

Obsessive behaviour, routines and rituals: children with autism spectrum disorder

Many children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) like routines and things being the same. They also have obsessions, special interests or rituals they feel they need to follow. This behaviour often helps them cope with their surroundings.



Obsessions, rituals, routines and autism spectrum disorder

Many children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have obsessions or obsessive interests.

Younger children might collect things such as twigs or balls or want to know the birthday of everyone they meet. They might open and close doors over and over again, or rush into each new place to find and flush the toilet.

Older children might have very narrow interests or preoccupations, such as needing to know everything possible about trains.

Children with ASD often need **rituals**. For example, your child might keep a favourite object in a specific place, like the bottom corner of a drawer in the bedroom. She might have to get it out and touch it before bed. Or she might drink only from a particular cup, or ask the same questions and always need a specific answer.

Routines are also important to children with ASD. For example, they might like to eat, sleep or leave the house in the same way every time. For example, a child might go to bed happily if you follow his regular bedtime routine, but won't settle if the routine is broken. Another child might get very upset if his route to preschool is changed, or insist he puts his clothes on in the same order each morning.

How routines and rituals might help children with autism spectrum disorder

We don't know what causes obsessions and obsessive behaviour or the need for routines and rituals. The cause might not be the same for everyone.

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty communicating and taking in what they see and hear. This makes it hard for them to understand what's happening around them, which can make them feel stressed and [anxious](#).

Obsessions, routines and rituals **might help children with ASD cope with their surroundings** and reduce their stress and anxiety by allowing them to control their environment and knowing what's going to happen next. The behaviour might also be related to children's need for something to do.

Children with ASD typically have [sensory sensitivities](#). This can also lead to them developing obsessions and rituals. For example, a child might stroke someone's hair whenever she can because she enjoys the feeling or it helps her feel calm.

Children with ASD often have trouble with planning, so having a rigid routine helps comfort them.

Handling obsessions, routines and rituals

Some children with ASD – and their families – can live with daily obsessive behaviour, routines and rituals. Others might want to find ways to handle the habits in a different way.

If you're thinking about doing things differently, it can be helpful to **ask some questions about the habit** and how it affects your child and family. For example:

- Is my child's behaviour affecting his ability to learn?

- Is my child's behaviour affecting her social life?
- Is my child's behaviour affecting our family's ability to carry out day-to-day activities, or to go on holidays or trips?
- How would I feel if this behaviour is the same in a few years?
- Is my child's behaviour causing harm to himself or others?

Your answers to these questions might help you decide whether it's worth trying to change things. And if you decide you do want to work on the obsessions and routines, your answers might guide you in what to focus on.

Working out what's causing your child's behaviour might also guide your next steps. Is it sensory? Or does your child feel anxious when faced with the unknown? You might be able to manage the sensory issues or the anxiety, which could lead to a decrease in the behaviour.

If your child's behaviour isn't affecting her life or other people in a negative way, but you still want to decrease it, you could consider **setting some limits** on the behaviour. For example, you could allow your child to talk about her special interest subject for half an hour after school. After that, she needs to switch to a new activity.

You might also be able to find a positive outlet for an obsessive interest. For example, if your child has an interest in dinosaurs, he might like to fill a scrapbook.



Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can get upset when they can't do their obsessive behaviour or follow their routines or rituals. For strategies to help you manage this issue, read our articles on [making changes to routines](#) and [managing difficult behaviour](#). Our [Parent Guide to Therapies](#) has information on a wide range of therapies for children with ASD.



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