

# Helpful approaches and information

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A resource for families undergoing an  
assessment at the Child Development Centre

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# Introduction

This guide is intended to provide helpful approaches (strategies) and resources to support families whose children have been referred for a neurodevelopmental assessment at the Child Development Centre.

We understand that at the start of your journey through the Child Development Centre there can be a lot of information to process and this can feel overwhelming. We hope this booklet provides you with some useful techniques to help you support your child while you go through the assessment process.

The resources and approaches in this pack can be started at any time - they are not diagnosis specific and will not negatively impact your child.

We do understand that every child is different, this means these approaches will not work in the same way for everyone, but trying them is a good place to start in understanding your child's needs further..

## Parent Carers Together

This advice and support pack has been created by professionals working in the Child Development Centre (CDC).

We also held a number of consultation sessions with members of Parent Carers Together, the official parent and carer forum for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, to ensure the pack includes the important information families will benefit from during the early stages of their assessment. Additionally, many forum members' children have been assessed by the CDC, making their experiences and advice valuable.

We have proudly incorporated their contributions into the final version of this pack.

# Neurodiversity and neurodivergence

**Neurodiversity** refers to the diversity of human brains and minds. This idea suggests that people interact with and experience the world in many different ways, and this is embraced. This approach supports child/person centred support for individuals, adapting support to each individual in the way which best supports them.

**Neurodivergent** is a term that can be used for individuals whose brain functions differently than the way which is considered 'typical'. Neurodivergence can relate to a number of different conditions or specific learning differences including autistic spectrum condition (ASC), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental coordination disorder (DCD), intellectual disability, language disorders, epilepsy, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, tics/Tourette's and dyslexia.

## Supporting individuals who are neurodivergent

Neurodivergent is a term that can be used for individuals whose brain functions differently than the way which is considered 'typical'. Neurodivergence can relate to a number of different conditions or specific learning differences including autistic spectrum condition (ASC), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental coordination disorder (DCD), intellectual disability, language disorders, epilepsy, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, tics/Tourette's and dyslexia.

# Understanding behaviours

Sometimes your child may show behaviours which are difficult to relate to, do not fit typical 'social norms', or are difficult to manage alongside your daily life. These behaviours can impact you and your child's wellbeing and may prevent your child from participating in everyday activities, including school attendance.

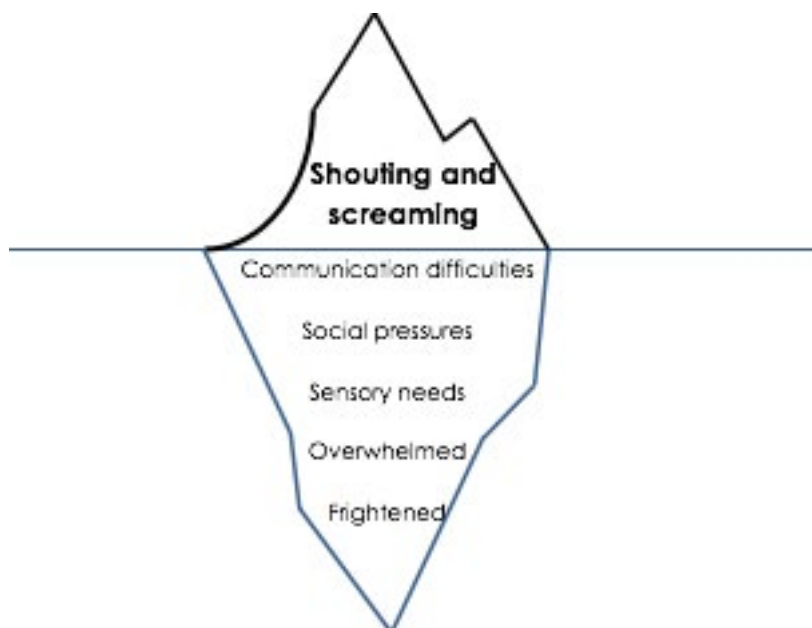
These behaviours are commonly referred to as challenging behaviours but can also be called behaviours which impact daily life, or dysregulated behaviours.

In this case, it is important to really understand where these behaviours are coming from. While it may not always seem this way, all behaviours have a function. They may be a result of an unmet need, physical or emotional upset, or difficulty with communication, among other things.



# The iceberg metaphor

One way to understand challenging/dysregulated behaviours is by using the iceberg metaphor shown below:



In this metaphor you can see that 'above the water', is the obvious behaviour, the behaviours which can have an impact on the child's daily life. 'Below the water' are the things that are more difficult to see. These are factors contributing to this behaviour and the function behind the behaviour.

These 'under the water' factors are the things we need to take time to discover and understand in order to help reduce levels of distress and support communication. It may take time to discover what is going on 'under the water', because every child is different, but we hope to offer you some approaches that may support you in this journey.

# Masking

The term masking is a term used to describe when individuals consciously, or subconsciously, hide or mask certain traits in order to 'fit in' to societies 'norms'. This can be an incredibly draining process and can also be linked to poorer general wellbeing.

Masking can also be referred to as 'camouflaging'.

You may notice the impact of masking in your child. Often this can be seen when a child has a 'good day' and then has a 'meltdown' or struggles to regulate themselves, this can seem out of the blue following a period of seeming calm and well regulated.

## The cola bottle metaphor

The cola bottle metaphor can be used to explain the impact of masking, or the delayed impact of 'just getting through the day', for a child with additional needs.

Imagine your child is holding a bottle of cola, as they go through the day the bottle gets shaken.

They wake in the morning and demands are placed on them 'time to get up - we can't be late for school'. **Shake the bottle.**

It's time to brush their teeth, this feels so uncomfortable, but they know they have to. **Shake the bottle.**

Time to put on their school uniform, it feels scratchy. **Shake the bottle.**

Time to walk to school, the cars are noisy and there are loads of other children shouting. They can't concentrate on what mum is saying. **Shake the bottle.**

Arrive at school, the teacher says hello and wants to ask about their weekend. They feel anxious but know they should reply, they're not sure what is the right thing to say. **Shake the bottle.**

Classroom time, the noises are so overwhelming, they've missed what the teacher said, they don't know what they should be doing. Shake the bottle.

Playtime, children ask to play but their games are confusing and they don't have clear rules. **Shake the bottle.**

Lunchtime, their food smells funny and they don't want to eat it but the teacher says they have to. **Shake the bottle.**

Now it's an art lesson and they're using clay. They make a model but the clay feels horrible under their nails and on their skin. **Shake the bottle.**

**Now think, what is going to happen if that bottle is opened. An explosion that you cannot control.**



This is where we see that delayed response of ‘out of the blue’ episodes where children become so dysregulated.

**You can support your child with this situation by:**

- Ensuring they have regular breaks throughout the day.
- thinking about after school routines which allow them ‘wind down’ or let out that ‘cola bottle pressure’ slowly. Helpful after school routines will look different for every child, some need a safe quiet space to relax, others may benefit from music or running around.
- reducing demands for a period of time after the school day (or other busy periods of time).
- looking out for and noticing subtle ‘warning signs’ in their presentation that may tell you they are becoming overwhelmed and need support to regulate this. Noticing this and offering support early on can be useful.



# Understanding triggers

## ABC charts

Often parents have a good understanding of the kinds of things that their children find difficult to cope with. However, sometimes triggers are more difficult to figure out, ABC charts can help with this.

ABC stands for: antecedent, behaviour and consequence.

### Antecedent

What happened immediately before the event or the events leading up to it.  
This can span hours or even days

### Behaviour

What was the behaviour that challenges?  
What did it look like?

### Consequence

What happened as a result of the behaviour?  
How was the problem dealt with?

The best way to understand ABC charts is through looking at an example. Below you can see the ABC chart also includes the date and time of the incident. It also has a column labelled 'possible function'. It can be helpful to think why the behaviour might have occurred, using the other information on the ABC chart. See if there are any links between days of the week or certain times the behaviour frequently occurs.

Date and time	Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence	Possible Function
Monday, 8.30am	Gabriel was watching the TV with his sister, sitting calmly. I turned the TV off as we needed to leave.	Gabriel screamed and swore and hit his sister.	I shouted at Gabriel to stop and sent him to his room.	Gabriel avoided going out.
Monday 12.00pm	Gabriel saw that his sister had a yoghurt which he wanted.	Gabriel banged his head on the table screaming that he wanted the yoghurt.	Sister gave him the yoghurt.	He learnt that banging his head gets him the yoghurt.

# Positive behaviour support plans

## What is positive behaviour support?

Positive behaviour support (PBS) describes a way of supporting adults, children and young people who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It is an ethical and person-centred approach to supporting these individuals.

The aim of positive behaviour support is to improve the quality of life for the child and the people who support them. It aims to understand underlying needs the child may have that they struggle to communicate. In understanding these needs, a plan can be put in place to support the child with communicating their needs, and those around them to work towards meeting those needs.

## What is a positive behaviour support plan?

Once you have identified triggers using the ABC chart on the previous page, you can start to develop a positive behaviour support plan.

There are four different stages of a PBS plan (green, amber, red and blue), this pack will briefly describe each stage. However, visit the Challenging Behaviour Foundation website for more detailed information.



**Green** = calm and relaxed

**Amber** = anxious, aroused or distressed

**red** = challenging behaviour incident (crisis)

**Blue** = calming down - but still need to be careful

PBS plans contain proactive and reactive strategies.

Proactive strategies are intended to make sure the person has what they need and want on a day-to-day basis and also includes ways to support the person with communication and life skills.

Reactive strategies are designed to keep the person and those around them safe from harm. They provide a way to gain safe, rapid and effective control in a situation where the person is distressed or anxious.



The information about PBS in this pack is from the Challenging Behaviour Foundation Website. They have lots of accessible and helpful information about PBS and challenging behaviour.

## The proactive green plan

- The green phase is when your child is happy and calm
- We want them to be in the green phase as much as possible
- Begin by writing down everything that this person likes, what makes them happy and relaxes them?
- The aim of proactive strategies are to fulfil an individual's needs
- The green plan should have strategies to reduce the chance of challenging behaviour occurring
- Use the green phase to develop communication strategies and skills
- Example green strategies:

**Avoid saying 'no'**

**Be consistent**      **Teach communication skills**

**Use positive language**

**Change the environment to suit them**

## Warning signs: amber plan

- The amber phase is when your child shows warning signs that there is an unmet need or the child is becoming dysregulated.
- Often challenging behaviour occurs because the warning signs aren't spotted
- The amber plan is used to support your child to come back down to the green phase, before they reach the red phase
- Think about what your child looks like when they are becoming dysregulated.
- Example amber strategies:

**Ignore the behaviour**

**Distract or divert**

**Humour**

**Take the trigger away**

## Reactive red plan

- The red phase occurs when a child becomes dysregulated
- Your child might feel out of control or extremely anxious
- Their adrenaline is very high
- The most important thing is to respond quickly and ensure everyone is safe
- Do not try and talk about the problem that resulted in the challenging behaviour
- Example red strategies:

**Distract and redirect**

**Remain calm**

**Do not stare**

**Give plenty of space**

**Remain calm**

## Post incident support: blue plan

- The aim of this phase is to help your child calm down and return to the green phase
- Their adrenaline levels are starting to return to normal, however it could easily spike back up if they are not given time to fully recover
- Think of things you could do to help soothe and relax your child
- Think of things your child does post incident, use this to help you recognise when they are starting to calm down
- Example blue strategies:

**Give more space**

**Make no demands**

**Check their wellbeing**

**Move them to a different environment**

**See if they want to do a relaxing activity**

# Top tips when creating a PBS plan

- Involve as many people as possible, including your child if it is appropriate to
- Regularly review and update the PBS plan as your child grows and changes
- A good PBS plan has more proactive strategies than reactive ones
- Think about what already works for you and your child to help develop the plan.

Use the link below to access a document from the Challenging Behaviour Foundation Website, which has all the information on PBS in this pack and much more, including a clear example of a PBS plan.

**[www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/003-Positive-Behaviour-Support-Planning-Part-3.pdf](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/003-Positive-Behaviour-Support-Planning-Part-3.pdf)**

# Communication

Difficulty with communication is one of the most common reasons for children becoming overwhelmed and for parents finding it tricky to work out the best way forward.

It may be that your child does not understand what you are asking of them, or they take a bit longer to process information. It could also be that you have misunderstood what they mean. Imagine if you asked a friend or family member for something, and they repeatedly misunderstood you and did the wrong thing. It would become extremely frustrating.

It is important to make communication as easy as possible for your child. The next few pages will outline some visual supports you can put in place that can help facilitate communication. They may help your child to feel safer as they support them to understand situations that previously they may have found confusing due to struggling with communication.

It is important to note that each child is different and you should use visual support that works best for your child. The techniques described in this advice pack may not be appropriate for every child, but are often a good place to start.



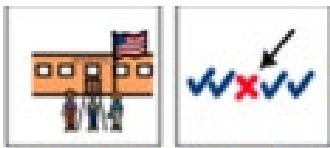
# Social stories

Social stories present information in a literal and concrete way. This is beneficial for individuals who sometimes struggle with understanding unwritten social cues and expectations.

Social stories can be used to:

- develop self-care skills, social skills and academic abilities.
- help someone to understand how others might behave or respond in a situation
- help a person to cope with changes to routine and unexpected or distressing events (e.g. absence of teacher, moving to a new house)
- Provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self-esteem

Below is an example of a social story to support someone with their self-esteem when making mistakes:

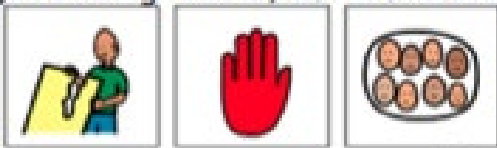


Mayer-Johnson

Sometimes at school, I get a wrong answer.



When I get a wrong answer, I feel mad and frustrated.



I want to tear up my paper or stop working. But it's okay to get a wrong answer. Everyone gets a wrong answer sometimes.



I can say "bummer" or "oh well." Maybe I will get a right answer next time. It's no big deal.



I keep working and soon I will get a right answer and feel happy.

The National Autistic Society website has more information on social stories. They also provide information on Comic Strip Conversations, which are simple visual representations of conversations.

# Consequence maps

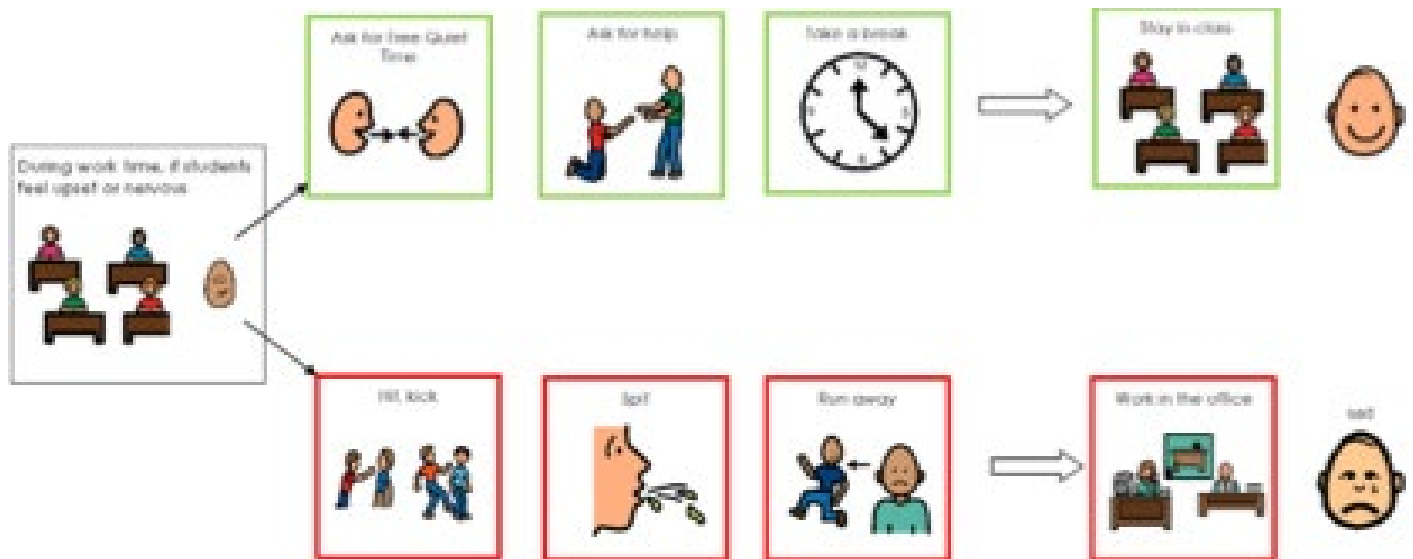
Consequence maps (also known as contingency maps) are a method for helping an individual to make choices.

Sometimes children find it difficult to think about the future. This can be particularly difficult when explained to them verbally.

For example, you might try to explain to a child that they can take breaks during lesson time to support them to manage throughout the day. You want to help them to understand that this will work most successfully if they ask for a break before they get too overwhelmed.

They may find it difficult to put this strategy into place as it is difficult for them to think about what might happen when they don't ask for a break.

Below is an example of a consequence map that might support a child in this situation:



These maps will be most successful if you take time to explain to your child. Ensure you use short clear sentences. Encourage them to ask questions and answers these as clearly as possible.

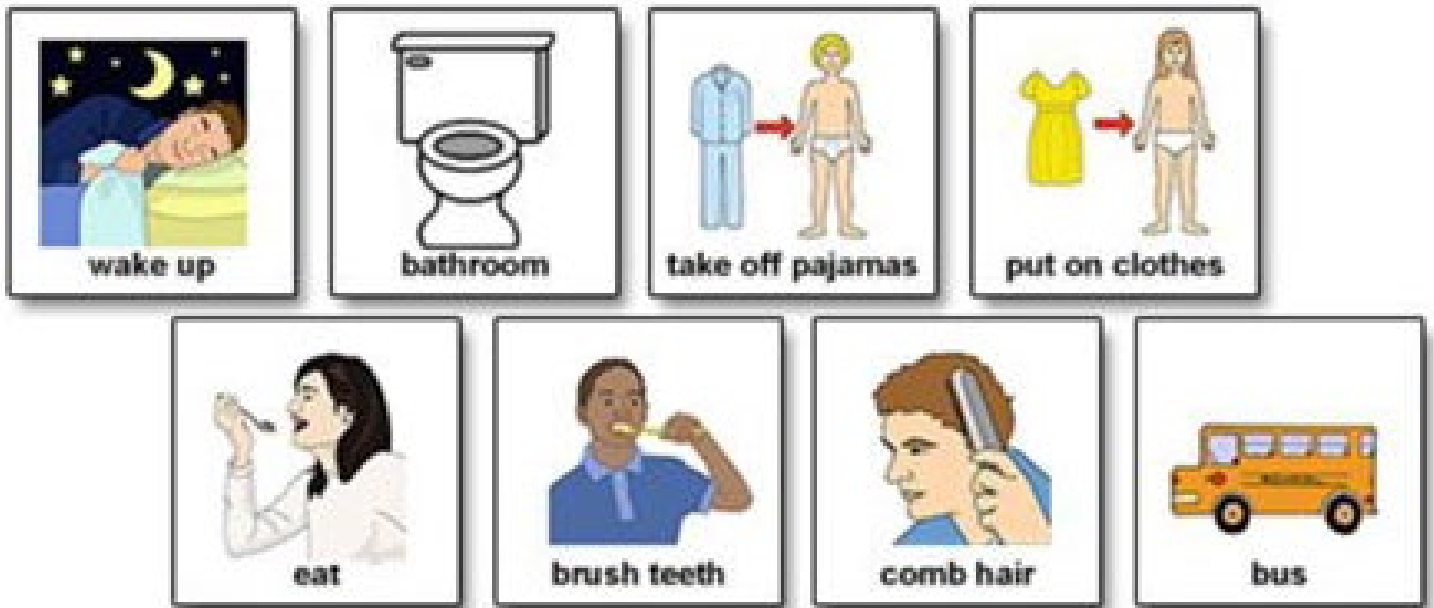
For some children, viewing the two possible outcomes is too overwhelming. In this case, you can show them the 'green' outcome, to support them to see how making this choice might help them.



# Visual timetables

Sometimes children can become overwhelmed or anxious about day to day tasks as they feel uncertain or unclear about what is going to happen. They struggle to communicate this or ask questions, and it can be difficult for them to take on the information from verbal instructions.

Visual timetables are a really helpful way to provide routines for your child in a visual and accessible format. Below is an example of a morning schedule from the 'do2learn' website.



If your child is struggling with a particular aspect, you can break it down even further:

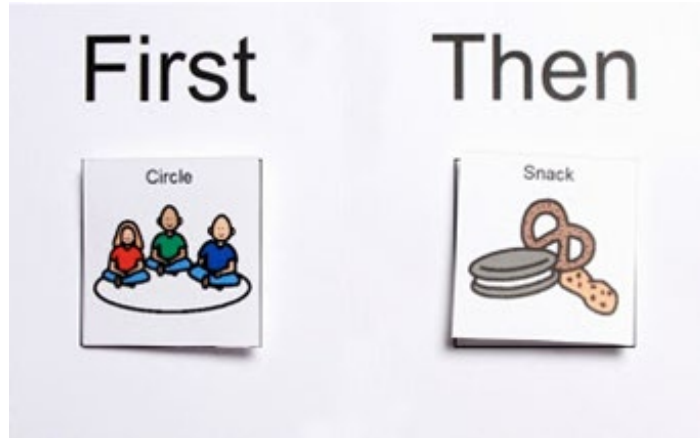


## How can I make them myself?

See the 'websites and resources' section of this booklet for websites you can use to make your own visual supports or find existing resources.

# First/then boards

First-then (also known as now-next) sequences present what we need to do now (first) and what we will do next (then). These boards are used for individuals who need a greater level of breakdown, so that they can focus on one task at a time without being overwhelmed.



First/then boards are also useful in teaching your child the concept of 'first' and 'then'.

A whiteboard is a useful tool for first/then boards as you can draw what is coming up next.

The website below has a free blank first/then template:  
<http://autismcircuit.net/tool/first-then-card>

# Supporting your child to cope with demands

Some children find it particularly difficult to cope when demands are made of them. This can be difficult for the individual and those around them, as demands are a huge part of everyday life.

Demands in everyday life can come in many forms, including:

- verbal instructions
- expectations
- social rules
- responsibilities
- timetables
- laws
- visual instructions
- prompts
- safety instructions
- questions

One useful way of understanding an adverse reaction to demands is thinking about the threat response. Children who find demands extremely difficult are often responding as a result of anxiety or an automatic threat response. This is typically related to feelings of not being in control of a situation.

## What is happening when a threat response is triggered?

When we perceive a threat, our body has an automatic response in order to try and keep us safe. This involves hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, being sent out into our body.

This response leads to a combination of different physical changes in our body including muscles tensing, heart rate changes, feeling shaky, sweating, feeling sick, breathing changes, and difficulty thinking clearly.



# Fight, flight or freeze

Fight, flight or freeze is a way of explaining humans response to threat, controlled by the physical changes described above.

Each of these reactions have a function in keeping us safe when there is real danger, but in some individuals, the threat response is over sensitive and is triggered without any real danger being present. Unfortunately, as this is an automatic response, it can be really difficult for individuals to gain control.

## How might fight, flight or freeze look as a reaction to demands?

### Fight



- Shouting
- Swearing
- Kicking
- Throwing things
- Pushing

### Flight



- Running away
- Hiding
- Refusal
- Avoidance of situations

### Freeze



- Extremely alert but not able to function
- Physically stiff limbs
- Shutting down

## Helpful approaches

- Reduce demands where possible. Take time to consider when you must place a demand and where there might be a different way of approaching a situation.
- Support and enable positive choices
- Allow some control, particularly in situations where a specific outcome is not crucial
- Spend time explaining why things are done in a certain way, without the expectation that the child will do them there and then.
- Learn about your child's anxiety response, spend time understanding triggers, 'warning signs' and helpful techniques for calming/soothing
- Reduce uncertainty
- Remain calm and neutral with tones
- Collaborate with your child when navigating challenges thinking 'how can we work this out together?'
- Give them chances to offer alternative solutions

- When you do have to make requests/demands, do so indirectly
- You will learn the signs that your child is more or less tolerant throughout the day or week. Adjust the level of demands to match this
- Try using play, fun, games to get things done
- Allow time to get things done
- To support your own management of day to day tasks, have a plan B

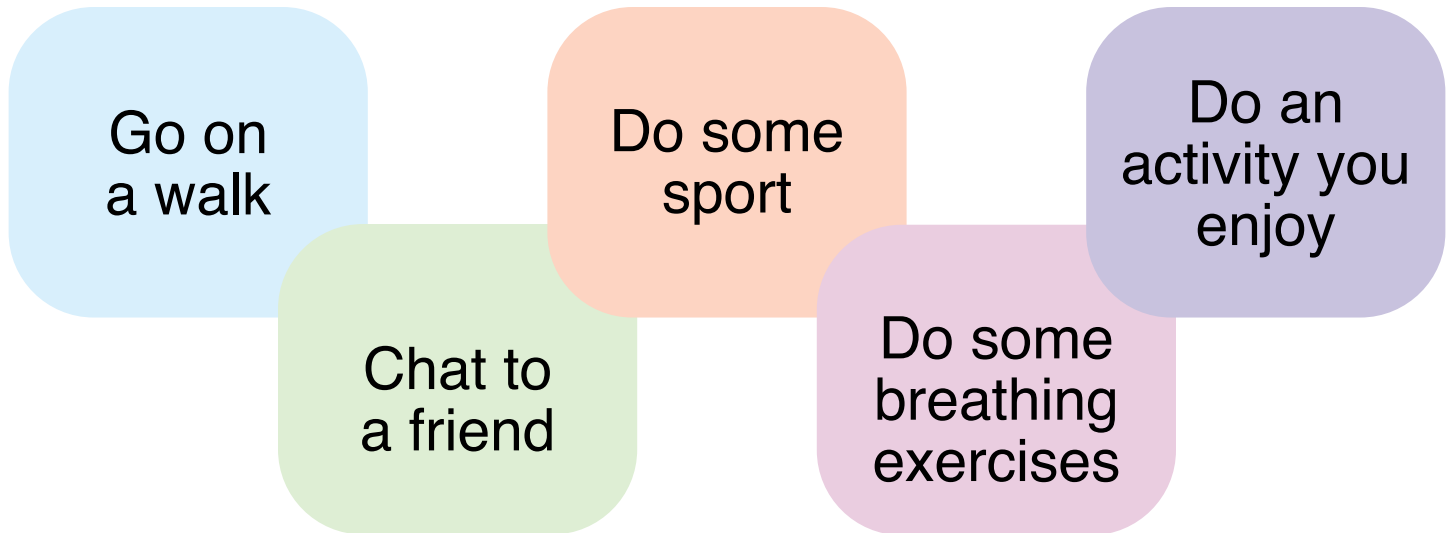
Useful advice can be found at:

**[www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/pda](http://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/pda)**

# Looking after yourself

It is so important you look after yourself. We know this can be an overwhelming and stressful process. The professionals at the Child Development Centre care about your wellbeing too. We can advise you on where to go if you feel like you are struggling.

Here are a few self-care ideas you could try:



Remember self-care is vital in ensuring you fit and healthy and therefore able to look after others too.

## Mental health charities and organisations

Dorset Mind: <https://dorsetmind.uk>

Samaritans: [www.samaritans.org/branches/bournemouth](http://www.samaritans.org/branches/bournemouth)

SHOUT: <https://giveusashout.org>

The Dorset Mental Health Forum:

[www.dorsetmentalhealthforum.org.uk/index.html](http://www.dorsetmentalhealthforum.org.uk/index.html)

Steps to Wellbeing Southampton & Dorset: [www.steps2wellbeing.co.uk](http://www.steps2wellbeing.co.uk)

## Where to find more information and resources:

For more resources and information, covering the following topics:

- general Information
- education
- parent support groups
- youth groups and activities
- being a carer
- diagnosis information
- creating visual resources



Please see the **‘useful websites and resources’** section of our **‘my journey through the Child Development Centre’** information pack.

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