

Let's Explore Behaviour



Parent Guide

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Contents	Page No
Introduction	3
Understanding Your Child	3
What is Behaviour?	4
Behaviours That Are Challenging	5
Your Experience as a Parent/Carer	6
• Emotions	6
• Self-Care	7
• Expectations	7
• Supports	8
Planning Next Steps – Using the SMART Framework	9
Introducing New Strategies – Understanding CAPE	10
• Communication	
• Action	
• People	
• Environment	
Key Theme Areas	12
• Sleep	12
• Toileting	14
• Screen Time	16
• Outings	18
• Physically Challenging Behaviours	20
• Transitions	22
Useful Resources	24
Conclusion – From Parents, for Parents	39
Acknowledgements	40

Introduction

Parenting a child with additional needs is a journey filled with unique experiences, emotions, and learning. This guide has been created to support you in understanding your child's behaviour, especially when it feels challenging. It is not a one-size-fits-all resource, but rather a reflective tool designed to help you explore strategies that may work for your family.

At the heart of this guide is the bond between you and your child. That connection is powerful, and it is supported by a wider network of people who care - family, friends, professionals, and community members. This guide was developed with input from parents, carers, and practitioners who understand the emotional weight of navigating behaviour and the societal perceptions that can come with it.



We recognise that completing this guide may bring up strong feelings. That's okay. You are not alone. Whether your child has a learning disability, autism, or other additional needs, this guide aims to help you reflect, plan, and take small, meaningful steps forward.

The goal is to make this resource inclusive, practical, and empowering—because you know your child best, and with the right support, every child can thrive.

Note: This guide is a toolkit developed for you as an aid to guide and support you to take small steps and signpost you to other support services – it will not be monitored.

Understanding your child

Every child is different regardless of their needs but each child needs routine, guidance and consistency from you as their parent/carer.

There are some common things that children may experience. It may take longer to learn new things and they may need support to develop new skills, understand information and interact with others. Some children will need more support and help at different stages of their life. However, it is important to recognise that all children are capable of thriving and meeting their full potential.

Throughout this booklet the main focus will be to enhance your understanding of your child's behaviour and suggest strategies that have been helpful for other families.

What is Behaviour?

It is important for you to understand that all behaviour is a form of communication. Behaviours that have an impact on quality of life can be considered challenging. Our own responses to these behaviours are key.

We use our behaviour to tell others how we are thinking and feeling. It may be through words, our body language, facial expressions, and actions. Children with additional needs may find it more difficult to communicate their needs and feelings. Particularly at times of distress and frustrations, behaviour can feel or become more challenging and this is what we often see in children.

Reflection for Parent/Carer:



As a driver or passenger, you have been stuck in traffic for 30 minutes, as you start to move, someone cuts you off. How do you react?

If you think about the scenario above, consider how this made you feel, how you reacted and the consequences after. Behaviour is learned and reinforced over time through our experiences and interactions with the environment around us.



It's important to remember all behaviours happen for a reason. The tricky part is trying to understand what your child is trying to communicate.

Examples may include:

- Pain
- Tiredness
- Hunger
- Hormone changes
- Emotions
- Sensory
- Environment
- Seeking attention/connection
- Avoidance of something or someone
- A combination of things or something entirely different

Behaviours that are challenging – what might you see your child doing?

Not all of these may apply to your child but parents have told us these are some behaviours that they have experienced:

- Hurting others
- Hurting themselves
- Causing damage
- Becoming withdrawn
- Swearing or shouting
- Risk taking behaviours
- Other behaviours



Reflection for Parent/Carer:



After reading the above, does your child display behaviours that challenge? If so, what do they look like?



Think of a time your child was presenting with a challenging behaviour. What do you think they were trying to communicate?



Your experience as a parent/carer

Emotions

Parenting a child with additional needs is an emotional journey that brings many successes and challenges. There will be areas of your child’s life that are difficult and it is understandable that you may feel sad, confused, angry or scared. There will also be many times to celebrate!

Reflection for Parent/Carer:

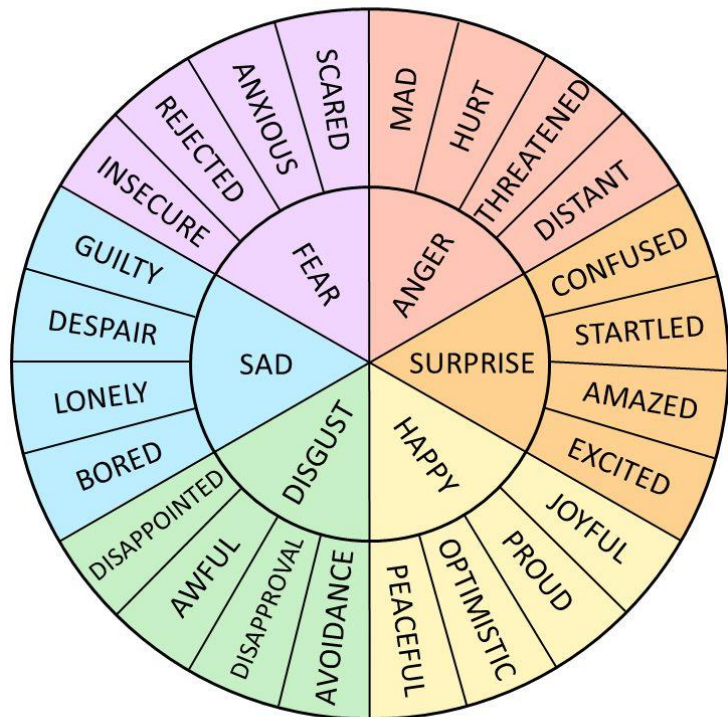


How do you feel right now? This emotion wheel may help you to identify what you’re feeling.



We all feel different emotions at different times of our lives, it is normal, don’t be afraid to express how you feel and practice self-care. While the feelings wheel is designed to support parents and carers in reflecting on their own emotions, children may sometimes need different ways to explore how they feel.

For some people, especially those who have difficulties with self-reflection and Interoception, identifying and naming their emotions can be challenging. Supplementary tools such as a Body Map, Energy Meter, or Anger Scale can provide visual supports that help children tune into their internal state and express their feelings in ways that don’t rely



solely on words. (See end of document for resources). These supports can sit alongside the parent-focused wheel, offering you both a way to reflect on your own emotions and a way to help children build awareness of theirs. Naming your own feelings and bodily sensations is not only helpful for you as a parent, but also incredibly important in helping your child learn to identify and manage their own emotions.

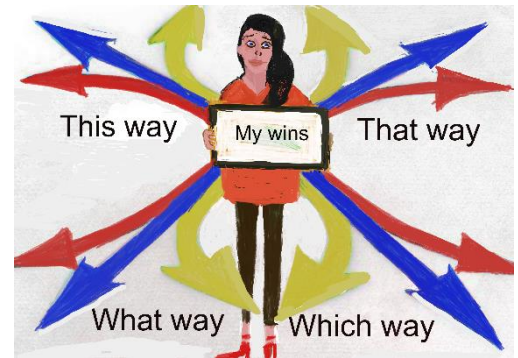
Self-Care

Studies show the importance of co-regulation in managing distressing behaviours. Remaining calm is vital when supporting children during times of distress, and self-care plays a key role in helping us achieve that. This doesn't have to be anything major — sometimes even a pause with some relaxing breathing, a short walk, or a chat with a close friend can be enough to ease feelings of overwhelm, which in turn helps you to support your child more effectively.

Expectations

We all have ideas of what we want for our children. Sometimes this pathway changes – just take it one step at a time.

Take some time to think about your wins, whatever this may be.



Reflection for Parent/Carer:



What are your wins?



Supports

As a parent/carer **you** know and understand your child best. However, there may be times when you need to seek support and advice, and this is okay! Having support from others around you is critical. If you haven't already – download Your Journey through Disability Guide providing support and advice from birth through to adulthood - <https://tinyurl.com/YourJourneyGuide>

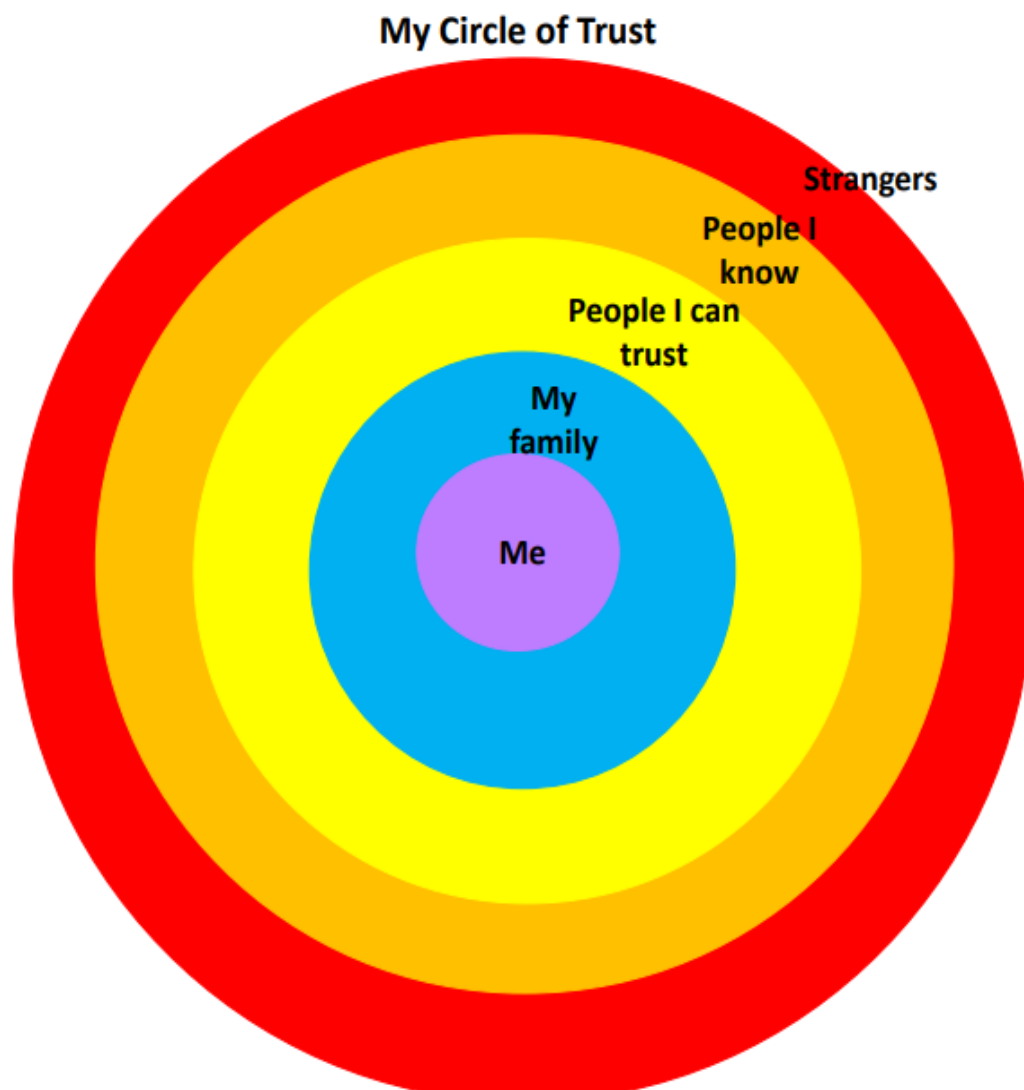
Where can I find help?

Support can be found in many places. This could be through your family, friends and people in your community, including schools, peer support from other parents, and professionals. These can all connect together to form a wider support network.

Reflection for Parent/Carer:



Take time to think who do you have in your Circle of Trust



Now you have identified your support system and we know that behaviour is a form of communication, take one step at a time and address one challenging behaviour at a time.

How do you do this?

The table below may help you to plan your next steps:

S pecific	M easurable	A ttainable	R elevant	T ime
What exactly are you trying to achieve?	How will you know when you've achieved it	Is this step possible to be achieved?	Why is this step important?	When do you hope to achieve this by?

- Be realistic, take small steps
- Be patient, pause, take a breath
- Be consistent - Repeated effort
- Be understanding - your child is learning at their own pace
- Accept it may not work first time and it's important to keep trying, it may take lots of attempts, **keep going!**
- Celebrate **ALL** the wins



Moving On– The following provides guidance on introducing new strategies to help.

What is CAPE?

CAPE is a way to help you remember the four key areas to consider when understanding and responding to your child's behaviour

CAPE – Definitions

C- Communication

- **Two-Way Exchange:** Communication involves both speaking and listening. It's a way for us to share our needs and interests. Some people may have challenges in understanding or expressing language. For example, a child may be nonspeaking or might find it hard to process spoken words.
- Using visual aids (like pictures) and body language can be very effective. It's important to find what works best for your child based on their needs.



A – Action

- When your child displays a behaviour that challenges you, your action should focus on understanding the function behind it. Supporting your child's behaviour is not just about words, it is about the actions you take to understand, guide and respond to their individual needs.

P – People

- The people around your child will have an influence on your child's behaviour through their words, actions, expectations and reactions. Being aware of this is important when supporting your child's behaviours.

E – Environment

- The environment includes everything around the child – people, places and the outside world which includes lights, noises, clothes, smells etc. Predictable routines help children to feel safe; it is important to plan for changes in the routine where possible.

How can CAPE help you?

Communication	Action	People	Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use your child's preferred communication system-e.g. objects, pictures, symbols and sign ✓ Be aware of your own body language ✓ Speak with support network and share plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Break down into smaller steps ✓ Timing? ✓ Work at the child's pace. ✓ What success would like and celebrate the success of all steps ✓ Try something new— change can be scary! ✓ If at first you don't succeed, try again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify and inform your support system ✓ Identify roles for those within your support system. ✓ Ensure everyone understands and follows plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Create a safe and suitable environment ✓ Be mindful of the change in environment eg home, school, shop ...

Introducing new routines for some children with additional needs can be very challenging. Routine is important for all children to help them understand what is expected of them and what is happening next. Well established routines can help your child feel safe, their world feels predictable and this reduces anxiety.

Once a routine is decided, it needs to be followed with consistency and shared with your support network. If everyone buys into the routine, it will be more effective.

The following section provides you with examples of key themed areas and includes information on top tips and advice, CAPE template and signposting to support services. *(Note: these can be printed as two-sided worksheet)*



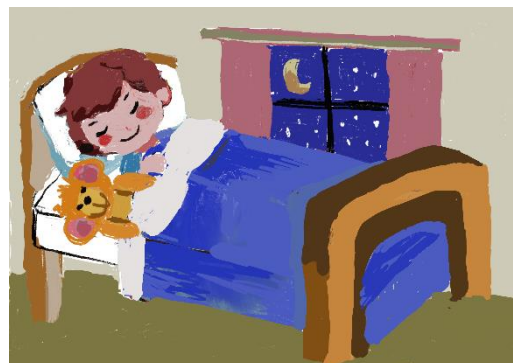
Key Theme Areas

Top Tips/Advice

1. Sleep

Everybody needs sleep. Are you and your child getting enough? Average hours of sleep for ages vary for children with additional needs. Behaviours can be a symptom of a lack of sleep.

Below are some strategies to try to support sleep in your home.



- ✓ Establish a consistent daily and bedtime routine
- ✓ Play Time - as much natural light outside during the day and exercise daily
- ✓ Dinner Time - plan a diet that feels safe and comfortable for your child
- ✓ Reduce Technology Use – consider minimising screen time before going to bed
- ✓ Plan Ahead - relaxing, sensory activities as part of the bedtime routine could include bath, book & bed
- ✓ Bedroom and Bed - blackout blinds, comfortable, calm environment and remove or hide distractions
- ✓ Take Care of Yourself - remember self-care for example, eat well, exercise regularly, rest when you can, do something you enjoy
- ✓ Bottom Line - It can be hard implementing changes in a child's sleep routine so be prepared for it to get harder before it gets easier

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child's communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. putting your child to bed earlier, getting your child to sleep in their own bed, getting your child to stay asleep in their own bed)
- Be consistent




CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – Quiet voice	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Remove toys/distractions

Signposting/Support: Sleep

<p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/autistic-spectrum-disorder-asd-services/paediatric-asd-services/asd-services-children/sleep/</p>	<p>Sleep information webinar <small>Care • Compassion • Community</small></p> <p>Sleep Information Webinar</p> <p>Kathryn Gillen – Senior ASD Therapist (Social Worker)</p> <p>Shauna Harten-Webster – ASD Therapist (Nurse)</p> 
<p>https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/common-concerns/helping-you-and-your-child-sleep/</p> <p>https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/our-helpline/</p>	
<p>https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/</p> <p>https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/contact-the-sleep-team/</p>	

2. Toileting

Your child may take longer to learn, so consider your expectations and don't rush the learning. The more consistent you are with your words and actions, the easier it will be for your child to learn. Most children can learn to be clean and dry. It may take longer and require more support, but the process is essentially the same.



- ✓ Don't Delay Too Long - It can feel daunting to start, but delaying toilet training can make it harder to introduce a new place for your child to wee or poo. Starting when your child shows signs of readiness is key
- ✓ Break It Down into Stages - Tailor your approach to your child's abilities. Focus on one step at a time, such as sitting on the toilet, recognising the need to go, or staying dry for short periods
- ✓ Use Clear Communication - Support your child with their preferred communication method, this might include visuals, signs, or simple words. Consistency in language and cues helps build understanding
- ✓ Establish a Routine - Regular toileting times (e.g. after meals, before bed) help your child know what to expect. Routine builds confidence
- ✓ Create a Calm Environment - Make the bathroom a comfortable, distraction-free space. Remove items that might cause anxiety or confusion
- ✓ Involve Your Support Network - Everyone involved in your child's care should follow the same plan. Consistency across home, school, and other settings is essential
- ✓ Celebrate Small Wins - Every step forward is progress. Praise and encouragement can go a long way in building your child's confidence and motivation
- ✓ Some children may never learn to use the toilet, and that is ok

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child's communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. sitting on the toilet, recognising the need to go, or staying dry for short periods)
- Be consistent.

CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – visuals signs, simple words	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Remove distractions – introduce the bathroom

Signposting/Support: Toileting

https://www.bbuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Top-ten-toileting-tips-for-children-with-down-syndrome-or-learning-disabilities-1.pdf https://www.bbuk.org.uk/enquiries/	
https://eric.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Advice-bladders-bowels-and-toileting-for-children-with-additional-needs.pdf https://eric.org.uk/helpline/	
https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/potty-toilet-training.pdf https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/our-helpline/	
https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/specialist-paediatric-continenceservice/ https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/continence-service/ https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/little-acorns-centre/ https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/specialist-continenence-service/ https://setrust.hscni.net/service/continence-service/	

3. Screen Time

Limiting screen time for children requires a thoughtful approach that considers individual needs, potential benefits, and the importance of balance. It's crucial to establish routines, set clear boundaries, and offer alternative activities to ensure a healthy relationship with technology.



- ✓ Establish Clear Boundaries/Routines - Create a plan that outlines screen time rules, including designated times, locations (e.g. no screens at mealtimes or in bedrooms), and monitor content. Use visual schedules to help children understand when screens are available and when they need to transition to other activities
- ✓ Managing Screen Time - Use timers or alarms to signal the start and end of screen time, helping children anticipate and manage transitions. Participate in your child's screen time, watching with them, discussing content, and ensuring its age-appropriate. Use Parental Controls to keep your child safe visit [Using parental controls](#)
- ✓ Limit Your Own Screen Time - model positive technology use. Be present and engaged with your child when they are not using screens
- ✓ Offer Alternatives - Encourage outdoor activities, walks, and physical exercise to provide a healthy balance to screen time. Engage children in arts and crafts, sensory play, or other creative activities that can be both engaging and relaxing. Prioritise face-to-face interactions, playtime with siblings or friends, and participation in family activities. Offer opportunities for reading, storytelling, or quiet time away from screens

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child's communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. no screens at mealtimes or bedtime)
- Be consistent





CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – use visual schedules	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Remove screens introduce new activity

Signposting/Support: Screen Time

https://saferschoolsni.co.uk/mobile-phone-guidance-parents-and-carers/	
https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-safety-families-children-with-send/supporting-online-wellbeing-for-children-with-send/	
https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/ https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/4_7/	
https://tinyurl.com/3rk5xpev	

4. Outings



Planning outings with children requires careful consideration to ensure a positive and enjoyable experience for everyone. Key tips include researching accessible locations, creating a detailed and flexible itinerary, and packing essential items like familiar toys and assistive devices. Prioritising your child's needs, preferences, and sensory sensitivities is crucial, as is involving them in the planning process.

- ✓ Identify Destinations – think about accessible facilities like parking, restrooms, and ramps. Call ahead before you go. Check for features like accessible play equipment or quiet areas for children with sensory sensitivities
- ✓ Include your Child -encourage participation in the planning process
- ✓ Use Social Stories – these will help your child to understand what to expect at the destination whether it be to the local park, supermarket or school, including potential sensory experiences
- ✓ Plan ahead - ensure you have all essential items, necessary equipment and contact details you may need. Pack familiar toys, comfort items, or activities that can help manage anxiety or provide comfort during the outing

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child's communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. a trip to the supermarket, a day at the beach or Playpark).
- Be consistent.




CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – Encourage participation in planning	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Find social stories that help children understand what to expect at the destination

Signposting/Support: Outings

https://autismni.org/help-support/resources/autism-card	
https://www.jamcard.org/	
https://www.maemurrayfoundation.org/inclusive-beaches/	

5. Physically Challenging Behaviours

For parents of children who are experiencing physically challenging behaviours, several resources and support options are available. These include specialised organisations like [Newbold Hope](#), which helps families manage challenging behaviours. Additionally, the [National Autistic Society](#) and [Action for Children](#) offer guidance and support for managing behaviours that challenge and [Contact](#) provide a one to one Listening Ear Service.



Often parents keep a behaviour diary, this helps them capture environment, what happened, what did behaviour look like, what made it better. This helps to identify patterns, see the range of potential triggers and work out best responses. The following tips may help

- ✓ Communicate clearly
- ✓ Reflect on how you respond best
- ✓ Rule out medical and dental causes
- ✓ Redirect to other activities
- ✓ Reinforce positive behaviours - eg “Kind Hands”, “Quiet Voice”
- ✓ Remove physical and sensory discomforts
- ✓ Prepare for changes in routines
- ✓ Provide sensory opportunities and look for opportunities for relaxation
- ✓ Celebrate all small wins

For detailed information on all of the above visit <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/distressed-behaviour/all-audiences>

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child’s communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. reduce number of episodes)
- Be consistent






CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – Quiet voice	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Remove physical or sensory discomforts

Signposting/Support: Physically Challenging Behaviours

https://www.newboldhope.com/	
https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/challenging-behaviour/	
https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/behaviour-that-challenges/	
https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/workshops/ https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/information-and-guidance/positive-behaviour-support/	
https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/childrens-learning-disabilities-therapeutic-service/resources/ https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/ld-community-treatment-services/ https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/children-with-disabilities/ https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/disabled-children-and-young-peoples-services/ https://setrust.hscni.net/service/childrens-disability-service/	

6. Transitions

Disability transitions refer to the process of young people with disabilities moving from children to adult services. This period involves significant changes in various aspects of life, including education, healthcare, social care, and personal autonomy. Effective transition planning is crucial for ensuring young people with disabilities have a smooth and positive experience during this time.



Transition planning often involves a team of professionals, including social workers, nurses, therapists, and educators, working together to support the young person and their family.

- ✓ Transition plans - should be tailored to the individual's needs, goals, and preferences, ensuring they have a voice in the process
- ✓ Communicate openly and honestly - Talk about the transition in a positive and age-appropriate way, involving the child in the planning process.
- ✓ Use visual supports - Visual timetables, picture schedules, and social stories can help children understand routines and expectations.
- ✓ Establish routines - Consistent routines and predictable environments can minimize anxiety and promote a sense of security.
- ✓ Build familiarity - Visits to the new setting, along with pictures or social stories, can help children feel more comfortable.
- ✓ Seek support - Don't hesitate to reach out to the new school or setting for information, guidance, and support.
- ✓ Acknowledge feelings - Validate the child's emotions, both positive and negative, and offer reassurance and coping strategies and recognise and celebrate small achievements throughout the transition process to build confidence.
- ✓ Focus on the individual - Remember that each child is unique, and their transition experience will be different. Focus on their individual needs and strengths.

Remember:

- Tell everyone your plan
- Use the child's communication systems to support you
- Set what you want to achieve (e.g. visit to new setting or social story)
- Be consistent

CAPE: Write down how you will take the next steps on your journey to help your child with new skills:

Communication -Actions -People -Environment



Communication	Actions	People	Environment
How will you communicate with your child – Openly and honestly	Establish routine	Who can help - Everyone must remain consistent	Visits to the new setting, along with pictures or social stories

Signposting/Support: Transitions

https://www.cedar-foundation.org/transitions-services	
https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/transition-and-inclusion-service-tis	
https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/looking-work/training-programmes	
https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/children-with-disabilities/transitions/ https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/transition-services/ https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/childrens-disability-teams/ https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/disabled-children-and-young-peoples-services/ https://setrust.hscni.net/service/childrens-disability-service/	

7. Useful Resources

Exercise - Where do I feel things?

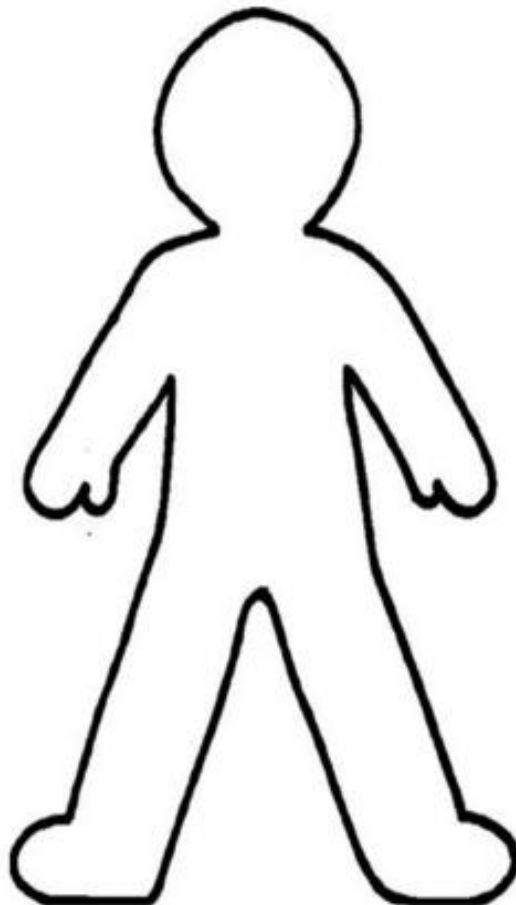
This is a 20–30 minute at-home exercise to help your child (roughly ages 5–11) notice and name how emotions show up physically in their body. It's great for building emotional awareness, reducing overwhelm, and starting conversations about feelings. Why this helps Emotions aren't just in our heads—they create real sensations in our bodies (like a racing heart or tight tummy). Mapping them out helps children: recognise early signs of big feeling, feel less scared or confused by them, talk about emotions more easily, start using calming strategies when they notice those body signals.

What you'll need (easy to prepare at home)

- Coloured pens, crayons, or markers (at least red, blue, green, yellow; others optional)
- A simple body outline: See below



Where do I feel different emotions in my body?



Red - Anger Blue - Sad Green - Worry Yellow - Happy

Sit together somewhere comfy. Say something like:

"Today we're going to be detectives and find out where different feelings live in our bodies! Everyone feels things differently, and that's okay. There's no right or wrong."

Explain the emotions and colours

- Red = Angry / Mad
- Blue = Sad / Down
- Green = Worried / Anxious / Scared
- Yellow = Happy / Excited

You can add more later (e.g., purple for calm, orange for embarrassed) if your child wants.

Go through one emotion at a time

Pick one colour/emotion (start with happy or angry—positive or familiar ones often work best first). Ask open, gentle questions like:

- "Think of a time when you felt really happy. Can you picture it?"
- "Where in your body do you feel that happy feeling? Maybe your chest feels warm, or your face smiles big?"
- "Does it feel fizzy, light, tingly, relaxed...?"

Give examples if needed: "Some people feel happy like sunshine in their tummy or loose shoulders."

Then invite your child to: Colour or draw with the matching colour (yellow for happy) on the body outline where they feel it. They can shade areas, draw symbols (hearts, stars, zigzags), write words, or make patterns. Encourage creativity—no need to be neat!

Repeat for each emotion: Angry (red):

- "Where do you feel mad? Tight fists? Hot face? Stompy legs?"
- Sad (blue): "Where do you feel sad? Heavy chest? Tears in eyes? Droopy shoulders?"
- Worried (green): "Where do you feel worried? Butterflies in tummy? Fast heart? Shaky hands?"

Discuss as you go (keep it light)

Talk about similarities/differences: "I feel angry in my arms too—lots of people do!" or "It's interesting how your happy feels in your legs like jumping!"

Normalise: "It's okay if some areas stay blank—that just means you don't feel that emotion there."

Extension: Focus on worry/anxiety (green)

After the main map, zoom in on worry if it's relevant. Ask:

- "When you feel worried or anxious, what happens in your body first?"
- "Where do you notice it the most?"

Common body signals to gently mention if your child needs ideas (don't suggest too many—let them lead):

- Heart beating faster
- Butterflies or knots in tummy
- Sweaty hands
- Dry mouth
- Shaky voice or legs
- Wanting to go to the toilet
- Headache
- Feeling light-headed or faint
- Tense muscles / tight chest
- Wanting to run away or hide

Have them add extra details/drawings to the green areas.

Wrap up positively and look at the finished map together.

Ask: "What did you learn about your feelings today?"

Display it somewhere (fridge, bedroom) as a reminder: "Next time you notice butterflies, we can remember this map and try some deep breaths." Praise effort: "You're really good at noticing what your body says!"

Tips for parents:

- Keep sessions short if your child is young or finds feelings hard—do one or two emotions per sitting.
- Model it: Do your own body outline alongside to show it's normal for grown-ups too.
- If big feelings come up, pause and comfort: "It's safe to talk about this."
- Repeat over time—feelings can change, and new ones appear as kids grow.

ENERGY SCALE



OVERLOADED

I feel overwhelmed –
need help to calm



HIGH ENERGY

I'm buzzing – need
movement or space



JUST RIGHT

I feel okay and ready
to do things



LOW ENERGY

I'm tired or slow –
need quiet time



EXHAUSTED

I feel drained
and need rest

MY ANGER-O-METER

Understanding My Feelings

ZONE 5: OUT OF CONTROL



How I Feel: Explosive, Overwhelmed!
Body Cues: Yelling, throwing things, crying hard.



Try This:
Ask an adult for help NOW!
Use your words, not your hands.

ZONE 4: REALLY MAD



How I Feel: Angry, Furious, Want to Yell.
Body Cues: Stomping feet, loud voice, tense body.



Try This:
Do 10 jumping jacks.
Draw a picture of how you feel.
Drink water.

ZONE 3: GETTING UPSET



How I Feel: Frustrated, Mad, Worried.
Body Cues: Heart beats faster, feeling hot, clenched fists.



Try This:
Walk away.
Find a quiet spot.
Squeeze a squishy toy.

ZONE 2: A LITTLE BOTHERED



How I Feel: Annoyed, Disappointed.
Body Cues: Frowning, arms crossed.



Try This:
Take 3 deep dragon breaths.
Count to 5.

ZONE 1: COOL & CALM



How I Feel: Happy, Relaxed, Smiling.
Body Cues: Loose muscles, steady breathing.

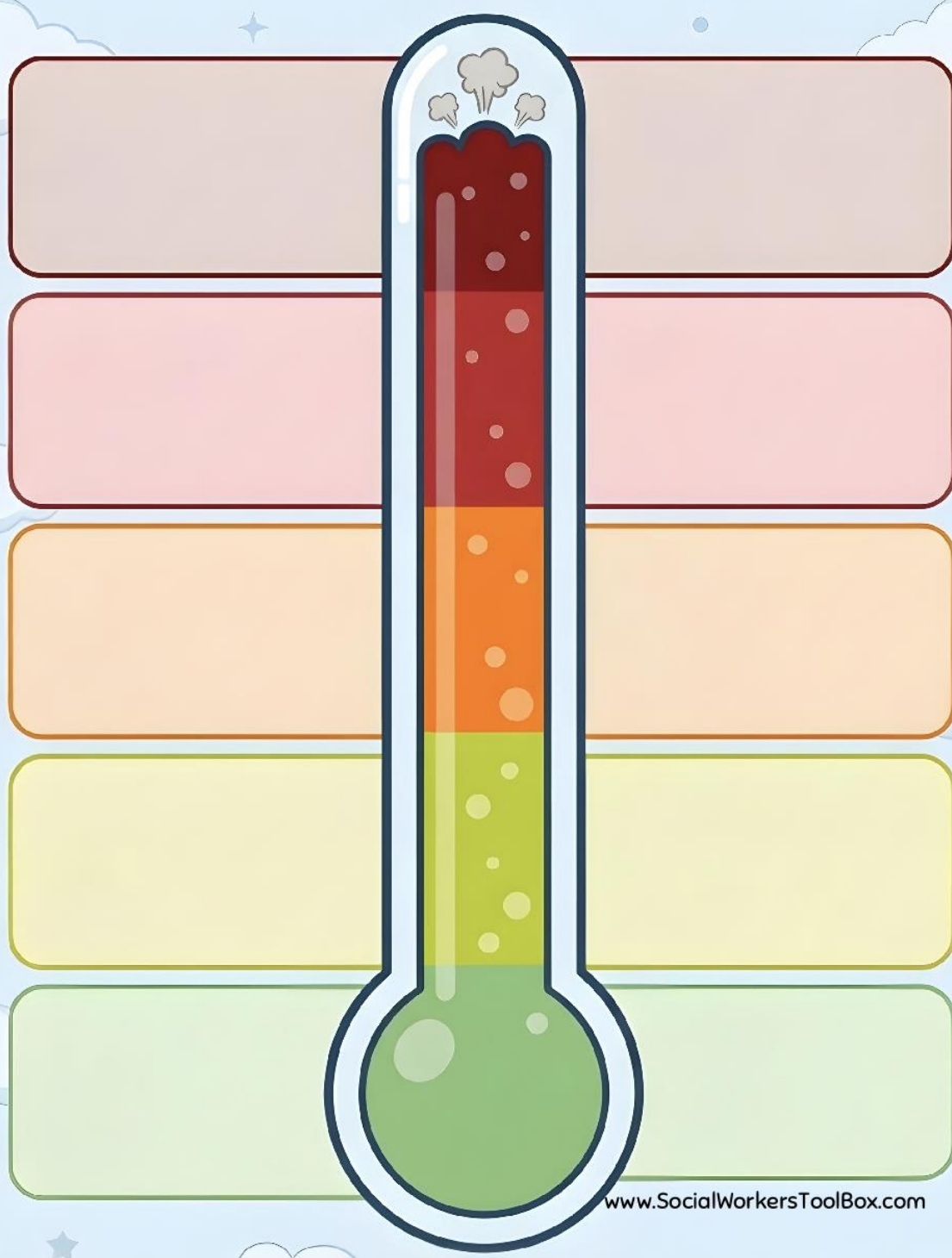


Try This:
Keep playing!
Share a smile.

www.SocialWorkersToolBox.com

Remember, it's okay to feel angry.
It's what you DO with your anger that matters!

MY ANGER-O-METER



www.SocialWorkersToolBox.com

Evening Schedule

How to use schedule:

Choose 3-6 key steps in your child's bedtime routine and add them to the strip of Velcro on the schedule.

Before beginning the routine, show your child the full strip of pictures.

After completing each step, encourage your child to remove the picture and place it in a "finished" box or bowl.

If bespoke visuals are needed, please call the helpline and ask for more.

Autism NI Helpline number: 028 9040 1729 (Option 1).





Toilet Training First and Then Board



Toilet Training First and Then Board



iPad



TV



Bubbles



Art



Snack








Play with toys



Instructions: Use this resource as an incentive to help your child use the toilet. Cut out the pictures and allow your child to pick one picture as a reward for using the toilet. Place the picture in the box on the 'Then' side using the Velcro provided.

Follow the links below for further resources:

	<p>https://autismni.org/help-support/resources</p>
	<p>https://www.praxiscare.org/northern-ireland/ni-learning-disabilities/</p>
	<p>https://contact.org.uk/northern-ireland/</p>
	<p>https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/our-work-around-the-uk/our-work-in-northern-ireland/</p>
	<p>https://tinyurl.com/YourJourneyGuide Includes local Northern Ireland information on peer support and guidance from birth through to adulthood</p>
<p>YOUNGMINDS</p>	<p>https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/challenging-behaviour/</p>
	<p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/child-health-development-and-emotional-wellbeing-services/child-health-development-and-emotional-wellbeing-resources/</p>
	<p>https://cypsp.hscni.net/ebpp/ Includes free parenting programmes</p> <p>https://tinyurl.com/YourJourneyGuide</p>
	<p>https://sensory-map.middletownautism.com/ Schools can be sensory busy and overwhelming environments for many autistic students, while others may find it difficult to sustain attention and engagement without individualised and flexible sensory input. This resource maps out the sensory challenges presented across the school setting, and how these challenges can be addressed through simple modifications and supports to accommodate different sensory preferences and needs.</p>
	<p>https://www.middletownautism.com/files/shares/Resources/Mon 4th Sept Breathing and Relaxation Visuals.pdf Breathing and Relaxation visuals</p>

 <p>www.SocialWorkersToolbox.com Free social work resources for direct work</p>	<p>https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/ FREE Resources that helps children and young people recognise, name and understand their emotions</p>
 <p>The Contented Child</p>	<p>https://www.facebook.com/thecontentedchild Little Minds, Big Feelings, Better Tools. Supporting parents/carers, professionals and educators to nurture emotional wellbeing in young minds with resources, training and 1-1 support</p>
 <p>family support NI.gov.uk Helping You Find the Services You Need</p>	<p>https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/</p>

Sleep Resources




 <p>Sleep Information Webinar Kathryn Gillen – Senior ASD Therapist (Social Worker) Shauna Harten-Webster – ASD Therapist (Nurse)</p>	<p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/autistic-spectrum-disorder-asd-services/paediatric-asd-services/asd-services-children/sleep/</p>
 <p>HELPING YOUR CHILD SLEEP</p>	<p>https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/common-concerns/helping-you-and-your-child-sleep/ https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/our-helpline/</p>
 <p>sleep</p>	<p>https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/ https://cerebra.org.uk/get-advice-support/sleep-advice-service/contact-the-sleep-team/</p>

Toileting Resources

 <p>Bladder & Bowel UK Supporting people with bladder and bowel problems part of Disabled Living</p>	<p>https://www.bbuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Top-ten-toileting-tips-for-children-with-down-syndrome-or-learning-disabilities-1.pdf https://www.bbuk.org.uk/enquiries/</p>
 <p>ERIC The Children's Bowel & Bladder Charity</p>	<p>https://eric.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Advice-bladders-bowels-and-toileting-for-children-with-additional-needs.pdf https://eric.org.uk/helpline/</p>



	<p>https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/potty toilet training.pdf</p> <p>https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/our-helpline/</p>
	<p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/specialist-paediatric-continenceservice/</p> <p>https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/continence-service/</p> <p>https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/little-acorns-centre/</p> <p>https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/specialist-continence-service/</p> <p>https://setrust.hscni.net/service/continence-service/</p>

Screen Time Resources

	<p>https://saferschoolsni.co.uk/mobile-phone-guidance-parents-and-carers/</p>
	<p>https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-safety-families-children-with-send/supporting-online-wellbeing-for-children-with-send/</p>
	<p>https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/</p> <p>https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/4_7/</p> <p>https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/articles/Parental-controls/</p>
	<p>https://tinyurl.com/3rk5xpev</p>

Outings Resources





	<p>https://autismni.org/help-support/resources/autism-card</p>
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 <p>Just a minute</p>	<p>https://www.jamcard.org/</p>
	<p>https://www.maemurrayfoundation.org/inclusive-beaches/</p>

Physically Challenging Behaviours Resources

	<p>https://www.newboldhope.com/</p>
	<p>https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/challenging-behaviour/</p>
	<p>https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/information-advice-services/health-medical-information/behaviour-that-challenges/</p>
	<p>https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/workshops/ https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/information-and-guidance/positive-behaviour-support/</p>
	<p>https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/distressed-behaviour/all-audiences</p>
	<p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/childrens-learning-disabilities-therapeutic-service/resources/ https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/ld-community-treatment-services/ https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/children-with-disabilities/ https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/disabled-children-and-young-peoples-services/ https://setrust.hscni.net/service/childrens-disability-service/</p>

Transitions Resources

	<p>https://www.cedar-foundation.org/transitions-services</p>
	<p>https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/transition-and-inclusion-service-tis</p>
	<p>https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/looking-work/training-programmes</p>
	<p>https://southerntrust.hscni.net/service/children-with-disabilities/transitions/</p> <p>https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/service/transition-services/</p> <p>https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/childrens-disability-teams/</p> <p>https://westerntrust.hscni.net/service/disabled-children-and-young-peoples-services/</p> <p>https://setrust.hscni.net/service/childrens-disability-service/</p>

Conclusion – From Parents, for Parents

As parents, we know that raising a child with additional needs can be a journey filled with joy, worry, pride, frustration, love, and everything in between. Working through this guide has reminded us that while behaviours can sometimes feel overwhelming, they are also windows into what our children are trying to tell us. None of us get it right all the time—and that’s okay. We are learning just as our children are learning.

What matters most is that we keep showing up, keep trying, and keep giving ourselves grace. Every small step forward counts. Every moment of connection matters. Every win—no matter how tiny—is worth celebrating.

This guide does not promise quick fixes, but it does offer understanding, reassurance, and practical support. It reflects the real experiences of families like ours—families doing their best, often in challenging circumstances, and still showing incredible strength.

We hope this resource reminds you of three important things:

You are not alone. Your child is capable. And you are doing better than you think.

As parents, we walk this path together. There will be tough days, but there will also be breakthroughs—sometimes small, sometimes life-changing. Hold onto hope, lean on your support network, and remember to take care of yourself too.

Most of all, know that your love, patience, and persistence make a difference every single day.

From our families to yours—keep going. You’ve got this.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, to the families who continue to inspire this work—your resilience and dedication remind us why collaboration matters. This guide is for you.

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Former Members Sharon Crawford Curtis Marshall Ellen O’Hara Katie Doherty Niamh O’Kane	Former Head of Service Children with Disability, NHST Behaviour Support Assistant, NHST Trainee Clinical Psychologist NHST Assistant Psychologist NHST Trainee Educational Psychologist Action for Children NI
Parents Consulted	Stronger Together NI Wide Parent Focus Group NHST Parent Plus Programme Group Ga

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