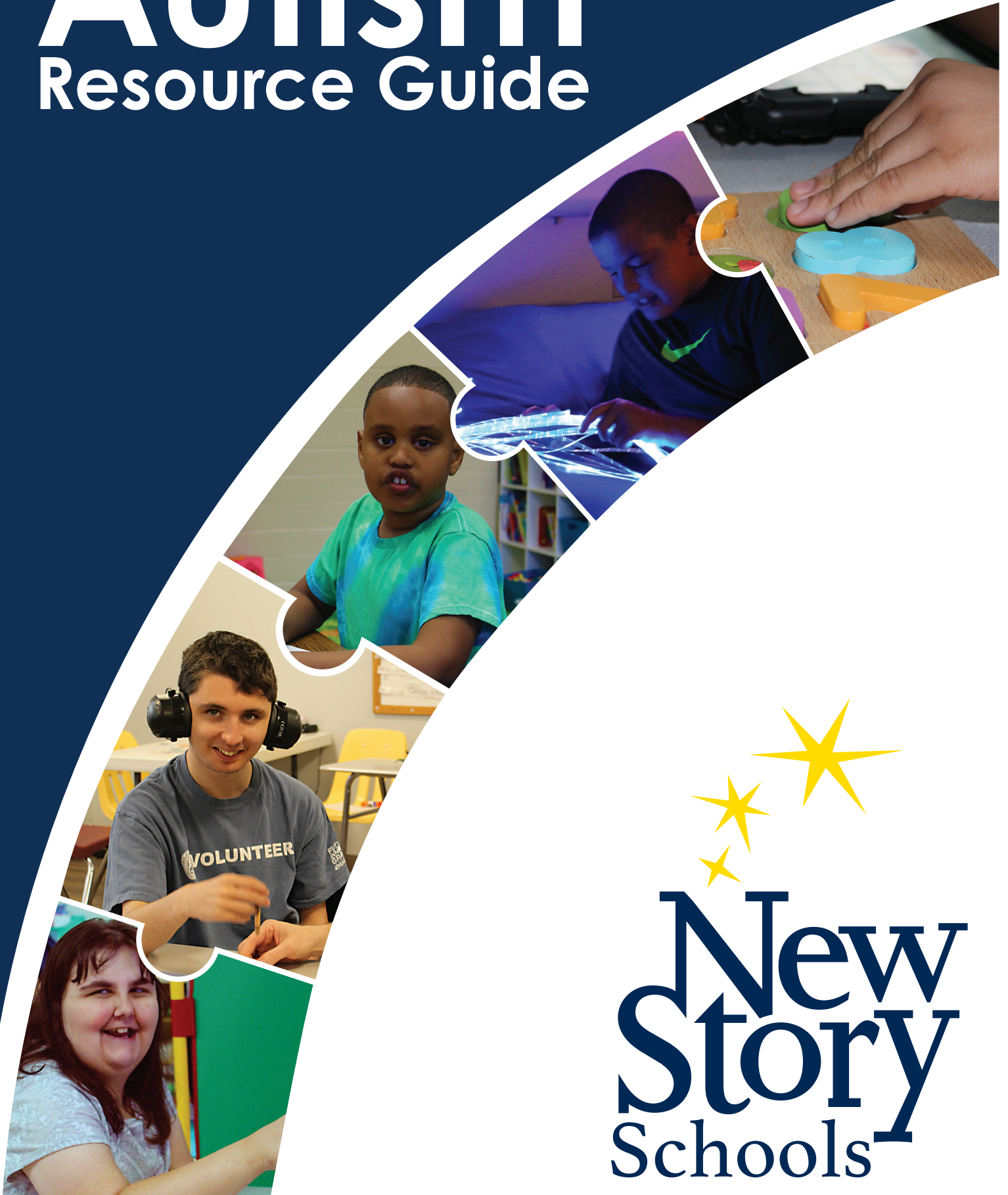


# Autism

## Resource Guide



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## Stimming: A guide for parents of children with Autism

Have you noticed your child with autism spectrum disorder (autism) engaging in repetitive motions or sounds, and you aren't sure why? These behaviors are likely a form of self-stimulatory behaviors, otherwise known as "stimming." [Stimming](#) can sometimes cause concern and alarm in parents. Is my child okay? Is something wrong? Will this behavior draw unwanted (or worse, unkind) attention from others? It can be difficult to know how to handle a loved one when stimming occurs. Here are some helpful tips to recognize, understand, and address stimming in your child.

### What is Stimming?

Stimming is the repetitive performance of certain physical movements or vocalizations. Most people (on and off of the autism spectrum) engage in stimming activities to some degree without even realizing it. This could present itself in simple actions such as foot tapping, nail biting, hair twirling, or drumming fingers on a table. However, for some, the actions can be more pronounced and noticeable. Some of these include rocking back and forth, hand flapping, clapping, rubbing surfaces of certain textures, humming, yelling, or repeating certain words, phrases, or sounds. Stimming behaviors are more common among those on the autism spectrum, but can be exhibited by anyone.



### Why is my child Stimming?

Stimming usually serves one of three purposes: self-regulating, expressing feelings, or coping with anxiety. Let's look at each one:

#### Self Regulating

People (especially children and young adults) with autism can often become overwhelmed or overstimulated in what can feel like a chaotic and out of control world. Stimming can be a soothing and comforting activity to help self-regulate and feel a sense of control in an unpredictable environment. Understimulation (or boredom) can also bring on stimming in some cases.

#### Expressing Feelings

Stimming can be a way to communicate excitement, joy, frustration, or a variety of other emotions. This is especially true when those feelings are difficult or unable to be conveyed verbally.

#### Coping with Anxiety

Stimming can be a calming coping mechanism in order to [manage stress or other intense emotions](#) that may be difficult to process. This is due to the repetitive and familiar nature of stimming activity, which can bring feelings of safety and reassurance.



## How Should I Handle My Child's Stimming?

There are a few questions parents should ask themselves about their child's stimming behaviors. First, is my child harming his or herself with this behavior?

If the answer is yes, please visit [this article](#) for more information on self-injurious behaviors and autism.

If the answer is no, it is important to avoid punishing or shaming your child for their stimming. Stimming is a natural behavior that serves an important purpose. Trying to suppress it can be harmful and counterproductive.

The second question to ask is what purpose the behavior is serving for your child. This may take some practice, trial, and error, but knowing why your child is stimming can help you provide the best support.

For instance, if you can tell the stimming is due to overstimulation, you can take a break or move to a less chaotic environment. If it's to express an emotion, you can share in the joy or provide reassurance in times of anxiety or frustration.

## What if My Child's Stimming Is Affecting Others?

The last question to ask is whether a child's stimming is affecting others in a negative way. While it's never a good idea to punish a child for stimming, it can be helpful to encourage appropriate times and places for the behaviors, or even provide opportunities for more fitting behaviors that serve the same purpose.

Perhaps your child's repeated clapping isn't harming them, but it might be very disruptive to others in public. Giving your child something else to do that is quiet (such as rolling and unrolling a towel, using a fidget device, or squeezing a stress ball) could serve the same purpose without causing a disruption. The more you know about why the behavior is happening, the easier it will be to determine an effective replacement behavior.



## What Will People Think?

Many parents worry about their child's stimming behavior appearing odd, socially unacceptable, or "weird." While it may be understandably tempting to discourage these behaviors for this reason alone, if no one is being harmed or disrupted, it is best to accept that all children are unique individuals with their own mannerisms, and support them as best you can.

In public settings, this may require some extra communication. A good way to do this is to introduce your child in a friendly way to anyone who might be looking, and then simply explain their behavior. Don't be afraid to reach out to your child's school staff, a therapist, or support groups for more guidance on how to appropriately handle your child's stimming. You are not in this alone.

“ If the behaviors are not harmful or obscene, the public doesn't need an explanation. ”

— Cole Dunlevy, Director,  
Community Partnerships



## Autism and Sensory Issues

When you have a child on the autism spectrum, it can be challenging to understand how the world around them can affect them differently than it affects you. While no two people with autism share the same sensory differences, it helps to know what to look for. Learning to recognize and help minimize sensory issues will make life better for your young one, and in many cases, improve your own life too.

### What are sensory issues in people with autism?

People on the autism spectrum commonly experience [sensory processing issues](#) that would not typically affect a neurotypical (non-autistic) person. These reactions can cause mild to very profound difficulties which can affect their lives (as well as the lives of those around them) significantly. Let's explore some ways that the senses can be affected, keeping in mind that each person is different, and can experience one, more than one, or any combination of the reactions discussed to the right.



### Hypersensitivity

This is a state of oversensitivity, or over-responsiveness, and it can affect any of the senses. A common hypersensitivity in people on the spectrum can be in reaction to bright lights, particularly fluorescent lighting, but any bright light could cause a sensitivity. For others, certain sounds, smells, tastes, or textures can be overstimulating or overwhelming.

For instance, some people on the spectrum do not tune out certain sounds or background noises as well as neurotypical people. So, something as simple as a loud air conditioner, a low hum of a refrigerator, or people talking quietly on the other side of the room, could be just as loud or intrusive as the person talking directly to them.

Particular clothes or clothing fasteners might rub the wrong way, or the smell of certain perfumes or soaps can be too strong. Signs of hypersensitivity may include pulling away from physical touch, covering ears to avoid sounds, being repulsed by certain foods, becoming agitated in certain lighting, and avoiding certain kinds of clothing.

### Hyposensitivity

This is a state of under-sensitivity, or under-responsiveness, and it can also affect any of the senses. This can present itself in various ways, such as difficulty recognizing hunger, pain, illness, or a need to use the restroom.

Someone with hyposensitivity to pain may walk around on a broken ankle for days before anyone notices. Hyposensitivity to smell may cause someone to be unaware of strong smells, like their own body odor. Hyposensitive people may have a constant need for movement, be attracted to brighter light, louder noises, attempt to eat things that aren't food, or seek out more sensory input with behavior [called stimming](#).

## Sensory Overload

This can happen when intensity (whether it be from hypersensitivity or from too much stimulation) overwhelms a person's ability to cope, or self-regulate. It could be triggered by one event, like a very loud noise, or build up gradually due to the effort it takes to cope with everyday [sensory sensitivities](#). When this happens, it can feel like intense panic or anxiety, a sudden need to escape, difficulty communicating, or exhaustion and shutdown.

## What can I do to help with my child's sensory issues?

The first thing you can do is gather information. Keep a close eye on signs of hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities in your child, and do your best to communicate with them about what may be bothering them. From there, you can try accommodating by changing the environment and/or using tools or strategies that help. Here are just a few examples of how to help sensory difficulties.



## Helping With Hypersensitivity

- Make a [safe, quiet space](#) with dim lighting for calming down
- Visit new places at quiet times, gradually increasing the duration over time
- Try earplugs or noise-canceling headphones to help with sound sensitivities
- Plan for 'calm' days to counteract busy days and reduce anxiety
- Avoid strongly scented products
- Choose soft, comfortable clothing
- Choose foods that avoid aversions to textures, temperatures, or spices
- Ask or tell before you touch, and remember that hugs can be painful

## Helping With Hyposensitivity

- Provide fidget toys, chewies, squishy balls, putty, or playdough
- Arrange furniture to allow for safe, open spaces that allow movement
- Take several breaks for movement throughout the day
- Use weighted blankets, stuffed animals, or squeeze vest to provide pressure
- Take frequent restroom breaks for those with reduced body sensation awareness
- Listen to music, bounce on a trampoline, or take walks periodically
- Provide foods with strong tastes or textures as desired

Be sure to partner with your child's school and medical professionals for the best chance at consistency and success. Therapies such as occupational therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, or other forms of therapy can also be very helpful in some cases. For more in-depth information on sensory issues and ways to help your child handle them, check out these articles by The [National Autistic Society](#), [Autism Speaks](#), and [The Spectrum](#).

## Self-injury and Autism

Almost nothing is more devastating for parents and caregivers than the idea of their children harming themselves. Why is this happening? Have I done something wrong? Will this get worse over time? How can I stop it?

About [one in four](#) children with autism spectrum disorder (autism) hit, scratch, or hurt themselves in some way. While these behaviors can seem scary and overwhelming, here is some helpful information to help you recognize, understand, and respond appropriately to self-in

### What is Self-injury?

Self-injury is any behavior that causes harm to oneself. It is important to know that anyone can engage in self-injurious behaviors, and that these behaviors occur for a variety of reasons. However, we will be specifically discussing **unintentional self-injury** as it relates to autism. Some examples of self-injury include, but aren't limited to: slapping, scratching, headbanging, biting, pinching, picking at skin, and hair pulling.

### Why Does My Child Self-Injure?

People with autism who exhibit self-injury are not actually trying to hurt themselves. They engage in these behaviors for other specific reasons, such as communication, sensory stimulation, and brain chemistry. Let's explore each one:



### Communication

Some people with autism self-injure as an attempt to communicate an urgent need, feeling, or frustration that they are not able to put into words. [The Autism Research Institute](#) explains it best:

*Biting, headbanging or other self-injurious behaviors are a means of getting their needs met and may be their urgent need to express pain, fear, displeasure, or anxiety. They may be trying to say, for example, "I'm scared, I want to get out of here" or "This is too hard, I don't want to do this" or "Play with me!" or "Look at me!" or "My head hurts, it feels better when I bang it," etc.*

### Sensory Stimulation

Sensory stimulation, or "stimming" is the compulsive or repetitive performance of certain physical movements or vocalizations. People (especially children and young adults) with autism can often become overwhelmed or overstimulated. Stimming can be a comforting sensory activity to help self-regulate and feel some sense of control in an unpredictable environment. Understimulation (or boredom) can also bring on stimming in some cases. For more information on stimming, check out [this article](#).

### Brain Chemistry

It is possible that there are other factors that could be contributing to self-injurious behaviors. Some examples could include seizures, genetic factors, or other health conditions which may affect the biochemistry of the brain.

### How Should I Handle Self-Injury In My Child?

First, know that you do not need to, and should not handle this alone. Be sure to reach out to your child's school, health professionals, and support groups for a team approach to making sure you and your child have the best help possible.

With this team approach in mind, the most important next step is to determine why the behavior is occurring. Your child's school or clinician may do a behavior assessment to help find the cause. Once you understand the behavior, you and your team can make a plan to address it.

If the behavior is due to brain chemistry, seizures, or a physical ailment that is causing pain, sometimes the solution is as simple as addressing the underlying condition medically. If the self-injury is happening as a means of communication or stimming, here are some helpful things to know:



- Self-injury can often be a learned behavior. Many well-meaning parents reinforce self-injurious behaviors without realizing it by removing what is unwanted or providing what is desired each time the behavior occurs. Although this reaction comes with the best intentions, it could ultimately be teaching a child that self-injury is the best way to get what they need or want.
- The most important thing you can do is teach your child to communicate in other, more productive ways. (This could be with words or without words, depending on your child.) It helps to practice various scenarios, needs or situations and the safer way to communicate them before they actually occur. Be very encouraging and rewarding of these replacement behaviors so your child understands that they get their needs met more quickly, effectively, and with praise from their loved ones when they use the replacement behavior instead of the self-injury. This takes practice, and the support of your team, but it can help immensely.
- It can also be very helpful to proactively remove or reduce any “triggers” or scenarios that you’ve learned bring on the injurious behaviors before they occur — especially until better communication skills are developed. For instance, if a task is too difficult and is bringing on self-injury, perhaps make the task less difficult or provide more help so that your child does not become frustrated to the point of injuring themselves.
- The [Autism Research Institute](#) has an online resource to help understand and treat self-injurious behaviors. While this is not a replacement for your team of professionals, it can be a very helpful tool to help guide you and supplement your needs.

#### Important Note on Autism and Self Harm

While the self-injury discussed above is of an unintentional nature, parents should also be aware that young people on the autism spectrum are also more likely to engage in various forms of intentional self harm. If you know or suspect that your child is harming themselves intentionally, seek professional help right away. For more information on self harm, [this article](#) can help.