

Behavioral Aspects of Coping with Change for Children Ages 5 - 12 with Level 3 Autism Spectrum Disorder



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1 Introduction

Coping with change presents a profound challenge for children aged 5 to 12 with Level 3 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This developmental stage is marked by increasing social and cognitive demands, and children with severe autism often exhibit marked difficulty tolerating changes or transitions. Central to these challenges is intolerance of uncertainty (IU), a behavioral and cognitive pattern characterized by distress and dysfunction triggered by unpredictable or ambiguous situations.

This report explores the **behavioral aspects** underlying coping with change in Level 3 ASD, considering consequences, neurobehavioral processing differences, environmental factors, intervention strategies, and ethical considerations relevant to supporting these children in managing change. Emphasis is placed on evidence-based strategies informed by current research and expert consensus, incorporating at least ten peer-reviewed and reputable references from 2020 to 2025 with reliable links for further information.

2 Understanding Autism Level 3 and the Challenges of Coping with Change

Level 3 Autism Spectrum Disorder, as defined by the DSM-5, represents the most severe classification within the autism spectrum, necessitating substantial support. Children in this category experience significant deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication and demonstrate pronounced rigidity and repetitive behaviors that interfere with daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Challenges with coping with change are particularly salient, as these children often exhibit an intense preference for sameness, routines, and predictability as mechanisms to (Rodgers et al., 2023).

Frequent behavioral manifestations include resistance to transitions, disruptive behaviors when routines are altered, and heightened anxiety in response to novel or unexpected stimuli. These behavioral responses



complicate social interactions, learning opportunities, and family dynamics, underscoring the need for research-informed, contextually sensitive approaches to support these children.

3 The Role of Behavior in Coping with Change

3.1 Behavioral Development in Coping with Change

Behavioral adaptation to change is a foundational developmental process enabling children to manage novel environments and unpredictable social contexts. Typically developing children progressively learn to tolerate unpredictability and spontaneously adjust behaviors.

However, some children with Level 3 ASD can show marked behavioral inflexibility, limiting exposure to new experiences and behavioral repertoire expansion (Kanne et al., 2011). Behavioral rigidity interferes with acquiring flexible response strategies that facilitate communication, play, and learning. It also impairs the natural development of emotional regulation by locking children into habitual coping behaviors often exacerbating anxiety (Dalrymple et al., 2018).

3.2 Behavior Norms and Coping with Change

Societal behavioral norms expect flexibility and adaptability as key functional competencies in social and educational contexts. In contrast, children with Level 3 ASD frequently display repetitive and rigid behaviors in response to change that diverge significantly from these expectations (Rodgers et al., 2017). Such behavioral differences may be misinterpreted as oppositional or noncompliant, causing social exclusion and pressure for behavioral conformity.

3.3 Behavioral Misunderstanding and Consequences

Behavioral manifestations of intolerance of uncertainty are often misunderstood by caregivers and educators, who may respond with punitive or corrective interventions that inadvertently increase distress and resistance (Harris et al., 2025; Whiteford et al., 2013). These behavioral misunderstandings reinforce avoidance and exacerbate problem behaviors during transitions or environmental changes.

3.4 Reducing Behavioral Misunderstandings for Adaptive Engagement

Recognizing the function and context of behaviors associated with coping difficulties is crucial. Behavioral interventions emphasizing positive reinforcement, gradual exposure to change, and validation of the child's



emotional state foster adaptive engagement and reduce challenging behaviors (Goodwin et al., 2022). Tools such as behavior support plans and visual aids clarify expectations while respecting the child's behavioral profile.

4 Processing Differences and Environmental Behavior Triggers

4.1 Sensory Sensitivities Impacting Behavioral Responses to Change

Children with Level 3 ASD exhibit increased sensory sensitivities which amplify behavioral reactivity to environmental changes (MacLennan et al., 2021). Sensory overload from unpredictable stimuli triggers avoidance, withdrawal, and repetitive behaviors functioning as self-regulatory mechanisms to cope with distress (Bey et al., 2024; Sabatos-DeVito et al., 2016).

4.2 Behavior in Socially Demanding Environments

Environments demanding rapid behavioral adaptation amplify stress and behavioral dysregulation. These contexts often precipitate heightened rigidity, meltdowns, or shutdowns, reflecting overwhelmed coping capacities (Bagherzadeh-Azbari et al., 2022). Behavioral outbursts during transitions hinder participation and learning.

4.3 Social Motivation and Behavioral Communication

Behavioral expressions of coping challenges are influenced by reduced social motivation and communication impairment in Level 3 ASD (Dalrymple et al., 2018). Children may rely more heavily on behavioral routines rather than social cues to manage their environment, which limits the use of flexible, adaptive behaviors in socially mediated change contexts.

5 Intervention Strategies to Improve Coping with Change

Effective intervention focuses on modifying behavioural patterns through supportive, evidence-based techniques. Stepwise visual supports, including Social Stories and photographic/visual activity schedules, serve to help children rehearse and tolerate small changes, with parents and educators reinforcing gradual flexibility (Gray & Garand, 1993; MacDuff et al., 1993; Schneider & Goldstein, 2010).



Coping with Uncertainty in Everyday Situations (CUES©) is a cognitive-behavioral approach targets maladaptive behaviors by teaching caregivers and educators to reinforce gradual behavioral flexibility and reduce anxiety-driven resistance (Rodgers et al., 2023; Schneider & Goldstein, 2010).

Naturalistic, caregiver-mediated communication programmes embed behavioral strategies within everyday routines and play, supporting generalization and spontaneous variability; large trials such as PACT-G demonstrate feasibility for rigorous, parent-involved intervention models that can be adapted to coping-with-change goals (Green et al., 2018).

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) combines reinforcement of adaptive behavior, functional communication, and antecedent adjustments; home-based single-case work shows reductions in challenging behaviour when Social Stories and mini-schedules are integrated within PBS frameworks. Sensory-based supports tailoring input and structuring environments can reduce over- or under-responsivity that fuels distress during change, thereby improving coping. (Beqiraj et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2017).

Technology-assisted interventions including virtual reality, artificial intelligence, avatars and gamified platforms, can create safe spaces for practicing behavioral flexibility in response to change (Porayska-Pomsta et al., 2018; Valori et al., 2021).

6 The Behavioral Context: Families, Carers, and Educators

6.1 Prioritizing Behavioral Comfort and Autonomy

Intervention plans must prioritize reducing behavioral distress by respecting the child's existing coping behaviors while introducing adaptive alternatives at a manageable pace. Forcing premature behavioral change can undermine trust and provoke resistance, impeding progress (Oerbeck et al., 2021).

6.2 Adapting Environments to Support Behavior Coping with Change

Developing environments that are structured and predictable with clear visual cues, schedules, and advanced warnings as this helps children with autism anticipate and prepare for transitions, reducing behavior disruptions related to change (Dalrymple et al., 2018)



6.3 Adaptive Behavioral Teaching

Educators and carers should acknowledge and reinforce even modest demonstrations of behavioral flexibility during changes, while validating alternative coping strategies the child uses. Structured scaffolding of behavioral expectations, combined with supportive transition techniques, eases anxiety and diminishes challenging behaviors (Esposito et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2022).

6.4 Positive Reinforcement and Token Economies

Individualized reward systems are critical for shaping adaptive behavioral responses to change. Rewards tailored to a child's preferences, such as tokens, stickers, or favored activities, provide meaningful and immediate positive feedback, strengthening the association between managing uncertainty and positive outcomes (Hollocks et al., 2023)

6.5 Use of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

For children with limited verbal ability, AAC systems (e.g., Picture Exchange Communication System or communication apps) facilitate behavioral communication regarding distress or needs in the face of change (Gray & Garand, 1993; Schneider & Goldstein, 2010). These tools reduce frustration and support functional, socially appropriate communication during transitions and changes (Valori et al., 2022).

Families, carers, and educators form the core environment shaping how children with Level 3 autism cope with change. By providing structure, consistency, and additional tailored strategies including direct instruction, role-play, parent coaching, and positive reinforcement of small steps, can reduce intolerance of uncertainty and build behavioral flexibility. Close collaboration across home and school keeps supports coherent and predictable, while attention to caregiver wellbeing helps sustain these practices over time.

7 Collaboration with Behavioral Specialists and Educators

Interdisciplinary teams comprising occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, behavior analysts, and educators work collaboratively to design individualized interventions, address behavioral challenges, and enhance behavioral understanding related to coping with change. Education plans commonly integrate goals that specifically target overcoming intolerance of uncertainty alongside the development of adaptive social and behavioral skills.



These collaborative teams facilitate consistent implementation of behavioral strategies across diverse settings, thereby promoting the generalization of adaptive coping behaviors. Ongoing data-driven behavioral assessments enable teams to monitor progress and adjust interventions responsively, ensuring individual education plans are current.

8 Challenges and Future Directions

8.1 Ethical Supports for Coping with Change

Supporting coping with change should prioritize the child's comfort and autonomy. Forcing rapid transitions or rigid expectations can intensify distress and undermine trust; instead, plans should use respectful scaffolding, social stories and visual supports that align with autistic learners' strengths in processing visual information and stepwise routines (Gray & Garand, 1993; Oerbeck et al., 2021; Schneider & Goldstein, 2010). Ethical interventions prioritize enhancing quality of life through positive behavioral supports and respect for the child's behavioral profile, avoiding coercion or punishment that aggravate distress (Oerbeck et al., 2021).

8.2 Emotional Regulation

Changes to routines often provoke fatigue, anxiety and emotional dysregulation in autistic children, driven in part by sensory response patterns, including hyper-responsivity, hypo responsivity and sensory seeking, that heighten arousal and avoidance during transitions. Integrative strategies utilizing calming routines, visual schedules and Social Stories, can reduce distress and improve on-task behavior during change (Schneider & Goldstein, 2010).

8.3 Complexity, Gaps and Overcoming Barriers

Coping with change in Level 3 ASD is heterogeneous: sensory profiles frequently co-occur and shift over time, so supports must be highly individualized rather than one-size-fits-all. The evidence base for visual supports includes many single-case designs showing promising effects, but more large-scale, controlled studies targeting coping with change specifically are needed.

Large randomized trials in allied areas (e.g., social-communication interventions such as PACT-G) demonstrate the feasibility of rigorous designs that could be adapted to behavioral supports for coping with change (Green et al., 2018).



Table: Behavioral Aspects of Coping with Change in Children with Level 3 Autism

Behavioral Aspect	Description	Intervention/Support Strategies
Intolerance of uncertainty	Distress/rigidity with unpredictability	Predictability (visual schedules, advance notice); graded exposure (e.g., CUES©)
Cognitive rigidity and routine dependence	Prefers sameness; difficulty shifting tasks/settings	First-Then; task analysis; flexible routines with small, controlled changes
Sensory reactivity to change	Over/under-response to new sounds, lights, crowds; avoidance/meltdowns	Sensory accommodations; regulation tools; gradual desensitization in low-demand contexts
Communication during transitions	Struggles to express needs/ discomfort when routines shift	AAC; functional communication training; visual transition scripts/social narratives
Reduced social motivation	Relies on routines over social cues; limited imitation	NDBIs; peer-mediated modeling and prompting
Emotional dysregulation	Anxiety leading to shutdowns or outbursts during transitions	Co-regulation; calming strategies; emotion labeling with visuals
Behavioral misinterpretation	Inflexibility seen as noncompliance → punitive cycles	Caregiver/educator training; function-based PBS plans
Demanding environments	Fast schedules, noise, crowds amplify stress	Antecedent modifications; environmental structuring; transition rehearsals/VR practice
Escape-maintained resistance	Avoidance/opposition to delay or block change	Differential reinforcement; demand fading; consistent routines with meaningful choices
Family and caregiver factors	High load reduces consistency/follow-through	Parent coaching; respite; coordinated home-school routines and data sharing
Social participation and autonomy	Limited inclusion; dependence on adults for transitions	Scaffolded community practice; goals for independence and coping skills



9 Conclusion

Behavioral challenges coping with change in children aged 5 to 12 with Level 3 ASD stem from intolerance of uncertainty, sensory sensitivities, and cognitive rigidity. Addressing these issues requires tailored, positive behavioral interventions that build flexibility and adaptive coping while respecting the child's autonomy. Collaborative approaches engaging families, educators, and therapists are key to fostering meaningful behavioral change and improved quality of life.



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