easterseals
taking on disability together

AUGUST & SEPTEMBER 2016
PARENT NEWSLETTER

From the Autism Spectrum Disorder Department at Easterseals Joliet Region

Visit our website or find us on Facebook

What's Going On At Easterseals....

Social Skills Group for 4th & 5th Graders with Autism - How 2 B Friends

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders have difficulty developing social skills, and many benefit from a Social Skills Group focusing on practicing specific skills. In this group we can build on strengths that kids already have to develop more advanced skills, like initiating and maintaining conversations, and resolving conflicts. The group is intended for kids that have already made strides through one on one services and are ready to function in a group setting. This group will be facilitated by social workers who will provide a weekly curriculum handout and ideas on how to carry the skills over at home. The 8 week session will meet on Thursdays from 4:00 – 5:00 pm starting Thursday September 22, 2016 and ending Thursday November 10, 2016. The cost of the group is $150 for all 8 weeks, due at registration, or it may be billable through insurance. Call Valerie Lentz at 815-927-5465 for more information or to sign up.

Social Skills Group for 3 and 4 year olds with Autism and social delays – BUDSS

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other social delays have difficulty developing social skills, and may benefit from a therapy group focusing on teaching and practicing specific skills. This group is for children that are just developing the building blocks of social skills. We will do activities like identifying emotions and facial expressions, making eye contact, responding to greetings, taking turns, and engaging in back and forth play. Since we will be using fun games, songs and stories we might even forget we're learning too! At each group parents receive a schedule of activities, a hand out discussing the skills that are targeted for that day and ideas on how to continue working on those skills at home. The 8 week session will meet on Tuesdays from 1:00 – 2:00 pm starting Tuesday September 22, 2016 and ending Thursday November 10, 2016. The cost of the group is $150 for all 8 weeks, due at registration, or it may be billable through insurance. Call Laura Wallace at 815-927-5466 for more information or to sign up.

Chat with a Therapist

Each month Easter Seals features a topic of interest on our Facebook page. This is a great opportunity for parents and community members to log on and get information, ask questions and connect with Easter Seals' staff and clients. The therapist is available for a scheduled hour where they will provide some basic information, but will mostly focus on answering questions. You can leave questions ahead of time if you aren't able to log on during the scheduled chat session, or go back and read what was said after the chat session is over.

This month we are featuring Laura Wallace, LSW who is a behavioral therapist in our Autism treatment program. She will be chatting about **"What is behavioral therapy?" on Friday September 9th from 9:00 – 10:00 a.m.**, with information about what kind of professionals provides behavioral therapy, different types of behavioral approaches and resources. Remember to log on and get your questions answered!

Parents Raising Children with ASDs

Our parent support group continues to meet the **second Wednesday of every month from 6:00 – 7:30.** This program is a wonderful way to meet other parents, get information and get connected to resources in your community. This month we will meet on **Wednesday, September 14th** and as always, childcare will be provided for those who sign up ahead of time by Easter Seals staff. Both the group and childcare are free of charge. Please call Randi with any questions or to register for childcare at 815-927-5466.

Family Center for Autism Resources

Don't forget about our amazing lending library which is full of books, articles, games and therapy tools. We have recently refreshed our resources with some new release books and we have titles on topics ranging from understanding ASD, biographies, sensory processing disorders, comparing treatment approaches, parenting strategies, anxiety, sibling support, social skills and more. We also have books on many other special needs and typical development. The library is free to use and open to the public. Please call us today to set up a time to explore our library and consult with one of our staff! Call Valerie Lentz at 815-927-5465.

What's Going On In Your Community...

QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH STUDY

For Families Impacts by Intellectual Disability

Dear Parents or Primary Caregivers/Legal Guardians,

We invite you to take part in a research study that focuses on family quality of life among families impacted by intellectual disability. If you live in Illinois or Tennessee and are the parent or primary caregiver/legal guardian of an individual of any age with intellectual disability, you are invited to participate in our anonymous survey. A link to the online survey, along with a description, can be found at: www.wheaton.edu/FQOL-study (print versions of the survey are available upon request).

Forty parents will be randomly selected to receive a $25 gift card (choice of Starbucks, Amazon, or Wal-Mart) for completing the survey. Additionally, we will gather what we learn into a helpful guide that we will make available for free to you, other families, faith communities, disability organizations, and service providers throughout Illinois, Tennessee, and across the country.

The survey includes questions on the following topics: (1) Background information about you and your child(ren), (2) Your views on your own family's quality of life, (3) Aspects of your social relationships, (4) Aspects of your religious/spiritual life, and (5) Your experience with various life-stressors. You can skip any of the questions you prefer not to answer. You can also change your mind about participating after receiving and reading the survey. We anticipate the survey should take about 30 minutes to complete.

We are interested in learning more about what contributes to quality of life for families touched by intellectual disability. We are particularly interested in aspects of social relationships and religion/spirituality because very little is known about these dimensions of life and how they may relate to family quality of life. For some families, religion/spirituality may be an important part of life; for others, it is much less—or not at all—important. Regardless of where your views fall on this topic, we strongly encourage your participation as we want to hear from parents with diverse views!

We encourage your questions about this project at any time by contacting Thomas Boehm at (630)752-5937 or thomas.boehm@wheaton.edu. For additional information about giving consent or your rights as participant in this study, please feel free to contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 343-4138 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

Thank you for considering this invitation!

Thomas Boehm, Mark Hiben, Madeline Hazel, Shimmy Gajjar, & Erik Carter
Disabilities, Religion, & Spirituality Program at Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Vanderbilt University *Disability Research Program* at Wheaton College

HOW CAN YOU PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

To access the survey online, click this link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/disabilityresearch. If you cannot access the survey online, you can also request a printed copy by sending an e-mail to ThomasBoehm at thomas.boehm@wheaton.edu, calling him at (630) 752-5937, or sending the following information by mail: Your Name, E-mail, Street Address, City, State, Zip Code, Telephone #. Mail this information to: **Thomas Boehm**, Education Department, 501 College Ave., Wheaton, IL 60187-5593.

Workshops & Resource Fairs

Autism and Related Disorders Course

Yale University has a seminar on Autism and Related Disorders on iTunes **FREE** to listen to. The course covers diagnosis and assessment, etiology and treatment of children, adolescents and adults with autism and related disorders of socialization. Don't have time to take a course on Autism? Listen to lectures on your daily commute or while getting ready! Once again, these are **FREE to download on iTunes**! For more information, go to https://itunes.apple.com/us/course/autism-and-related-disorders/id495056283?enlh=7&mt=10&ls=1

Three Part Series on IEP – FREE workshop

Six Principles of IDEA

On Saturday **September 10th** from **10:30am-12:30pm**, the Family Resource Center on Disabilities will host a **FREE** workshop. This training is an overview of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) which is the law that protects the rights of children receiving special education services. The workshop will cover the evaluation process, Individualized Education Plans (IEP), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and procedural safeguards. This workshop will be at the **Will Grundy Center of Independent Living in Joliet, IL**. For more information and to register, go to https://frcd.org/workshop_posts/six-principles-of-idea/

Navigating the IEP Process

On Saturday **September 17th** from **10:30am-12:30pm**, the Family Resource Center on Disabilities will host a **FREE** workshop that will cover an overview of rules and regulations related to creating the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child. This workshop will be at the **Will Grundy Center of Independent Living in Joliet, IL**. For more information and to register, go to https://frcd.org/workshop_posts/navigating-the-iep-process/

Transition to Post Secondary Education

On Saturday **September 24th** from **10:30am-12:30pm**, the Family Resource Center on Disabilities will host a **FREE** workshop. They will discuss issues relating to transitioning from school to adult life/post-secondary education identifying outcomes and developing goals as part of the IEP process. Parents and young adults will become knowledgeable regarding resources in the community in order to build linkages, and ensure dignified life as a contributing citizen. . This workshop will be at the **Will Grundy Center of Independent Living in Joliet, IL**. For more information and to register, go to https://frcd.org/workshop_posts/transition-to-post-secondary-education/

Understanding Autism (also offered in Spanish)

The Resource Center for Autism & Developmental Delays (RCADD) is hosting a **FREE** workshop to address the core characteristics of autism spectrum disorders on **Wednesday, September 21st from 10am to 12pm** at the Garfield Community Center in Chicago, IL. This workshop will also be in Spanish on September 28th, from 10am-12pm at the Garfield Community Center. For more information and to register, go to https://www.eventbrite.com/e/understanding-autism-tickets-19894008515?aff=erelexpmlt For the Spanish class, go to https://www.eventbrite.com/e/entradas-comprendiendo-el-autismo-19895022548

Awakening the Autism Entrepreneur

On **Friday September 16th and Saturday September 17th**, Rising Tide U and UM-NSU Card will facilitate a one day workshop to help spark autism entrepreneurship in Chicago. They believe that entrepreneurship holds the key to providing gainful employment to many individuals with autism. **Friday's workshop will take place from 9am-4pm** at the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago and **Saturday's workshop will take place from 10am-5pm** at Saint James Commons in Chicago. The prices of these workshops are **$15**. For more information and to register, go to https://www.eventbrite.com/e/awakening-the-autism-entrepreneur-chicago-tickets-26209007848?aff=es2

Temple Grandin comes to Lombard, IL

On September 21st 2016, Temple Grandin will come to the Glenbard Parent Series to offer information, inspiration, and hope. Temple Grandin is the most accomplished and well-known adult with autism in the world. Dr. Grandin is an author, animal scientist, and autism self-advocate who encourages and motivates others through her story. Learn the extraordinary potential of all on the autism spectrum and how educators and parents can help people with autism, Asperser's syndrome, and ADHD tap into their hidden abilities and unique strengths. Dr. Temple Grandin will discuss her book "Different…Not Less" on **September 21st at Glenbard East High School at 3pm and again at 7pm**. The event is **FREE** and open to the public. To view the flyer, go to http://www.glenbardgps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/GrandinFlier.pdf

Siblings of Autism Video Contest (Win scholarships)

The Autism Society and Siblings of Autism have partnered up to start supporting the needs of siblings of those living with Autism. The first effort Siblings of Autism is undertaking is a contest where siblings of those living with autism are encouraged to develop a short video that describes what they perceive as their gifts of autism and discusses how the experience has had a positive impact on them. Seven scholarships will be awarded ranging from $1,000 to $10,000! The deadline to enter is August 31, 2016. To find out how to upload the video, scholarship information and more, go to http://www.autism-society.org/in-the-news/siblings-partner-video-contest/

Recreational & Social Opportunities

Free Chicago Museum Days

Chicago's museums are world class, but generally don't come cheap. The following museums offer FREE admission to Illinois residents on certain days. Free days can always change last minute, so always call first to confirm before heading out to the museums!

- The Field Museum: August 11, 27, 29 September 10, 17-19
- The Museum of Science and Industry: September 6-9, 12-16, 19-23, 26-30
- The John G. Shedd Aquarium: August 29-30, September 5-6, 12-13, 19-20, 26-27

Ride for Autism Speaks

On Sunday September 18th, Autism Speaks will be hosting a 75-mile scenic ride through the suburban countryside starting at the Fox River Harley-Davidson and ending at Skooters Roadhouse in Shorewood for an after-party. Registration begins at 8:30am and the ride kicks off at 10:30am. The registration fee is $30 per person and covers the ride and after-party. Contact Windy City Harley Davidson Dealerships to rent any bike they have available. For more information, and to register, go to http://ride.autismspeaks.org/faf/home/default.asp?ievent=1158545

Recurring Monthly Events

These events are going on every month out in your community. Please contact them directly for more information!

Exploration Station Special Needs Nights

Exploration Station is a wonderful children's museum in Bourbonnais. They host a special needs night on the **First Sunday of every month from 11am-12:30pm**. The staff at Exploration Station has taken special care to adapt the environment and provide an opportunity for children with special needs to explore their exhibits so they can learn through hands on interaction. The museum is only open to families with special needs children during this time, which provides a safe and accepting environment. The fee is $2.50 for residents and $3.50 for non-residents. Exploration Station is located at Perry Farm Park on 459 N Kennedy Drive in Bourbonnais. Pre-registration is required. Call 815-933-9905 ext. 3 for more information or visit them online at www.exploration-station.org.

Sensory Friendly Films at AMC

AMC has EXPANDED their Sensory Friendly Film program to include some evening hours with films geared towards an older crowd! The auditoriums dedicated to the program have their lights up, the sound turned down and audience members are invited to get up and dance, walk, shout or sing! They will now be on the **second and fourth Tuesday at 7pm AND second and fourth Saturday at 10 am every month.** Go to http://www.amctheatres.com/programs/sensory-friendly-films for more information and to find a nearby theater that is participating in this great program!

DuPage Children's Museum Special Needs Nights

Did you know that the DuPage Children's Museum has a dedicated night for families of children with special needs? They do! It is the **third Thursday of every month from 5pm-7pm**. It is a time designated for the families of children with special needs to enjoy the museum in an inclusive, typically quieter, less crowded atmosphere. They have a creativity drop-in studio that implements sensory-based activities with a different theme every week along with purposeful play with peers, adaptive equipment, and guides to help parents use the exhibits for therapeutic benefit. Admission is $11 per person, ages 1-59, and $10 for anyone over 60. For more information go to their website at http://dupagechildrens.org/

Sensory Story Times

The Plainfield Public Library is hosting a **FREE** drop-in Sensory Story time on the fourth Saturday of every month. After free play, socializing, and tactile activities, gather for a story time designed for children of all abilities. Friends and siblings are welcome. Children ages 3 to 9 must be accompanied by an adult. Drop in event, no registration is required. Find out more information at http://il.evanced.info/plainfield/evanced/eventcalendar.asp

Fountaindale Public Library (in Bolingbrook on Briarcliff) offers a **FREE** drop-in Sensory Story time on the second Saturday of every month from 10:30 to 11:15 for children from 2 to 6 years old with a caregiver. This story time is geared "especially for children with sensory integration issues". Visit their calendar at http://host7.evanced.info/fountaindale/evanced/eventcalendar.asp

Articles of the Month

Autismspeaks.org has an online blog called "Got Questions" where parents and caregivers can submit questions related to Autism and get answers from professionals on the Autism Speaks staff. We've posted a few of the questions and answers below for this month's article. Visit autismspeaks.org for more posts.

Autism and snorting: Parents seek help with new 'stim' behavior

We're having difficulties with a new stim [sensory stimulating behavior] that our seven-year-old has developed. He's snorting. It's deep and from the back of his throat. It started when he had some sinus drainage. That's gone, but he still snorts constantly both at home and at school. I suspect he enjoys the vibration it makes. But it sounds terrible, and we're getting complaints. We have no idea how to curtail or replace this behavior.

This week's "Got Questions?" post is by occupational therapist Moira Pena, of Toronto's Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. The hospital is one of 14 centers in the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network (ATN).

Editor's note: The following information is not meant to diagnose or treat and should not take the place of personal consultation, as appropriate, with a qualified healthcare professional and/or behavioral therapist.

Thanks for your question. I suspect that you're correct in thinking that there is a sensory stimulation element to this new behavior.

However, it's important to first rule out other potential causes with the help of a medical professional. Here are some of the possibilities to investigate:

Could the snorting be due to a medical problem? Though you mention that your son no longer has obvious sinus drainage, it's so important for a qualified medical professional to evaluate your son to rule out any persistent physical problem.

Could the snorting be a tic? By definition, tics are involuntary responses beyond a person's control. Tics can appear abruptly and take various forms. Familiar examples include facial twitches, compulsive blinking and unusual neck movements. Tics can also have a vocal component such as snorting, sniffling, throat clearing and unusual sounds. Typically, a tic has no clear trigger. The child (or adult) feels a compulsive need to engage in the behavior and typically feels quite frustrated by the inability to stop it. If you or your son's doctor suspects a tic behavior, a referral to a neurologist may be the next step.

Could the snorting be driven by anxiety? We know from research that many children with autism also suffer from an anxiety disorder. Repetitive and self-stimulatory behaviors can be a self-soothing response to the stress they feel. From my own practice, I recall a teen with autism who started hiccupping in stressful anticipation of social situations. His hiccupping and other anxiety symptoms only worsened if he tried to stifle the hiccups. If you or your son's doctor suspects underlying anxiety, a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist may be in order.

Working with problematic sensory-stimulatory behavior

If you sense that your son simply enjoys the snorting on some level, then it may very well be a pleasurable form of sensory stimulation. As an occupational therapist who specializes in autism, I frequently help children with sensory stimulation behaviors that interfere with their daily lives.

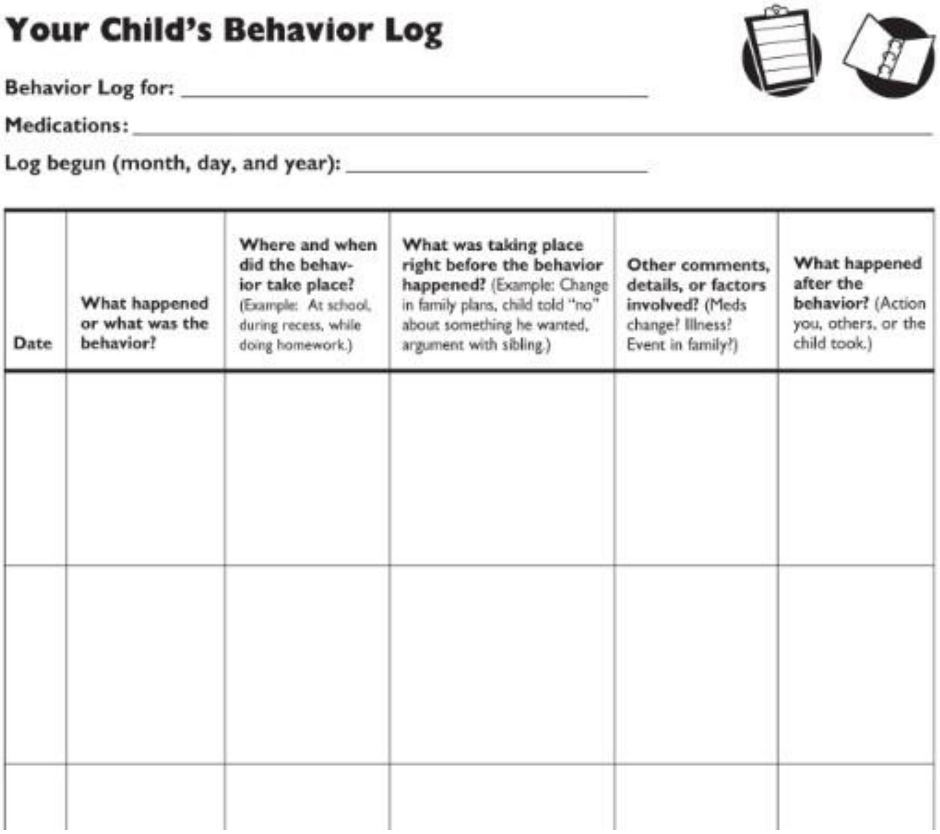
The kind of snorting you describe is both common and particularly challenging to manage. So while I hope my tips are helpful, I want to make clear that they're no substitute for a personalized therapy program with your son working one-on-one with an occupational, speech or behavioral therapist.

Also please keep in mind that sensory-stimulating behaviors serve an important purpose. From your question, I see you understand the need to find a replacement behavior to meet your son's sensory needs.

Here are some strategies that may help reduce the frequency and intensity of the snorting:

Track when it happens

I encourage parents to keep a log that notes when and where a problem behavior tends to occur. See the example behavior log below. You can download a full-size copy from the "Team Up for Families" website here.



Your Child's Behavior Log

Behavior Log for: ______________________

Medications: ______________________

Log begun (month, day, and year): ______________________

Date	**What happened or what was the behavior?**	**Where and when did the behavior take place?** (Example: At school, during recess, while doing homework.)	**What was taking place right before the behavior happened?** (Example: Change in family plans, child told "no" about something he wanted, argument with sibling.)	**Other comments, details, or factors involved?** (Meds change? Illness? Event in family?)	**What happened after the behavior?** (Action you, others, or the child took.)

Here are some important questions that a behavior log can help answer:

*** Does the behavior get louder or more frequent during certain times of day?** If so, note the time of day when the snorting becomes louder or more frequent. In my experience, the vocalizations tend to become louder when the child is either particularly excited or overwhelmed by some sort of sensory input (too much noise in the classroom, too many people nearby, spinning fans, fluorescent lighting, echoes in the gym and so on). Becoming aware of your son's triggers gives you the opportunity to minimize them and/or help him prepare to cope with them.

*** Are there times of day when your son seldom if ever engages in the behavior?** If so, look for clues as to what in the environment might be inhibiting the behavior. I recall, for example, a student who made loud vocalizations during class and lunch breaks. I noticed that it didn't happen when he sat at a particular table during lunch. I then noticed that the table was near a window at the quieter end of the lunchroom. I worked with his teachers to allow him to sit in this spot at lunch and seat him in a relatively quiet spot near a window in his classroom. This accommodation helped reduce the frequency of his disruptive vocalizations.

*** Does he snort more when he's around other people or by himself?** If the snorting is more frequent when he's alone, it suggests that he's simply enjoying the pleasurable vibration. By contrast, if it's more frequent around people, it may be that he's responding to something stressful or over-exciting about their presence.

*** Does the snorting follow or precede any particular activity or request?** If so, your son might be using the behavior to avoid something he doesn't want to do. I've often seen this with behaviors so disturbing that they divert the parent or teacher from following through on the request. If this is the case, it's important for you to keep your son on task (i.e. time to turn off the video game) while calmly ignoring the behavior.

In addition, I've found a number of helpful social story apps for the Ipad. They include Social Stories (Proteon Software), Pictello (AssistiveWare), Kid in Story Book Maker (Enuma) and Stories2Learn (MDR).

Whatever format you use, I recommend sharing the social story with your son several times a day. You can discuss how the boy in the story feels at different stages of his journey – and how his family and classmates feel, too.

Toning down the behavior and finding substitutes

Here are some tips for finding a replacement behavior to meet your son's need for sensory input and/or turning down the volume and frequency of his snorting.

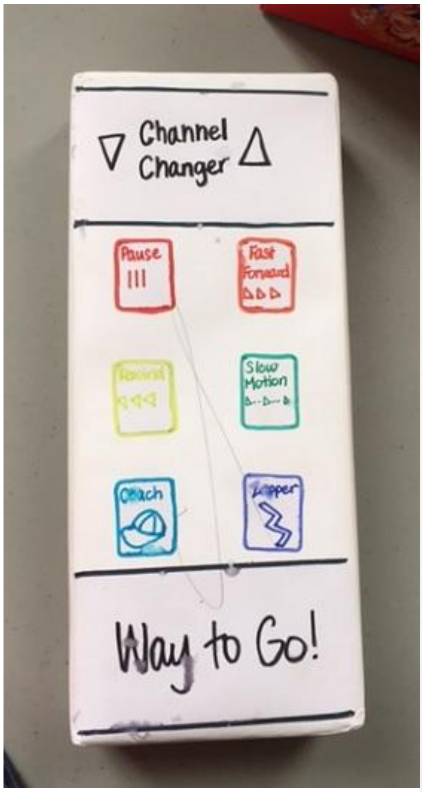
*** Have your son listen to gentle music or white noise** through earbuds or headphones to see if this reduces the frequency of his snorting. The idea is to block the sensory feedback that the snorting provides – while providing an alternative form of feedback.

*** Give your son a vibrating sensory toy** as a substitute for the vibratory sensory stimulation he's getting from the snorting. (Some examples here.) I've had success with this method in my practice.

“Control-o- Meter” by Joel Shaul, courtesy autismteachingstrategies.com*

Help turn down the volume. With help, your son may be able to reduce the intensity of his snorting enough that he doesn’t disturb others but still gives him the sensory input he craves. Many people on the autism spectrum respond best to visual prompts. So I suggest making a “volume-meter” (image at right) to prompt him. Make a game out of seeing just how quietly he can snort.

*** Reward abstinence!** Praise your son and reward him when he refrains from snorting. Whenever you notice him not snorting, praise him and give him a reward. (The reward can be a check mark on a visual reward chart that add up to earn a toy, treat or favorite activity.) Make your praise and reward exciting enough that he’s motivated to start reducing the behavior without prompting.



Make a mock “channel changer” for a fun visual prompt that says “time to do something else.” Photo courtesy Moira Pena.

*** Make a “remote control” to “change the channel.”** Use cardboard and colorful markers to create a pretend remote control with one button labeled “change channels.” (See example at right.) The parent shows the child the device and explains that when the parent (or teacher) presses the “change channel” button, the child needs to do something else – in this case something other than snorting. I’ve had great success with this strategy and have shared it with many families. Remember to praise and reward your son for complying.

*** Make time for snorting.** Encourage your son to indulge in his snorting at specific times and/or places (i.e. the privacy of his bedroom). You might note this regularly scheduled “sensory time” on a visual schedule of the day’s activities. You can learn more about creating a visual schedule in the Autism Speaks visual supports guidebook described below.

Visual Supports and
Autism Spectrum Disorders

AUTISM SPEAKS
ATN

*Learn more about visual supports and download the Autism Speaks ATN/AIR-P Visual Supports Tool Kit **here.***

*** Enrich the day with acceptable, sensory-rich activities.** Occupational therapists often refer to this as enriching a person's "sensory diet." The idea is to satisfy your son's need for sensory stimulation in acceptable ways. Options can include bouncing on a therapy ball, playing tug of war, bicycling, swimming, squishing him safely and playfully in a beanbag chair and so on. Find out what your child enjoys and look for opportunities to engage in these activities throughout the day.

*** Track what works.** With all these activities, track whether the strategy prompts a reduction in the frequency and/or intensity of the unwanted behavior. The behavioral log mentioned above is an excellent tool for this.

I hope these tips and insights prove helpful.Please let us know how you and your son are doing by emailing us again at gotquestions@autismspeaks.org.

Helping students with autism make the back-to-school transition

"At the end of last summer, our twins – who both have autism – had a terrible time switching back to early wake up and long school days. This year, how can we help them prepare for the transition?"

This week's "Got Questions?" response comes from autism educator Peter Gerhardt. Dr. Gerhardt is world-renowned for his work with adolescents on the autism spectrum.

The transition from the more laid-back schedule of summer to that of the school year can challenge any student. For those affected by autism, this transition can be particularly difficult. As you've noticed, they often struggle with the shift back to an earlier wake up time and the demands of a long school day.

Adjusting sleep time and wake up

Let's start by addressing the earlier wake-up call. Generally, this can be accomplished through an approach we call "shaping." First, consider how much time you need to shift your children's summer schedule to bring it in line with a school-day schedule.

Let's say that your kids are now waking at 9 am. But come the first day of school, they need to wake at 6:30 am. You have 2.5 hours you need to shape down. Ideally, you would start this shaping process around a month before school starts. The schedule whould look something like this:

Week 1: Wake them a half hour earlier than their typical summer wake-up time. So, in this example, at 8:30 am. It may be helpful to offer a glass of juice or other positive reinforcement for getting out of bed.

Week 2: Move wake-up time up another 30 minutes. So now they're waking up each day at 8 am. Continue offering positive reinforcement – be it a glass of juice or gentle praise – when they get out of bed. If possible, this is a good week to adjust bed time as well. Let's say 30 minutes earlier when they've been going to sleep.

Week 3: Now we get a little more ambitious. Advance wake-up time by 45 minutes (7:15 am in our example). Continue to provide positive reinforcement – now for both getting out bed *and* completing the first step in what their school-morning ritual will be. For instance, this step could involve getting dressed before leaving their bedroom – with clothes laid out the night before. Or washing their faces and brushing hair before coming to the breakfast table. If possible, try to maintain 8 hours of sleep by adjusting bedtime earlier – by up to 45 minutes.

Week 4: Move wake-up time to within 15 minutes of that for a school-day. So in this case, to 6:45 AM. Provide positive reinforcement for getting out bed and completing the first *two* steps in their school-morning ritual.

First week of school: Wake them up each day at the normal time. Provide positive reinforcement for getting out of bed and completing as many steps in their morning ritual as they have mastered.

Adjusting to school demands

To help transition to the more-demanding school day, I recommend that you talk with your children's teachers, classroom aides and/or school counselor. Some coordination is definitely in order here. Remember that your children – like most students – will be arriving a little more tired than usual the first week of school. And they may not be in the best of moods.

Ideally, the teacher will try to start the classroom day with preferred activities designed to ease students into the school-day routine. During the first few weeks, I encourage teachers to allow up to half of the school day for short breaks involving physical activity or some other preferred activity – but not napping.

As a general rule, I recommend against letting students with autism or other developmental disabilities sleep at school – unless, of course, they are ill and waiting for you to pick them up. By staying awake during the school day, they will be better able to fall asleep and stay asleep at night.

I also encourage teachers to use a visual aid or similar type of activity schedule to help students keep track of their progress through the school day. Without a sense of when something will end, even a brief activity can feel like an eternity for a student with autism. Visual schedules are an excellent way to cue students to the passage of time that leads to the end of the school day.

I hope these tips are helpful for you and your children. Please let us know how you're doing in the comment section below or with an email to GotQuestions@autismspeaks.org.

Also see these school resources from Autism Speaks:

** The Autism Speaks School Community Tool Kit*

** Autism Speaks ATN/AIR-P Guide to Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorder*

** The Autism Speaks Resource Library: Books for Students*

** The Autism Speaks Resource Library: Tools for Professionals*

Parents seek autism-savvy advice on getting 3-year- old to interact

They know that pointing and shared attention is important, ask how to begin when their preschooler ignores them.

Our 3-year- old was recently diagnosed with autism. We know it's important to encourage him to interact with us, but we don't know how. When I point to something, he pays no attention. He rarely points to show me something, and when he does point, he doesn't look at me when he does it.

Today's "Got Questions?" response is from speech-language pathologist Barbara Braddock. Dr. Braddock practices at the SSM Cardinal Glennon Medical Center of the Saint Louis University School of Medicine. The center is one of 14 sites in the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network (ATN).

Editor's note: The following information is not meant to diagnose or treat and should not take the place of personal consultation, as appropriate, with a qualified healthcare professional and/or behavioral therapist.

This is a question I often hear in my practice. You're describing difficulties in what we call "joint attention." Joint attention involves the behaviors we use to share information with others. Typically, before children learn to talk, they start using behaviors such as eye gaze, gesture and vocalization to share interest in objects and events around them.

Typically developing young children use gestures such as pointing to something of interest or holding up an object for another to see. In addition, they may pair words or nonverbal sounds with their gestures. Conversely, they begin paying attention when other people make bids for their attention – even following another person's gaze to see something of interest.

As you've noticed with your son, many young children who have autism fail to demonstrate these behaviors or the behaviors look noticeably different from what we might expect.

I encourage you to work closely with your son's developmental specialists on this issue. Ask them for suggestions of activities that would be particularly appropriate for you and your son to share at home.

Before I share some general tips, it may help to break down the two sides of this important social behavior.

Responding to a bid for joint attention. Typically, this involves a young child responding to your words and/or looking at your eyes or gestures, then shifting his attention to the object or activity you are showing him.

Initiating joint attention. Conversely, a child can initiate joint attention by making eye contact and then gesturing or looking at something of interest. The child might also make sounds or say a few words that show interest.

So, what happens when a child lacks these social communication behaviors? Where do you start?

Combining professional intervention and parent support

The good news is that research has shown us that therapists and parents can foster joint attention in young children who have autism – using the principles of behavioral intervention. (See "Joint attention and symbolic play in young children with autism: a randomized controlled intervention study." and "Randomized controlled caregiver mediated joint engagement intervention for toddlers with autism.")

If you haven't already, I urge you to request therapy aimed at helping your son develop this skill through your state's early intervention program.

Find contact information for your state's early intervention program here.

To get started at home, here are some general suggestions:

Respond to movements that signal interest. I encourage you to watch your child and respond to movements that indicate interest. Do so even if he’s not deliberately using these movements to communicate with you. For example, you see your son reaching for a toy – perhaps a toy just out of reach. Promptly respond by saying something along the lines of, “I

see the toy, too. Would you like to have it?”

Does your son sometimes hand you something? Respond to this warmly as a nonverbal sign of communication. For example, “Thank you for showing me this ball. It’s so squishy, isn’t it?”

Praise any effort your son makes to show or share something. For example, if your child holds an object up for you to see, respond with appreciation, such as, “Oh, yes, I see the toy car. I like it. Do you?”

Similarly, respond with clear interest if your son points at something – whether or not he looks at you. For example, you might mirror his movement by pointing at the same thing, then name it and ask about his interest. As in, “Yes, I see the pretty flower. Do you want to touch it?”

A remote controlled toy can help you encourage your child to respond to your gesture or words. (Learn how at left.)

In other words, you can share your interest in many ways – through your voice, your eyes, gestures and turning your body to face your child.

Encourage your child to respond to gesture and words. A fun strategy we often use in speech therapy is to activate a remote-controlled toy that flashes or makes a sound immediately after pointing to it and giving a verbal prompt such as “Look at the funny toy.” Just take care that the flashing or beeping doesn’t alarm or overwhelm your child.

A therapist combines a gesture with words when communicating. Photo courtesy Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disabilities.

Pair gestures and words. When talking with your son, point, touch and/or show objects or actions to share with him. For example, you might point to a bird and say, "Look, the bird is eating". You can hold up something in your son's line of vision and comment, "Look, I have a cup of juice."

Use gestures in play. It's fun and easy to incorporate gestures in games and routines. A great example is the "so big" gesture with spread arms. ("How big is Aaron? He's sooo big! Can you show me how big you are? Sooo big.") Conversely, you can use your thumb and pointer finger to use the "so little" sign when talking about, say, an insect on the sidewalk. ("Look, the bug is soooo little.")

Have fun with facial expressions. Try making silly faces with your child. Imitate his facial expressions in a loving, friendly way. Then see if he will imitate you. This type of interaction – just between two people, no object – can be particularly helpful in developing joint attention.

Use playtime to share interests. “Look, you’re coloring. I’m coloring. We’re coloring together!” Photo courtesy Michigan State University.

Share focus. Playing with a toy can be a starting point for you and your child to enjoy and share interactions. For example, while you and your son are playing with toy trucks, you can imitate how he pushes a truck back and forth. Then prompt him to imitate you loading it up.

You can expand play by making it more creative – such as adding a toy driver or parking the truck in a pretend garage.

Reading picture books together can be a powerful form of shared attention. Point at the pictures and discuss. You don’t need to read word for word.

Share books. Sharing a picture book with your child may be one of the most powerful ways to foster joint attention as well as language. You don’t need to read the book word-by- word.

Point at pictures and talk about them. Relate them to your child’s experiences. For example, ”Look, it’s a dog! … The dog is eating its dog food. Grandma has a dog, doesn’t she? … What do dogs do?”

I hope these tips prove helpful. Please let us know how you and your son are doing by emailing us again at gotquestions@autismspeaks.org.