

Busy Places and Travelling

Busy places and travelling out and about can be overwhelming for some children. Whether that's using public transport or unpredictable events, these situations may be hard to manage such as loud noises, bright lights, or crowds. Some children may seek sensory input in these environments, while others might feel the need to retreat.

The following ideas are designed to help address these challenges. When using them, consider your child's age, any potential risks and their sensory preferences. Reflect on how to adapt these strategies to best support your child in feeling calm and relaxed when in a busy place.

Area of Difficulty	Strategy	Tick when strategy has been tried and add comments
Child becomes overwhelmed by the noise.	Use noise-reducing ear defenders or headphones with music they can listen to. Remember to ensure the child has a break from using headphones to reduce dependency on use.	
	Identify quieter times of day to access the setting, or quieter areas within the environment.	
Child becomes overwhelmed by unfamiliar smells.	Ensure the child has access to a smell that can distract them (eg roller ball perfume, scented tissues, scented hand cream.)	
Child finds crowds or fast paced environments overwhelming.	Carry a backpack with a reasonable weight, in busy unpredictable places to provide a deep calming pressure. The weight should not be excessive or affect their posture. Carrying a bottle of water can also add to the weight of their bag and sucking water from a straw is an additional calming strategy.	
	Try tight-fitted clothing, as this may offer calming sensory input, improve body awareness, and help your child feel more secure and regulated.	
	Hoodies, hats or sunglasses can help to reduce overwhelming visual input and provide a sense of security.	
	Bring a familiar item like a blanket or toy for comfort or provide safe, calming sensory aids, such as chewing gum, a weighted lap item, or a fidget toy.	

	Encourage calming activities such as deep breathing and grounding exercises. For some ideas see Breathing Exercises for children.	
	Wherever possible minimise exposure to crowds, e.g. allow the child to leave 5 minutes before the rest of the school at transition times.	
	Pair the child with a buddy or adult e.g. in the playground or on transport.	
	If appropriate hold hands or stay close with your child. If you recognise the child is becoming overwhelmed, identify a quiet space to access.	
Child feels anxious in unfamiliar environments	As above, bring familiar items, sensory aids or practice sensory activities to support your child to stay calm.	
	Use apps or online maps to help your child familiarise themselves with the transport/ layout of the place. 'Practice' going there at quiet times or for shorter periods.	
	Prepare the child with social stories™. For further information on social stories™ see: Social Stories - Carol Gray - Social Stories (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
	Consider the other factors that may be influencing your child's anxiety/stress level. If possible, consider going to unfamiliar environments on days where there are fewer demands that cause your child stress.	
Child is distracted by their environment.	As above, consider how to reduce distraction from unfamiliar or overwhelming smells or noises.	
	See Worksheet B-Attention and Focus in 'Paediatric Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website.	
Child struggles to wait in queues	Engage them with interactive games, visual timers, or stories and consider distractions such as a tablet with headphones.	
	Allow the child to engage in safe, regular movement breaks before and after waiting.	
Child struggles with motion sickness	Support the child to sit in the front, towards movement of travel, and nearer a window. If on a boat, sit in the middle.	
	Encourage the child to maintain an upright position, focusing on looking at something straight ahead.	
	Reassure the child, if the movement is causing vomiting, don't push them past their limit.	

	See: Vestibular Essex Partnership University NHS Trust	
	Where possible, have regular breaks so the child can take some time to recover.	
Child is unsafe, e.g. does not have any danger awareness, will run away, or excessively touches objects	Prepare the child with social stories™ to support them understanding danger awareness and how to behave outside of the home. For further information on social stories™ see: Social Stories - Carol Gray - Social Stories (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
	See Worksheet L-Safety (pg. 4-9) in 'Occupational Therapy Pre-School Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Allow access to a box of fidget items. See Worksheet D-Attention and Focus in 'Occupational Therapy Motor Skills Resource Pack' on our website.	
	Where possible prepare where you are going to know where risk factors, or any potential triggers may be.	
	Hold hands or encourage your child to hold a fidget toy.	
	Provide 'jobs' for your child to focus on, for example, collect shopping, or carry objects.	
	Consider whether eligibility for a blue badge. For further information go to gov.uk, and access Who can get a Blue Badge? - GOV.UK	

Useful resources:

[Sensory-Preparing-for-Busy-Environments.pdf](#)

Humber NHS Foundation Trust Ground Techniques - <https://connect.humber.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/mindfulness-hand-breathing-and-grounding-techniques.pdf>

[Everyday Situations Public Transport.pdf](#)

[Motion sickness - NHS](#)

<https://youtu.be/PizUq-DDdjE>

Safety guide for parents - <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/transport/road-safety/parents-and-carers>

[Child car seats: the law: When a child can travel without a car seat - GOV.UK](#)

[Child car seats: the law: Using a child car seat or booster seat - GOV.UK](#)