FREE GUIDE · FOR CLINICIANS

Skills work for autism and ADHD: a toolkit for therapists

Practical interventions for executive function, emotional regulation, social understanding, sensory needs and self-esteem, with a focus on how the person's brain works rather than changing who they are.

This is a menu, not a manual. People with autism (ASD) and ADHD often arrive in therapy having spent years being told to try harder, sit still, make eye contact, stop being so much. The aim of skills work isn't to make them less themselves. It is to help them understand how their brain works, live in a way that costs fewer resources, and choose their responses more often instead of being run by them.

A few principles sit underneath everything below:

- **Start with the person's own model of their brain.** Psychoeducation reduces shame and makes every strategy easier to use.
- **Think in resources.** Executive function, emotional control and social processing all draw on the same limited budget. Sensory load, poor sleep and masking drain it. Many "skills deficits" are really budget problems.
- **Use external hooks.** Don't rely on a busy brain to remember. Put structure in the environment.
- **Experiment.** Try a strategy, see what happens, adjust. If nothing changes, try something else.
- **Build on strengths** and individualise. Nothing here is universal.

1. Executive functioning

Organisation, planning and getting started are common difficulties in both ADHD and autism.

- **Time:** visual schedules, timers and apps; time blocking; breaking tasks into steps with a clear start and end.
- **Getting started:** micro-tasks (one sentence, one drawer), and short work-and-rest cycles such as the Pomodoro technique.
- **Planning:** checklists, planners and task apps; backward planning from the goal to the first step.

2. Emotional regulation

Dysregulation is common in both conditions and can show up as frustration, anxiety, shutdowns or meltdowns. Often the person is running low on resources long before anyone, including them, notices.

- **Notice the curve:** help the person spot the early signs and the point at which they tip over, so they can act before it's too late.

- **Name it:** mood thermometers, emotion wheels and apps help with recognising and labelling feelings.
- **Calm the body:** breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and guided imagery, with sensory-friendly versions for autistic clients (textured objects, soothing sounds).
- **Question the story:** identify the thoughts driving the reaction. Is this information, or just the feeling?
- **Plan for crises:** a calm-down toolkit with sensory tools, coping cards and pre-prepared self-soothing scripts.

3. Social understanding

Social challenges are often central in autism and affect some people with ADHD. Frame this as learning another language, not fixing a fault, and focus on what the person wants from their relationships.

Reading social cues

- **Psychoeducation:** explain what social cues are and why they matter, in plain language (facial expression, gesture, tone, posture, proximity). Flashcards, photos, apps and emotion wheels help.
- **Video modelling:** pause clips of interactions and discuss what people might be feeling or thinking, then role-play something similar.
- **Role-play:** greetings, joining a conversation, repairing a misunderstanding. Start with exaggerated cues, then make them subtler.
- **Social stories:** short, personalised narratives that describe a tricky situation and the cues involved.
- **Emotion recognition practice:** games and apps that build from obvious emotions to subtler or mixed ones, like sarcasm or smiling while annoyed.
- **Tone of voice:** listen to recordings with different tones, discuss how context changes meaning, and try matching tones to emotions.
- **Body language:** notice posture, proximity and gesture, for example the signs that someone is bored.
- **Eye contact:** only if it matters to the person. Some people find it uncomfortable, and there are other ways to show attention. If they want to practise, go gradually, and light-touch games (such as noticing eye colour) can take the pressure off.
- **Feedback and reflection:** gentle, immediate feedback in session (“When I smiled just then, I was agreeing with you”), reviewing recorded role-plays, and teaching a pause-and-check question: “What do I notice about their face or body?”
- **Real-world practice:** observation tasks in daily life or on TV, practice tailored to settings like school or work, and group or peer sessions where possible. Games such as charades or an emotions version of Guess Who? keep it light.
- **State and culture:** notice how anxiety or low resources make cues harder to read, and remember that cues vary between cultures.

Relationships

- Practise conflict resolution with “I” statements, active listening and step-by-step problem solving.
- Use shared interests as a foundation for friendships, and practise starting and keeping up conversations around them.

4. Sensory sensitivities

- **Toolkits:** noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets and fidget tools chosen by the person.
- **Environment:** work together on sensory-friendly spaces at home, school or work. Less sensory load means more resources for everything else.
- **Gradual exposure:** where the person wants it, build tolerance slowly with manageable inputs.
- **Body-based activity:** yoga, tai chi or swimming can help with regulation.

5. Communication

- Structured conversation practice: turn-taking, staying on topic, asking for clarification.
- Visual supports to back up verbal instructions and explain abstract ideas.
- Perspective-taking: “What might they be feeling right now?”
- Technology, including AAC devices for people who are non-speaking.

6. Impulsivity

Impulsivity is a hallmark of ADHD and appears in some autistic people too. It is often autopilot: the response arrives before the thought does.

- **Awareness:** learn the early signs and practise a pause. Who’s steering?
- **Waiting games:** “stop and think” activities and delayed-reward exercises.
- **Scripts:** pre-planned responses and self-talk for situations where impulsivity tends to show up.
- **Physical outlets:** stress balls, tapping or short movement breaks.

7. School and work

- **School:** advocate for adjustments such as extra time, quiet exam rooms and seating near the front; break homework into chunks; use checklists or apps to track progress.
- **Work:** task managers and digital calendars with reminders; practise asking for clarification and for reasonable adjustments, such as noise reduction or flexible hours.

8. Self-esteem and confidence

Years of negative feedback often leave people with ASD and ADHD feeling inadequate, and that fear of not being good enough drives a lot of avoidance, masking and distress. This is often where the most important work happens.

- **Understand the brain:** knowing why things are harder reduces shame.
- **Focus on strengths:** creativity, focus, unusual ways of solving problems.
- **Reframe struggles** as part of a neurodivergent profile, not a personal failing.
- **Collect evidence:** a success journal helps the brain notice what goes right.

9. Supporting caregivers

- Give parents and carers clear information about ASD and ADHD and how to help.
- Encourage them to look after their own resources through self-care, support groups or therapy.
- Teach them to reinforce what is going well and to build structured, predictable routines. Ask questions rather than hand over answers, so the young person builds their own problem-solving.

10. Make it theirs

Every person is different, so tailor the work to their needs, preferences and goals, review progress regularly, and stay flexible. The aim is a person who understands their own brain, uses their strengths, and lives a more independent and fulfilling life, as themselves.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Questions about this work?

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