



# THE BIG FOUR: DEVELOPING COPING SKILLS

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## A PARENT RESOURCE TOOL

### **About this Toolkit:**

Strong coping skills lead to more opportunities, which contributes to having a higher quality of life. Having and developing coping skills is important to everyone throughout their lifetime, especially individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Our ability to cope and overcome difficult situations builds the foundation for us to be resilient, successful, and independent. We can foster that same resiliency in our children and loved ones with autism by intentionally identifying times of day to practice and further develop their coping skills. As identified by research, coping skills is one of the four essential skill areas that are critical for individuals with ASD to master (Ala-Rosales et al., 2018). The purpose of this toolkit is to help you explore your child's current coping skills and help you identify areas to develop goals to help further develop this skill area for them.

### **Included in this resource:**

- Definition and examples of coping skills and why they are important.
- Questions to consider as you prioritize how to build on these skills for your child.
- Considerations for when and how to teach these skills.
- A sample of a completed Coping Skills Goal Form with examples of teaching coping skills.
- A blank Coping Skills Goal Form Template for you to personalize and organize your goals for your child.

*The content included is general information and is not specific medical or behavioral advice. The information provided may not work for every child with autism or their family. We recommend working closely with your child's doctor(s), therapist(s), and/or educator to discuss how the ideas shared may be individualized to meet your child's needs. If you have an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.*

# Developing Coping Skills

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## INTRODUCTION

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Each of the Big Four Toolkits provided on our website, [okautism.org](http://okautism.org), focus on one of the four skill areas identified by Ala'i-Rosales and colleagues (2018) as skills that individuals must master in order to prevent challenging behavior and have more opportunities to successfully participate in their community. As you make goals in each of these four areas, you may start to see how they are connected and tie together. Flow back and forth between each of these Big Four skills to help you further develop your Master Plan and pinpoint skill areas you want to prioritize.

What happens if your child is asked to wait in a line? How does your child respond when having to wait to gain access to a preferred item or activity, for example, when they are sharing/ taking turns with a sibling or peer? As you read through this toolkit there will be opportunities to think through and answer similar questions to help guide you as you identify and determine what coping skills to help your child develop. Developing additional skills in communication, play/leisure and/or appropriately gaining attention can also assist your child in experiencing more success as they build coping and self-regulation skills.

By continuing to build and expand on your child's skills in these four areas, you increase their ability to effectively navigate their learning environments in a way that can contribute to their overall quality of life over time, as well as prevent future problem behavior.

**Article referenced:** Ala'i-Rosales, S., Cihon, J. H., Currier, T., Ferguson, J. L., Leaf, J. B., Leaf, R., McEachin, J., & Weinkauf, S. M. (2018). The Big Four: Functional Assessment Research Informs Preventative Behavior Analysis. *Behavior analysis in practice*, 12(1), 222–234.  
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# Developing Coping Skills

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## WHAT ARE COPING SKILLS

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Coping skills are skills that help us regulate ourselves as we adapt to and overcome stressors in our environment. There are a variety of words that are used to describe and/or label skills that fall into the category of coping skills. Ala-i Rosales and colleagues define this skill area as the ability to “Safely, effectively, and diplomatically, coping with, tolerating, and accommodating adversity in situations that are in the child’s best interests over the long term.”

The list below includes other ways you may have heard or seen coping skills labeled. As you read through this list, you might start to think about how you would describe your child’s current ability in these areas.

### **Other words/ phrases that are often used to describe or label coping skills:**

- Stress Management
- Emotional Regulation
- Self- Regulation
- Social/Emotional Learning
- Building Tolerance
- Flexibility
- Adaptive Behavior
- Resiliency
- Ability to tolerate difficult situations
- Self-Control
- Building Stamina
- Impulse Control

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## WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT

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Being part of a community, whether we are at home, the park, school, work, the grocery store, sporting events, concerts, or restaurants, we are exposed to stressors. By developing skills around coping and being able to tolerate these stressors, we are able to fully and successfully participate in these environments.

Children with ASD often have fewer opportunities to practice navigating these stressors. As a result, they may not develop the skills to tolerate these stressors and cope with them in a socially appropriate way when they occur.

# Developing Coping Skills

By effectively identifying what your child's stressors are and how you can further develop skills around coping with their stressors, they will have the skills they need to be successful across their environments. When we do not develop these skills, we are limited in how, when, and at what level we can be included or participate.

Overall, developing coping skills will create more opportunities for an individual.

## Prioritize Teaching These Skills

Now that you have some examples of what coping skills are and why they are important, let's take some time to think about your child and their current skill level within this skill area

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### ASSESS YOUR CHILD'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

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How would you describe your child's current ability/ skill level around coping? Take some time to think about your child's current skill level in this area, as well as what progress might look like for them. Using these questions, you can begin to identify some coping strategies that may help your child better manage day to day life.

- How does your child respond when asked to do non-preferred activities, or when demands are placed on them?
- What does it look like when your child is upset?
- How does your child handle disagreements/ arguments?
- Does your child have effective ways to calm, reset, or safely and appropriately protest? If yes, how do they calm or appropriately protest?
- How does your child respond to a stressor?

A stressor can be anything from being asked to wait, tolerating a haircut, or entering a loud or crowded environment like a classroom or grocery store. The chart below includes more examples of potential stressors. These stressors, as well as how your child responds to them, will be individualized. A stressor is anything your child recognizes or perceives as challenging or threatening.



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Here is an example of a completed stressors chart:

My child experiences stressors when...		
Told/ asked to do something, but does not fully understand the instruction, or know how to break down the steps.	Told/ asked to do something that is too hard.	Doing hygiene routines: brushing hair, bathing, brushing teeth, cutting nails etc.
Going to medical appointments or asked to take medication	They do not know the correct answer/ or how to respond	Told/ asked to wait in line or share with their sibling

If your child currently has difficulty responding appropriately to a stressor, you may need to build more skills within the specific area they are struggling with as well as developing coping strategies and adding in additional supports to help them experience more success. To help you identify your child's stressors or triggers, think about what it looks like when they are upset and what observable behavior they engage in. As you do this, start to think of another more desirable (or socially appropriate) way they could get their needs met. The other ways you identify will be potential replacement skills you can prompt and teach.

Take some time to list out what "stressors" exist for your child. Note any patterns you find. Do they happen at a certain time of day or under certain conditions? This will help you identify what skill you will target, what strategies and supports you may want to prioritize implementing and teaching, as well as times of day you want to practice. These patterns may also help you identify the function, or why the behavior is happening. Once you determine why the behavior is happening or the purpose the behavior is serving, you will be able to identify an effective replacement skill. Again, it is important to remember that these replacement skills should be individualized to your child's need, age, current skill level, and appropriate function of the current behavior. For more assistance in understanding the function of your child's behavior watch our [What We Know Works: Challenging Behavior Webinar](#).

If you are needing some extra supports in identifying what stressors exist for your child, consider what events you try to avoid or prevent from happening so that challenging behavior doesn't occur.

After you identify what stressors exist for your child, note how your child currently responds to the stressor, as well as an alternative way for them to respond to those stressors. See the chart on the next page for a sample way of organizing this information.

# Developing Coping Skills

Here is a sample chart of how you can organize what your child currently does when they respond to stress, as well as a reasonable next step for them to do instead. You may also include supports you will put in place to help your child, and or other skill areas that need to be targeted simultaneously to help improve the amount of stress they are experiencing so they can continue to gain more skill and tolerate a healthy amount of stress as they build their tolerance and ability to self-regulate. In this sample chart, each behavior represents a different child with a different skill set.

<b><u>Signs of Distress</u></b> Examples of observable behavior that may signal your child is under stress	<b><u>Replacement Skill</u></b> Behavior you would like to see instead. These will be things you might have to prompt and teach your child how to do instead.
Screaming/ crying	Supporting adult labels emotions, and prompts child by modeling language to communicate wants and needs.
Running away/ leaving area expected to be in and/ or using inappropriate or offensive language	Child identifies what they need and when and how to ask for it. Starts to take a few deep breaths. Use visuals such as flow chart to help determine if they can keep trying, take a break to reset, or need to ask for help. Identify what strategies help them calm/ reset their energy. Remind themselves it's okay if they don't know the answer. Supporting adult help teach options for movement breaks, and navigating, supporting and prompting use of all visuals and steps needed.
Hitting/ grabbing/ scratching self or others	Depending on the context of when this is happening, supporting adult labels emotions or ignores the behavior as much as possible as they redirect to alternative behavior (i.e., child asks for a turn with preferred activity or item and accepts waiting 1 minute to get access). Work on requesting/ waiting/ and remaining calm during this process. Child learns alternative ways to gain attention from adult and peers. Slowly increase expectations
Twirling hair/ hand flapping/ vocalization	Supporting adult helps child identify additional calming strategies that work for the child or other ways of occupying their time, but still allow the child to do these other behaviors. Label emotions for the child. If appropriate, gives choice to take a movement break to reset before behavior escalates. If behavior happens and child is otherwise calm, they may not need to be redirected. Supporting adult identifies where any other skills may need to be built in to further support child to experience even more success.

# Developing Coping Skills

When reviewing the sample chart, remember these are only examples. The context of when the behavior happens, the intensity and severity of the behavior, what your child is trying to communicate with the behavior, the stressor triggering the behavior, and your child's current skill level and age will help you determine what is appropriate. What may be an appropriate example of a replacement skill for the behaviors shown in the chart above may not be an appropriate replacement skill for your child based on all the above factors. Again, ***this must be individualized to the child for it to be an appropriate and effective replacement skill.***

If the behavior your child engages in has an increased intensity, such as property destruction or causing harm to self or others, try to identify what signs of stress occur before it escalates to that stage of intensity. These precursor behaviors are often times subtle behaviors like increased pacing back and forth, or hand flapping. As soon as your child is signaling they are under distress, provide support and prompt your child to use a replacement skill at that point.

For example, if your child's behavior is signaling to you that they need a break, and you can tell that they need to remove themselves from the environment to calm down and reset before they will be able to experience success, instead of allowing the behavior to be what gets them access to the break, prompt your child to request for a break. Depending on your child's current skill level, they may need more support asking for a break and you might start off by modeling the language for them.

How you do this will be individualized based on your child's current skill level; however, if they are needing more support and need to get out of the situation quickly, you might model the language for them by saying, "I need a break." to model the response you expect from them in the future, and responding "Ok," and redirecting them away from the stressful environment to a place they can calm and reset.

This same skill could be practiced with a child with a different skill level when they experience frustration with school work or another task. It may be appropriate for you to model how to ask for help or how to ask for a break. Consider how you might use visual supports if needed.

# Developing Coping Skills

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## IMPORTANT TIPS TO REMEMBER

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- **These skills do not develop on their own.** Help your child develop these skills by intentionally creating opportunities for them to practice and gain these skills.
- **Remember to consider your child's current skill level, age, and a reasonable next step** for them to take to make progress towards reaching their goal. Autism Spectrum Disorder covers a broad spectrum of abilities; consider what supports, prompts, and strategies to use as you make progress towards helping them experience success to get desired outcomes.
- **Identify when to practice:** When introducing new coping strategies, select times to practice when the child is calm and you are calm. First, introduce and practice coping skills in a controlled environment, when your child is calm. Then, give your child an opportunity to practice those same skills in natural context by redirecting and prompting them to use the skill in natural context.
- **Label emotions & give alternative ways to respond.** Label emotions for your child and give them alternative ways to request or gain access to what it is they are needing.
- **Prompt the replacement skill before challenging behavior happens,** and immediately after noticing your child may be responding to a stressor.
- **Assess your progress:** Take some time to reflect what is working well, and any areas you may want to tweak to experience more success. Remember to praise the process and celebrate progress that comes with practice.
- Remember the definition that Alai-Rosales and colleagues (2018) give for coping skills: **How does my child currently safely, effectively, and diplomatically, cope with, tolerate, and accommodate adversity in situations that are in their best interest over the long term?**



# Developing Coping Skills

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## RESOURCES

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Thinking about your child's individual strengths and needs, what are some extra supports (i.e., visuals, tools) you might want nearby when practicing the skill? Both Dr. Amy Laurent and Kari Dunn Buron have tools on their website you may identify as helpful when working on these skills with your child. We discussed some of these tools in our [What We Know Works: Everyday Strategies Webinar](#).

[Amy-Laurent.com](#): Dr. Amy Laurent's website is dedicated to providing developmentally-based information and resources for children and individuals with autism and to the people who support them. Her supports and resources page, <http://amy-laurent.com/category/supports-resources/>, gives you access to a bank of free visual supports and tools to use when teaching your child coping skills. Dr. Laurent provides a 1-2-minute video for each tool explaining how it can be used, as well as a sample, and a free download you can customize for your child's needs. Because there are so many tools and resources on her website, we have highlighted a few below that may help you get started.

- **The Regulator 2.0**- This support helps individuals explore sensory motor strategies that may be useful for self and mutual regulation. This tool was created for use in combination with The Energy Meter as it serves to create a known list of strategies that can sooth or alert to move "My Energy" closer to "Energy Needed."
- **My Energy & The Energy Meter**-These supports are helpful for individuals who struggle with emotional identification and expression but are working to understand the concepts of regulation and how to adjust their energy level to successfully engage in activities.
- **Decision Making Tree for Dealing with Problems**- This is a support for individuals working on identifying problems and their next steps once a problem has been identified. This serves as a visual reminder to help decide if the problem needs to be addressed or if something different can be done. This visual tool helps remind them of the options and steps they can take to work through a problem, determine if their solution was effective or if they need to try something else.

[5pointscale.com](#): was developed to share information about the use of the 5-point scale and other systems to teach social and emotional concepts to individuals on the autism spectrum. In addition to free resources on Kari Dunn Buron's website, we have highlighted two of her books below.

- **When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety**- written to help children to understand the nature of worry and the power of relaxation. The 2nd edition includes a special section on teaching activities for parents and teachers.
- **The Incredible 5-Point Scale: The Significantly Improved and Expanded Second Edition**- strategy and visual support for assisting students in understanding social interactions and emotions.



# Developing Coping Skills

## SAMPLE #1: COPING SKILLS GOAL FORM

**Child's Name:** Joseph

**Date:** May 17, 2020

If your child has more complex communication, you may find Joseph's example helpful.

**How does your child respond to stressors/ triggers in their environment? What strategies help them calm down or reset? How does your child respond when asked to do non-preferred activities, or when demands are placed on them?**

When Joseph gets upset about something he often talks very loudly or yells regardless of location. He becomes upset when someone else doesn't follow a rule or does something he perceives to be wrong or incorrect, or when asked to do something he doesn't want to do. He makes statements about what is upsetting him, saying things such as "He is stupid. He didn't do that right"; "You don't know what you are talking about!"; or "This is a dumb idea. I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_." At times the situation can escalate to him hitting at the table or other solid objects and occasionally throwing objects.

**What would progress look like? What replacement skills/ coping strategies do you plan to introduce and prompt as an alternative way for your child to gain access to what they need during times of stress? Write your goal here:**

Joseph will talk in a calm voice and use appropriate language to express his disagreement with a situation. He will use phrases such as "I don't agree but everyone has their own opinion." When Joseph is asked to do something he doesn't want to do he will ask if it is an optional activity. If told yes, he will respectfully say, "I don't want to do that right now." If told no, that he needs to do it, he will say "Ok." and ask for help if needed.

**When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?**

Natural opportunities occur when Joseph is being asked to do chores at home. Also opportunities occur at dinner when the family is talking about their day, or in the car when they are on the way home from school and siblings are also talking about their day.

**How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.**

Work with Joseph to create a 5-point scale to help him identify what frustrates him and appropriate ways to respond. Role play with him how to respond to situations and provide several script options for him to use in situations that frustrate him. Have the 5-point scale available in a place that is convenient for him to see/ use. Prompt him as needed to respond appropriately. Provide feedback and verbal praise when appropriately responds. Explore other tools on Amy Laurent's website to identify other resources and continue to develop more skills in coping.

# Developing Coping Skills

## SAMPLE #2: COPING SKILLS GOAL FORM

**Child's Name:** Elliot

**Date:** May 17, 2020

If your child is developing language or a communication system, you may find Elliot's example helpful.

**How does your child respond to stressors/ triggers in their environment? What strategies help them calm down or reset? How does your child respond when asked to do non-preferred activities, or when demands are placed on them?**

Elliot has difficulty calming down when he is upset/ excited. He normally works himself up until he makes himself tired and is ready to rest. When he does decide to calm down he wants to sit in my lap or and be held or rest on his own. He primarily gets upset when there is a delay in gratification, if something is not available or if he is asking for something and has to wait for it. When he is upset he might start pacing and whining and that escalates into throwing himself on the floor, eloping, crying, screaming, and throwing objects. If things get really bad he will start hitting himself or biting others.

**What would progress look like? What replacement skills/ coping strategies do you plan to introduce and prompt as an alternative way for your child to gain access to what they need during times of stress? Write your goal here:**

Elliot will point to a visual or use a single word to be able to label his emotions or tell someone when he is mad/ upset. When given a choice of calming options, Elliot will select and engage in one of the calming activities

**When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?**

Times he is being asked to wait. Natural opportunities present themselves daily when his sister is working on homework, or I am working on house chores like cooking/ laundry.

**How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.**

Talk through the plan with everyone involved (dad, grandparents, etc., so we will respond the same way). Prepare visuals/ actual item/ activities for calming options. Offer calming options as soon as see him start pacing/ whining and prompt him to communicate wants and needs or alternative behavior. Label his emotions, "You're upset/ mad: Maybe prompt him to verbalize with one word or select with visual. Show him visual to help him label emotion and give choices that we identify as calming for him. Once he selects an alternative choice, or adult helps him choose, allow time for him to engage in that alternative option (Some form of movement works best for him right now. Look at other resources noted in this toolkit to help identify if there are any other options we want to try.



# Developing Coping Skills

## COPING SKILLS GOAL FORM

Child's Name:

Date:

How does your child respond to stressors/ triggers in their environment? What strategies help them calm down or reset? How does your child respond when asked to do non-preferred activities, or when demands are placed on them?

What would progress look like? What replacement skills/ coping strategies do you plan to introduce and prompt as an alternative way for your child to gain access to what they need during times of stress? Write your goal here:

When will I practice this skill with my child? What routines/ times of day work best?

How will I help teach this skill to my child? This is what I will do to support my child to learn this skill.

