

## Stimming: A Guide for Parents of Children with Autism

Have you noticed your child with autism spectrum disorder (autism) engaging in repetitive motions or sounds, and you aren't sure why? These behaviors are likely a form of self-stimulatory behaviors, otherwise known as "stimming." Stimming can sometimes cause concern and alarm in parents. Is my child okay? Is something wrong? Will this behavior draw unwanted (or worse, unkind) attention from others? It can be difficult to know how to handle a loved one when stimming occurs. Here are some helpful tips to recognize, understand, and address stimming in your child.

### What is Stimming?

Stimming is the repetitive performance of certain physical movements or vocalizations. Most people (on and off of the autism spectrum) engage in stimming activities to some degree without even realizing it. This could present itself in simple actions such as foot tapping, nail biting, hair twirling, or drumming fingers on a table. However, for some, the actions can be more pronounced and noticeable. Some of these include rocking back and forth, hand flapping, clapping, rubbing surfaces of certain textures, humming, yelling, or repeating certain words, phrases, or sounds. Stimming behaviors are more common among those on the autism spectrum, but can be exhibited by anyone.



### Why Is My Child Stimming?

Stimming usually serves one of three purposes: self-regulating, expressing feelings, or coping with anxiety. Let's look at each one:

**Self Regulating:** People (especially children and young adults) with autism can often become overwhelmed or overstimulated in what can feel like a chaotic and out of control world. Stimming can be a soothing and comforting activity to help self-regulate and feel a sense of control in an unpredictable environment. Understimulation (or boredom) can also bring on stimming in some cases.

**Expressing Feelings:** Stimming can be a way to communicate excitement, joy, frustration, or a variety of other emotions. This is especially true when those feelings are difficult or unable to be conveyed verbally.

**Coping with Anxiety:** Stimming can be a calming coping mechanism in order to manage stress or other intense emotions that may be difficult to process. This is due to the repetitive and familiar nature of stimming activity, which can bring feelings of safety and reassurance.



## How Should I Handle My Child's Stimming?

There are a few questions parents should ask themselves about their child's stimming behaviors. First, is my child harming his or herself with this behavior?

If the answer is no, it is important to avoid punishing or shaming your child for their stimming. Stimming is a natural behavior that serves an important purpose. Trying to suppress it can be harmful and counterproductive.

The second question to ask is what purpose the behavior is serving for your child. This may take some practice, trial, and error, but knowing why your child is stimming can help you provide the best support.

For instance, if you can tell the stimming is due to overstimulation, you can take a break or move to a less chaotic environment. If it's to express an emotion, you can share in the joy or provide reassurance in times of anxiety or frustration.



## What if My Child's Stimming Is Affecting Others?

The last question to ask is whether a child's stimming is affecting others in a negative way. While it's never a good idea to punish a child for stimming, it can be helpful to encourage appropriate times and places for the behaviors, or even provide opportunities for more fitting behaviors that serve the same purpose.

Perhaps your child's repeated clapping isn't harming them, but it might be very disruptive to others in public. Giving your child something else to do that is quiet (such as rolling and unrolling a towel, using a fidget device, or squeezing a stress ball) could serve the same purpose without causing a disruption. The more you know about why the behavior is happening, the easier it will be to determine an effective replacement behavior.

"If the behaviors are not harmful or obscene, the public doesn't need an explanation."

— Cole Dunlevy, Director  
Community Partnerships

## What Will People Think?

Many parents worry about their child's stimming behavior appearing odd, socially unacceptable, or "weird." While it may be understandably tempting to discourage these behaviors for this reason alone, if no one is being harmed or disrupted, it is best to accept that all children are unique individuals with their own mannerisms, and support them as best you can.

In public settings, this may require some extra communication. A good way to do this is to introduce your child in a friendly way to anyone who might be looking, and then simply explain their behavior. Don't be afraid to reach out to your child's school staff, a therapist, or support groups for more guidance on how to appropriately handle your child's stimming. You are not in this alone.