

Protective Behaviours Therapy Programs – Frequently Asked Questions

1) What is a Protective Behaviours Therapy Program?

Protective Behaviours is a personal safety program designed to empower children and young people with strategies to promote safety and resilience. The program being taught at ACT for Autism was developed by the WA Child Safety Services with input from teachers, social workers and protective behaviours experts. Each program is adapted to suit the individual learner and supports social comprehension and understanding of safe behaviours by avoiding ambiguities, being clear, exact, truthful and direct. Visual supports and AAC are used as necessary.

The program at ACT for Autism Australia requires children to have some language comprehension skills, at minimum they need to be able to engage with a level of language understood by a typical four-year-old.

2) What skills are taught?

Some of the skills taught within the program are: emotional awareness, empowerment, assertiveness, understanding of right and wrong body contact, the concept of consent, how to keep safe, and problem solving.

3) Why are Protective Behaviours so important?

Protective Behaviours are important for all children. They are designed to reduce the risk of child abuse.

In Western Australia, public schools are [required](#) to implement protective behaviours education, and in non-government schools they must meet registration criteria relating to Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse ([Standard 10](#)).

4) Why do Autistic children have a greater support need in this area?

Autistic children are at greater risk of abuse^{1,2}. They are more vulnerable than neuro-typical children and may not have been able to access the Protective Behaviours lessons at school. We believe many Autistic children benefit from 1:1 or small group therapy which translates complicated social rules and concepts, such as those involved in Protective Behaviours education, with the information being presented by a therapist experienced in supporting neuro-divergent learners and adapting the materials so that the content can be processed and understood. With this extra support, we also hope to help prevent Autistic individuals entering the justice system unnecessarily.

5) How is the program structured?

The program can be adapted to each individual. Typically, it runs for 1 session a week (1-1.5hrs) for 12 weeks. The first two sessions are familiarisation sessions, and subsequent sessions teach topics such as 'the right to feel safe, feelings, early warning signs, safety check, talking, safety networks, safe and unsafe secrets, persistence, body safety, public and private, personal space, consent. Top-up or follow up sessions can be delivered to previous clients as needed. Please fill in the Expression of Interest form on the website to set up a conversation / book a place.

¹ Fisher MH, Epstein RA, Urbano RC, Vehorn A, Cull MJ, Warren Z. A population-based examination of maltreatment referrals and substantiation for children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*. 2019 Jul;23(5):1335-1340. doi: 10.1177/1362361318813998. Epub 2018 Dec 7. PMID: 30523699; PMCID: PMC6555697.

² McDonnell, C. G., Boan, A. D., Bradley, C. C., Seay, K. D., Charles, J. M., & Carpenter, L. A. (2019). Child maltreatment in autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability: Results from a population-based sample. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60(5), 576-584.