

Why bother?

We all need food to eat and clothes to wear so going shopping is a necessary and important part of our lives.

Unfortunately, many shopping experiences can be extremely difficult to cope with for autistic individuals and those who care for them. Changes to routine, difficult social interactions with strangers and overwhelming sensory experiences are just some of the issues that can cause stress, anxiety, fear and meltdowns.

Of course, shopping online offers us a great alternative to physically leaving the house and going to the shops but it isn't always the best way to get what we need or the ideal long term solution.

Shopping can help us develop good life skills. We need to plan and organise to make shopping lists or know which shops to visit. We need to understand money and budgets. Having strategies to cope with social experiences and sensory problems can increase our independence, reduce isolation and help us to be part of a community.

Start planning early

Use a visual routine chart to introduce the idea of your shopping trip. Go at a quieter time of day or week if possible and give as much warning of the upcoming trip as you can. Sneaking in a last minute or surprise visit is best avoided.

You can use your visual chart to show how you will get there (e.g. car then walk), what sort of shop you are going to and what you need to buy. If you regularly use the same route or transport, try to stick to it or make sure you explain the change of route with visual prompts.

What's going to happen?

Set up another visual list with more detail about what to expect in the kind of shop you are visiting. For example, at the supermarket you need to put things in a trolley or basket, walk together, queue at the checkout, put the shopping in a bag, then pay.

This preparation is particularly useful when shopping for clothes and shoes which can both be especially challenging shopping experiences. Preparing a simple social story and using a visual timeline will help you to talk about why we need to do this kind of shopping, what's going to happen when you get there and what it might feel like.

Ask and answer questions

Why do we take our clothes and shoes off here but not in other shops or public places? Why does the shop assistant get close and possibly touch us when they need to find out what size we need?

Use the time before you go to ask and answer these sort of questions and think about the strategies you and your child can use to help them stay calm. You could even try some role-playing at home too.

Remember to take your TomTag visual prompt to the shops with you and use it as a reminder of the process once you're there.



Sensory overload

Bright white lights, rows of brightly coloured objects, background music, strong smells and noisy crowds make supermarkets and shopping centres some of the most likely places to trigger sensory overload, leading to meltdowns and consequent behaviour issues.

Try using ear plugs or defenders to dampen noise and dark glasses or peaked caps to reduce the light intensity. Avoid strong smelling areas of shops such as washing powder aisles or perfume sections.

Keep a visual list handy so your child can show you what they are having problems with (too bright, too noisy, too smelly, thirsty, hungry, etc.) and pair it with a list of strategy symbols (deep breathe, count to 10, need to leave, etc.) that you can use to remind them of suitable self-help solutions.

Keep them busy

Giving your child the responsibility for finding items on your shopping list is a great way to avoid boredom and focus their energy. You can also make up games to keep them interested; for



Want to make your own schedules and checklists like the ones we've shown in the examples here or need more ideas or advice before planning your next outing to the shops?

Visit

www.orkidideas.com

or call

01904 213 123

We used the kit

I know what to expect going shopping

including the optional symbol packs

My shopping list

Shopping for clothes & shoes

TomTag is a versatile system with the flexibility to choose from a range of toolkits or put together your own combination of components and symbol sets.

Kits are available for a wide range of needs and experiences in the home, at school, for trips out or when staying away.



example, be the first to find 3 items on your list and turn the symbol over when you find them.

Involving children in helping to prepare the shopping list at home before you go can also be a useful way to encourage engagement and interest.

You might want to take a favourite toy or fidget or let them use a computer tablet or phone as a distraction as well.