

# I can't wait!

Learning to be patient can be a challenge for all children but especially those with special educational needs, says

**Adele Devine...**

The traffic is at a standstill and stretches for miles into the distance. There is no apparent reason. You can do nothing but be patient. In another car someone is repeatedly beeping their horn, getting hot, bothered and frustrated. Maybe they are trying to get to the airport to catch a flight, to a job interview or perhaps, like you, they are on their way home. Of course, it's not just traffic. The English people's apparent need to devise endless queuing systems is a source of amusement to those from other countries - think bus stops, shops, cash points... Things get faster every day as technology tries to serve our need for all things to be 'instant' but, as much as we might wish it didn't, real life still involves waiting.

For children, especially those with special educational needs, it takes time to learn to understand clocks, calendars, queues, road signs and traffic systems. On top of this, to them time seems to move slower - think how long the summer holidays seemed when you were little, or the eternity that seemed to pass between birthdays. The idea of 'appropriate distance' in different social contexts can also be a mystery. Most adults know not to stand right behind someone at the cash point as they type in their pin number, and to wait for people to exit the train before we get on. But we are not born knowing these things; we learn them over time.

Some of the rules described above we pick up naturally along the way, but others we are taught. I remember as a child, for example, being taught about waiting for people to get off the bus. Helping children to gain an understanding of them can be accomplished in a number of ways.

## Teach waiting skills

Try the following activities to help children to practise having patience:

- Plant sunflower seeds or broad beans and monitor their growth.
- Buy unripe pears or peaches. Taste them

before and after they ripen.

- Use toy cars to show a traffic jam.
- Discuss why traffic jams happen.
- Teach road safety and experience waiting at real traffic lights.
- Make bread. Knead it, wait for it to rise, wait for it to bake, then enjoy!

## Use waiting visuals

Recognisable images can be used to indicate the need for, and recognise good, waiting skills:

- Timers - for example, egg timers, oven timers, traffic light timers, and time tracker timers.
- Clocks.
- Count downs.
- Schedules.
- 'Good waiting' visuals (you can download one for free at [tinyurl.com/TNgoodwait](http://tinyurl.com/TNgoodwait))
- Visual calendars.

## Be alert!

No matter how well your waiting skills teaching goes, there will be hiccups along the way. Watch out for the following impatience flashpoints which can occur in your setting and in children's homes:

- Slow Internet connections.
- Scratched DVDs.
- Commercial breaks.
- Transition times.
- A sibling or other child's birthday.
- Any queues.
- Traffic jams.
- Phone calls.
- Supermarkets.
- Other busy places.

## CASE STUDY

### 'Milly's telephone trials' (Age 4, Diagnosis: Autism)

Milly was a happy child as long as she had 100 per cent adult attention 100 per cent of the time. She loved to play, to cook and explore. Milly's Mum had learnt to adapt to 'Milly Time'. The housework and paperwork waited until Milly was in bed. Mum devoted herself to making playdough, baking and arts and crafts. The majority of the time this worked well.

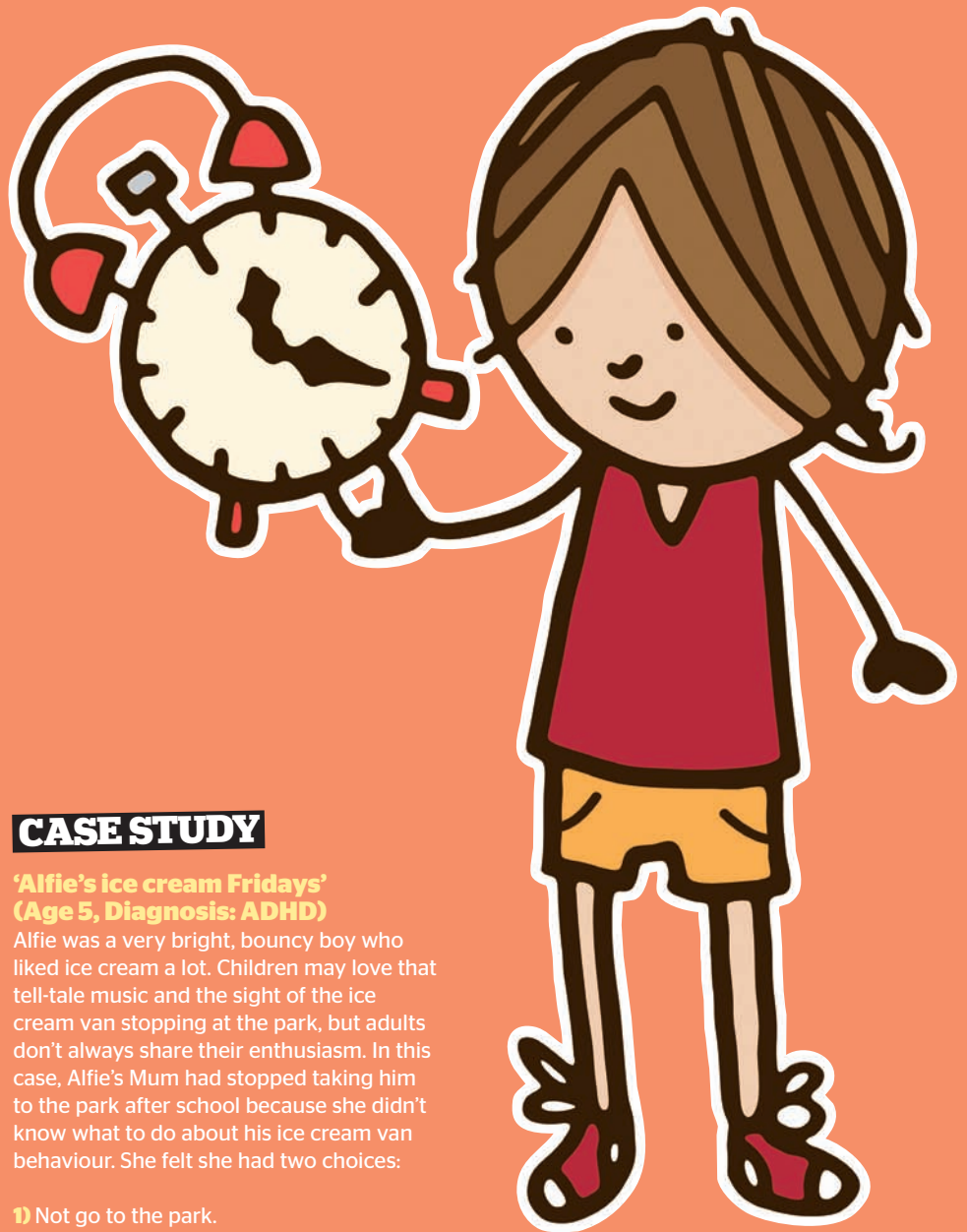


The time Mum needed support was when the phone rang unexpectedly and it was one of those calls she had to take. As soon as her attention was diverted, Milly would flip. She would start with making lots of noise. If that didn't work she would find something naughty or dangerous to do. She did anything she could to get Mum's attention back. Mum would come off the phone flustered and cross. Their tranquil, happy 'Milly time' had been interrupted and it was a challenge to get the day back on track.

What if Mum knew there was going to be a call or a visit? She would put on a favourite DVD or the Cbeebies website and Milly was usually happy.

So we came up with a plan. We made a simple Social Story explaining to Milly that if the phone rang and Mum needed to talk, Mum would put on a DVD. We practised in a role-play situation with a set up phone call. Mum kept the story by the phone and the DVD ready to go. The idea worked. In time, Milly learnt to go and find something else to do without needing a Social Story or DVD.

We cannot always predict when our attention will have to be diverted, but we can think ahead and see if there are ways to help a child wait.



## CASE STUDY

### 'Alfie's ice cream Fridays' (Age 5, Diagnosis: ADHD)

Alfie was a very bright, bouncy boy who liked ice cream a lot. Children may love that tell-tale music and the sight of the ice cream van stopping at the park, but adults don't always share their enthusiasm. In this case, Alfie's Mum had stopped taking him to the park after school because she didn't know what to do about his ice cream van behaviour. She felt she had two choices:

- 1) Not go to the park.
- 2) Give in and buy Alfie an ice cream every day.

Why couldn't she just tell Alfie "No"? Because "No" resulted in an aggressive verbal onslaught, anger and even hitting. Mum found this embarrassing and didn't like other parents seeing Alfie like this.

The park was important to Alfie after school. He could let off a lot of steam playing football. Socially and physically Alfie benefited from his visits.

I suggested to Mum that she try a new tack and use a 'when' rather than a 'no'. We decided to choose one day a week when (if the van came) Alfie could get an ice cream. We chose Fridays so the ice cream could be seen as an end of week treat.

Mum highlighted ice cream Fridays on the calendar to give Alfie a visual. They talked it through and on the Monday went to the park. Alfie did try to pressure Mum when the van arrived, but Mum was firm. Each day it got easier and on the Friday Alfie got his ice cream. Replacing the 'no' with a 'when' meant Alfie learnt to wait.

## DOS & DON'TS

USE THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES TO PREVENT PROBLEMS FROM EMERGING AND ESCALATING...

### TRY:

- Having a 'good waiting' bag of motivating toys.
- Having a planned alternative activity for when you have to take a call.
- Having access to a selection of healthy snacks to appease rumbling tummies.
- Using Social Stories and Comic Strip Pictures to explain and prepare.
- Praising and rewarding children when they manage to do 'good waiting.'

### AVOID:

- Visiting the likes of supermarkets, shops and cafés at busier times.
- 'Quick fix' sweet treats. Sugar may intensify behaviours.
- Times when children may be hungry or tired.
- Using too much language. A visual may be easier to process.
- Leaving wrapped treats or presents in view (avoid temptation).



## about the author

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## Final thoughts

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten." If we dislike waiting, imagine how it feels for a child. When teaching the 'art' of waiting we must be patient. We adults can use clocks, calendars and that loading bar on the computer to manage our waiting. Try to find a visual that the child can understand and reward them when they manage a calm 'wait.'