

Aspect Autism Advisor Program

Positive Behaviour Supports



Challenging behaviour is often described as “challenging” because it challenges the child, their family and others. There are lots of different reasons that a child on the autism spectrum may engage in behaviours that challenge. It may be the quickest and easiest way to communicate with others, it may be a way of coping with sensory experiences or a way to get away from places, people and activities they find overwhelming. When attempting to support any challenging behaviour, it is important to try to understand what purpose the behaviour might be serving the child and what the behaviour is trying to communicate. If the behaviour is successful most of the time, the child is more likely to continue using that behaviour, because it works. The best predictor of future behaviour is behaviour that has been successful in the past.

When examining challenging behaviour, one of the questions to ask is “Do they have the skills to communicate their needs in a more appropriate way?”

For many children on the autism spectrum, difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication are also evident (e.g. lack of eye contact, pointing, gesture) and therefore their ability to clearly communicate their needs is restricted. For other children it may be that the ability to regulate sensory needs or emotions is still developing. One way of assisting the child is to teach them more functional and appropriate ways of meeting their particular needs.

Positive behaviour support

When attempting to change any behaviour, it is important to examine when the behaviour is **more likely to occur, with whom** and in **what setting**. This provides important information about the possible purpose of the behaviour and may allow for changes to be made. This approach is known as ‘Positive Behaviour Support’ and is different to more traditional approaches to ‘managing’ behaviour that only react to difficult behaviours once they have occurred.

Interventions that only react to a challenging behaviour are often focused on punishment and usually exacerbate the behaviour for the child as well as the parent or carer. The most successful interventions are proactive and positive, and aim to address why the behaviour is occurring.



Most behaviour is communicating about something

While some children on the autism spectrum are able to let their parents know what they want, it is difficult for most children on the autism spectrum to communicate about things they do not want, how they feel, or what they are afraid of. When children are unable to communicate easily or when attempts at communication are misunderstood, often the only option left is a behavioural response. As one author writes, “Many of the challenging behaviours exhibited by individuals with autism are better understood as unconventional attempts to communicate in the face of serious communicative limitations” (Schuler & Fletcher, pg 130).

However, difficult behavioural responses can also be used by children on the autism spectrum who can verbally communicate.

What is the function of the behaviour?

Finding out the function or purpose of the behaviour is the key to supporting difficult behaviours. The first step is to identify the behaviour that is causing the most difficulty and distress. We then need to observe the behaviour in a structured way as outlined below.

ABC

The "A-B-C" of behaviour

"A-B-C" stands for **'antecedent, behaviour, consequence'** and relates to all the things that happen before, during and after the behaviour. By analysing the "A-B-C" of behaviour, we can start to see why the behaviour is occurring and what is happening to maintain the behaviour over time.

'A' is for antecedents

Antecedents are all the things that might be occurring for the person and/or in the physical environment prior to the behaviour occurring. When we analyse what happened prior to a behaviour occurring, we are able to get information about the likely 'setting conditions' and 'triggers'.

'Setting conditions' are the things that happen in the time leading up to the behaviour, that make the behaviour more likely to occur but do not necessarily cause the behaviour. Good examples of setting events in children might be tiredness, illness, pain or someone new in their environment.

'Triggers' are the events that happen immediately before the behaviour and directly cause the behaviour. Trigger events for children on the spectrum might include a change in routine, refusal of something the child wants, frustration due to comprehension difficulties, sudden sensory stimulation or lack of attention.

'B' is for behaviour

Children on the autism spectrum may present a range of challenging behaviours. In order to analyse a particular behaviour, we need to be able to accurately describe the behaviour using the following questions as a guide:

- What does it look like?
- How often does it happen?
- How long does it last?
- How dangerous/disruptive is it?

The answers to these questions will allow the behaviour to be accurately described which means that improvements and changes in the behaviour over time can be clearly seen. When there are several difficult behaviours, these questions can also help with making a decision about which behaviour to address first.

'C' is for consequence

The 'consequence' of the behaviour is anything that affects whether the behaviour increases or decreases. In traditional ways of helping behaviour, the 'consequence' of a behaviour is seen as what the adult or others do to react to behaviour, for example, the 'consequence' of hitting your sister is to be sent to your room in the hope that this will discourage you from doing it again. In positive behaviour support, it is important to consider the consequences from the point of view of the person engaging in the behaviour, ie what does the child "get out of" engaging in this behaviour?

When we know what the child is achieving from the behaviour, we can put strategies in place to teach new skills and prevent the behaviour from occurring.

Identifying the reason for the behaviour

All of the information about what happens before, during and after a behaviour is important to identify why the child is using the behaviour to communicate. When the reason for the behaviour has been identified it is important to work out what the child can do instead to get the same outcome. This could be a new behaviour that the child hasn't been able to do before, or it could be a behaviour that they already have, that just needs to be encouraged in a new context. Identifying the new behaviour will then help work out what the child needs to learn.

Managing setting conditions and triggers

It is very challenging for children to learn when they are under stress and not coping. Teaching new skills and replacement behaviours can only occur when the child is calm. An obvious short term strategy to keep a child calm is to avoid the problem situation altogether. For some families, this is a good short term solution to very difficult behaviours that occur

in shopping centres or in response to particular sensory environments. Parents can aim to have the child avoid the difficult situation as a way of managing stress in both the child and other members of the family, or minimise the stress by adjusting the environment. Avoiding situations, however, can only ever be a short term solution because it is important to support the child to learn new skills and access a range of environments. To help behaviours where the trigger can't be avoided, we need to look at supports to cope with triggers.

You can do this by:

- Using clear communication
- Using visual supports to make the environment easier to understand
- Visual supports to show when an activity will finish
- Creating routines so the child can predict what will happen next
- Supporting the child's sensory needs by helping them appropriately avoid or receive the sensory input they require.

Teaching new skills and replacement behaviours

It is important that any new behaviour or skill identified produces the same outcome for the child as the challenging behaviour. This increases the likelihood of the new behaviour or skill occurring more often.

This is especially true if the positive alternative is easier, more efficient or more rewarding than the challenging behaviour. Establishing a competing behaviour may require the teaching of that skill, providing a minimal response to the challenging behaviour and an immediate and rewarding response when the new behaviour is used by the child. Sometimes, the child may already have the skills to use a competing behaviour and therefore changes can be made immediately to how others react to this behaviour and in particular, how they react to the problem behaviour. In the case of the child who needs to be taught a new skill, achieving change may take a little more time.

Positive reinforcement

When something positive follows a particular behaviour that behaviour is more likely to occur in the future. Positive reinforcement is therefore

a good way to encourage a child to engage in appropriate behaviours and new skills. Positive reinforcement may be anything that is meaningful and relevant to the child:

- Tangible reinforcement such as a lolly or sticker
- Social praise such as "Great sitting and listening!"
- Positive attention
- Favourite toys.

For example, the child might:

- Use the toilet and is immediately given a chocolate teddy
- Get dressed by herself in the morning and is given a 'high 5'
- Finish a puzzle and gets to play with his music box.

With any challenging behaviour that may result in harm to the child or others, and/or create high stress, it is important to seek additional help and assistance from professionals to make long term changes for the child and family. This can include therapy supports and/or behaviour support practitioners.

