

Aspect Positive Behaviour Support

Early Years

aspect
practice

Non-verbal behaviour may be the only effective method of communicating for children who have difficulties using and comprehending language. Some behaviour may also be related to sensory processing difficulties often experienced by children with autism spectrum disorder.



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 that 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 a child's challenging behaviour, one of the questions asked is "Do they have the skills to communicate their need in a more appropriate way?" For many children with ASD, difficulties with non-verbal communication are also evident (e.g. lack of eye contact, pointing, gesture) and therefore their ability to clearly communicate their needs is quite often restricted. One way of assisting the child is to teach them more functional and appropriate ways of meeting their particular needs, as will be described below.

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 further information about the possible purpose of the behaviour and may allow changes to be made which may reduce the chances of that behaviour occurring in the first place. 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 exacerbates the behaviour for the child as well as the parent or carer. The most successful interventions are proactive and positive.

Most behaviour is communicating about something

Children with ASD typically have difficulty communicating. While some children with ASD are able to let their parents know what they want, it is difficult for most children with ASD to communicate which things they don't want, about 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 for them 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, pg130).

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.

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 happen in the physical environment prior to behaviour occurring. When we analyse what happens prior to behaviour, we are able to get information about likely ‘setting conditions’ and ‘triggers’.

‘Setting conditions’ are the things that happen in the time before the behaviour, that make the behaviour more likely to occur but do not necessarily cause or trigger 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 cause or trigger the behaviour. Trigger events for children with autism 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 with ASD can show a range of challenging behaviours. In order to analyse the 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 does to react to the 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. That is, what does the child get out of engaging in this behaviour?

When we know what the child is getting out of a behaviour, we can then start to put in place strategies to teach new skills and prevent the behaviour from occurring.

There are a range of different consequences that motivate difficult behaviours. The four main categories of consequences are:

- Attention
- Wanting something tangible
- Sensory stimulation
- Avoidance or escape from an activity or situation

Consider the following example:

A young child with autism hits another child during group time at preschool and is removed from the group to sit on a chair on the other side of the room. What are the possible consequences for the child with autism?

- *Attention from the teacher?*
- *Removal from overwhelming sensory input?*
- *Escape from an activity he doesn't like?*
- *Getting to sit on a chair, rather than the floor?*

We need to consider how our actions might be helping to maintain a difficult behaviour.

Promoting appropriate behaviour

There are many ways to begin promoting positive behaviour. First, we need to look at how we can avoid a behaviour from happening in the first place and then we need to look at teaching the child new and more appropriate ways of getting what they need, without using difficult behaviours.

Managing antecedents

An obvious short term strategy 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. Avoiding antecedents, however, can only ever be a short term or 'circuit breaker' solution. To help behaviours where the trigger can't be avoided, we need to look at longer term antecedent management.

The main long term strategy for managing antecedents is to change the environment. While it is unlikely and generally impractical to make major physical changes to the environment, there are many ways that the environment can be made more structured, more predictable and less confusing or difficult for children with autism.

This can happen in a number of ways:

- 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

Match the strategies to the function of behaviour

In the above preschool example, we can see if the function of the child's behaviour was to escape from group time, the strategy of removing that child from group time until they calm down may only serve to reinforce and thus maintain that behaviour. Therefore, when deciding on strategies for behaviour we have to ensure that the strategy is compatible with the function.

In the above example we may introduce a First-Then approach where the child is required to only sit for a short time at group (First- 1 minute) before being allowed to have break time (Then). We then build up to having that child remain at group for longer periods. We may use visual supports and a sand timer to help the child understand how long they have to remain in their seat.

The Competing Behaviour model is based on the logic that many different behaviours may serve the same function and can produce the same consequence. When a positive behaviour provides the same type of consequence that challenging behaviour produces, the likelihood that a child will use the alternative behaviour increases. This is especially true if the positive alternative is easier, more efficient or more rewarding than the problem 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. Therefore, for a child who may find tasks difficult and use challenging behaviour to escape, we may teach that child to ask for a short movement break during work time.

Other simple strategies and new skills to teach for each of the four functions are listed below.

Attention

- Increase the overall level of attention
- Teach attention getting skills e.g. help, excuse me
- Give attention to appropriate behaviour
- Teach waiting using visuals and timers

To get something

- Increase the overall level of access to preferred objects, people & activities in scheduled times
- Give choices and use a First-Then approach
- Teaching sharing and turn taking

Escape/Avoidance

- Modifying task difficulty and duration using backward chaining, build in small successes and use a First-Then approach
- Consider task preferences
- Identify and manage transition issues

Sensory

- Modify sensory environment - Sensory Diet e.g. reduce/increase light, noise, diet
- Replace with a socially appropriate sensory alternative e.g. jumping on a mini trampoline rather than the couch

Positive reinforcement

When something positive follows a particular behaviour, that behaviour is more likely to occur in the future because it is perceived favourably. Positive reinforcement is therefore a good way to encourage a child to engage in appropriate behaviours.

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 "Good boy! Good sitting!"
- Positive attention
- Favourite toys

For example, the child might:

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