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Dealing with challenging behaviour using positive behaviour support

Positive behaviour support is an approach which can be used with any age group to support a process of behaviour change. But before we go into that...

There are no behaviours which are specific to people with Down syndrome. Difficult behaviour which is often bundled under a label of 'being stubborn', if looked at closely may frequently be attributable to one of a number of reasonable causes, such as:

- Anxiety about moving out of a comfort zone
- Lack of understanding or reading of a situation
- Not feeling in charge of a situation – not having choices
- Communication skills limiting ability to discuss or negotiate

People with Down syndrome are not intrinsically stubborn. For more detail on this, read Carol Johnson's *Stubborn is ... as stubborn does* (<http://www.ndscenter.org/resources/documents/stubborn.php>).

Positive behaviour support

All behaviour usually happens for a reason, so in order to eliminate difficult behaviours, two steps are needed:

- ✓ Understanding the behaviour
- ✓ Teaching skills which replace the behaviour

Difficult behaviour is often a message about some feeling or unmet need. It serves as a form of communication, especially for people who may have limited language communication or do not know a more appropriate way to get the same result. So, a large part of changing a behaviour is understanding exactly why it occurs or what message the individual is really giving. In order to do this we need to look in detail at the behaviour

1. Detective work.

What is the specific context of the behaviour?

Observe the behaviour carefully over a period of time and note clues. It is worth keeping a behaviour diary in which you can note any patterns in its occurrence and its context – when? where? how often? who is around? what happens before it? what happens after it? what reactions are given by others? Be specific about the context, frequency etc

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Avoid negative or punishing strategies, which are rarely effective in reducing difficult behaviour.

The next step is using the detail observed to try to ascertain what the reason for the behaviour is. Some common reasons (functions) for behaviour include:

- Communication – including communication of feelings such as frustration, anger and anxiety and symptoms of ill health
- Getting attention (including negative attention)
- Getting something you want (to do)
- Getting a sensation (sensory input, stimulation, reaction) you want
- Avoiding unwanted attention
- Avoiding something you don't want (to do)
- Avoiding a sensation (sensory input, stimulation, reaction) you don't want – including pain

2. Make an informed guess about the cause. Why does the behaviour occur?

Use the previous detective work on the context of the behaviour and knowledge of behaviour functions to try and make an informed guess as to what is causing the behaviour.

3. Make changes.

Based on the informed guess, consider what you can change (for example, in the environment or the circumstances surrounding the behaviour) to avoid triggering – or rewarding – the behaviour. The changes should all be positive strategies – avoid negative or punishing strategies, which are rarely effective in reducing difficult behaviour.

Some common strategies which may be applicable:

- Unexpected events often trigger challenging behaviour – try to maintain a predictable routine or schedule and give forewarning of changes of plan.
- Give choices where possible – especially if you think the behaviour may be about avoiding or escaping something. All of us need to feel that we are in control of our lives. Offering a choice of which order to do things in can help lift the focus from something an individual wants to avoid.

4. Teach new strategies.

Substitute new strategies to express or deal with the reason for the behaviour. Teach the right thing to do. Replace the challenging behaviour with positive strategies which serve the same purpose.

5. Positively reinforce appropriate behaviour.

Praise and reward every *instance* of the behaviour you want. You need to reward good behaviour rather than give attention to undesirable behaviour. If possible, ignore the behaviour that you are trying to eliminate (this is only possible if safety is not

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compromised).

Challenging behaviour rarely disappears overnight, and just the fact of examining it in detail in order to address it suggests that this is going to take time. However, it is worth it in the long run.

Case study

Tamara

Tamara is 8 years old and attends a mainstream primary school. During recess time the children sit together to eat their morning snack before going out to the playground. Tamara persistently tries to take other children's food from their lunch boxes or hands and hits the other children when she is not successful in this. This aggressive behaviour results in her having to stay behind in the classroom with an aide whilst the other children go out to play.

In documenting the context of the behaviour, some questions that could be investigated include:

Does Tamara hit other children regularly in any other context?

Does the same behaviour occur in a similar context at home or elsewhere?

Who does she sit next to for snack time... is it always the same children?

Does Tamara get to choose the snack food she brings from home?

What's her favourite snack food – is this what she brings to school?

Is her snack food significantly different from that she is trying to take from other children?

Does she eventually eat her own snack?

What reaction does she get from the children when she attempts to take their food?

What reaction from the adults present?

What happens just before this behaviour?

What happens just after?

What does Tamara usually do or play when she goes into the playground with the other children?

Who does she spend time with in the playground?

In this case, the answers to the questions above added the following information about the context:

Tamara usually has a more healthy snack choice than some other children in the class.

She chooses, where possible, to sit near a couple of particular children who regularly bring more 'exciting' food.

A number of the children find the struggle over the lunch box amusing and laugh when Tamara tries to take food from her neighbours.

Tamara does not interact much with other children in the playground. She often hangs out on the play equipment but not with any particular child or group of children.

Tamara often tries to re-enter the classroom during recess time,

She finds it difficult to directly interact with the other children because of her expressive language ability and probably appreciates the attention she gets from some other children as a result of the behaviour.

which is not allowed as the teacher and aide need to set up for the next session.

An informed guess regarding this behaviour might look like this:

Tamara prefers the snacks that other children bring, so attempts to take these (she may even have seen other children swapping food and is trying to do this herself) – her level of maturity and communication skills, both of which are below that of her age-peers, are instrumental in using the behaviour to show what she wants. She finds it difficult to directly interact with the other children because of her expressive language ability and probably appreciates the attention she gets from some other children as a result of the behaviour. Being kept inside as a consequence of the behaviour probably does not act as a deterrent, since she frequently chooses to try and be inside anyway and may find it easier to seek out the company of the aide or other adults rather than try to establish friendships in the playground.

A number of strategies were implemented to try to address the behaviour, based on this hypothesised scenario.

- Discussions with the family lead to Tamara being able to choose her own more exciting snack food on two days each week, if she ate her own snack food every day.
- A visual choice chart on the fridge, with Velcro-attached pictures of the snack foods reminded her of what she would eat for snack each day in the week (and helped reinforce learning the days of the week and making healthy food choices).
- Just before snack time each day Tamara was quickly reminded of the rules by means of a visual chart showing photographs of (i) her fetching her snackbox, (ii) sitting eating her snack with the other children, (iii) putting away her snackbox, (iv) putting a star in her communication book which would alert her family that she had done the right thing.
- If she tried to take other children's food, Tamara received one reminder that doing the right thing meant she would choose her snack the next day. If she persisted she was removed from the group, having made a bad choice, given a few minutes to eat her snack and then went out to the playground at the same time as the other children. The snack was sent home if she did not eat it in the time given. If necessary, children were reminded not to laugh when Tamara did the wrong thing.
- The teachers on yard duty encouraged Tamara to join in playground games when they saw opportunities for this.

Within a couple of weeks, Tamara was consistently opting to do the right thing at snack time and the behaviour supports were gradually removed. Her family reduced the exciting snack to one day a week only without drama!