

Behaviour Management

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Children with Down syndrome experience fewer behavioural problems than children with other forms of intellectual disability, but more problems than typically developing peers. Difficulties that arise are associated with having an intellectual disability rather than any specific aspect of Down syndrome. Understandably, learning difficulties can be associated with behaviour problems. It's much harder to acquire the complex personal and social skills needed to cope independently and effectively when you face challenges in learning.

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It pays for parents of children with Down syndrome to have a set of effective behaviour management strategies in their parenting tool boxes. Research has demonstrated lots of effective ways that parents can help. Children with intellectual disabilities learn how to behave in the same way as typically developing children, it is just that we can't always rely on the informal and unstructured approaches to teaching appropriate behaviour. Frequently, a little more thought, planning and structure is required.

This article provides an introduction to understanding challenging behaviour, and some key strategies for preventing problem behaviour occurring and dealing with it constructively. Prevention is better than cure, and strong parent-child relationship and a positive learning environment at home are key components of avoiding problems.

Understanding behaviour challenges

You can think of your child's behaviour as a form of communication. Behaviour is your child's way of trying to tell you something that they may not easily be able to put into words. One of the keys to effectively dealing with any challenging behaviour is to work out what the behaviour is saying. It might be: "I can't do this!", "I don't like this!", "I am scared by this!" or "Look at me!".

It can be hard to take an objective view to work out what your child's behaviour is really saying. Before jumping in and trying new things, it can pay to step back for a while, and look closely at the situation before deciding how to respond. Look at what happens just before the behaviour (triggers) and right after the behaviour (consequences). Look for patterns and relationships. Are there things that consistently trigger the behaviour? What are the consequences of the behaviour, what does it achieve? You may even consider keeping a diary.

Reacting to behaviour you like

It might sound strange, but a key to preventing and managing challenging behaviour is how you react when the behaviour does not occur, or even more importantly, when an alternative acceptable behaviour occurs. But it's difficult — we are better at seeing negatives than positives. It takes a lot of effort and concentration to deliberately change your focus to seeing and responding to the positives in your child's behaviour. Here are some tips:

Be vigilant for behaviour you like

This means watching out for behaviour you like and value in your child, or as it is often expressed, 'catching your child being good'. Good behaviour would be a trigger for you to respond positively.

Look for the small things

Don't wait until your child has done something perfectly before you provide positive feedback. Look for little steps and gains that you can encourage, praising effort as well as outcome.

Be selective

You are looking specifically for behaviour you want to encourage—not all behaviour—or even behaviour that is already well established, but rather behaviour that you want to see more of. For example, children playing well together, speaking in a nice voice, following an instruction, playing quietly. Once your child is regularly doing the new behaviour, you will gradually move your focus to something else.

Act immediately

The best time to respond to behaviour you like is as soon as it occurs. Think of how you would react if you caught your child drawing on the wall or doing something else you don't like. Pounce on the good behaviour.

Be specific in your praise

Tell your child exactly what they have done that pleases you. For example: "Simone, you are patting the cat so gently. That's great!"

Focus on 'us'

When your child is behaving well, make it all about you and her—make it personal: "Leah, it's so great when you do what I ask! It's so fantastic when we cooperate with each other!"

Be genuine

Praise and encouragement will always be more powerful and effective when it's genuine. Try to get in the habit of responding positively regardless of how you feel.

Be emotional

Think for a moment about the level of emotion you invest in responding to bad behaviour. If you are angry, things can get pretty intense and personal. Strangely, it's often in times of anger that the strongest connecting occurs. Contrast this to the level of emotion you invest in responding to good behaviour. The children may be playing

nicely together in the bedroom; what do you do? Work at turning this around. Invest high levels of positive emotion in responding to behaviour you like and try to keep interactions around challenging behaviour as emotionally neutral as you can.

Back up praise with other rewards

You can make praise more powerful by combining it with other types of rewards. Time doing something together, like playing a favourite game, can be a powerful reward. One child I know used to love going to Bunnings with his Dad. Other things like stickers, small toys, and food treats can all be effective rewards. Use 'backup' rewards like this when you are teaching new behaviours, and phase them out as quickly as you can as the new behaviour becomes established. A surprise or lucky dip bag filled with some inexpensive small toys or treats can be a good reward system: novelty helps keep up interest and motivation.

Be inconsistent

It might seem strange advice, but you need to be 'inconsistent' when responding to good behaviour — full of surprises. One moment it might be enthusiastic praise, another time it might mean a big hug, or even another time it might be celebrating with a plate of ice-cream together. The idea is to make a strong impression and mix things up so your responses to good behaviour don't become routine and boring.

Reacting to challenging behaviour

Be selective

When behaviour occurs that you don't like, ask yourself whether you really need to do anything. If the behaviour is not dangerous or disruptive then perhaps it's something you don't have to respond to. Intervening ought to be the exception rather than the rule.

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Don't allow challenging behaviour to work

Challenging behaviour occurs less as children develop more socially acceptable ways of achieving the same ends. This takes learning new skills and behaviours. For example, fighting over toys will occur until children get better at sharing and negotiating. The goal then should be to help children learn new skills and new ways of managing the situation. However, if negative behaviour remains an effective way of getting what you want, it will continue. Not allowing challenging behaviour to work is an important general principle. You need to have an idea about the purpose of the behaviour or what it is 'saying'. For example, if a child throws a temper tantrum because they don't want to get out of the bath, and as a result they are allowed to stay in the bath a little longer, the tantrum has 'worked'.

Ignoring

Ignoring is a strategy that is frequently recommended, but hard in practice. It will work only for behaviours that are reinforced by your attention. If the behaviour is rewarded by getting something they want, or avoiding something they don't like, or even by getting attention from others, ignoring will not make any difference. It may even make things worse. Ignoring is more than simply doing nothing, it is withholding your attention from the behaviour. Ignoring means not looking at, or speaking to, your child until they have stopped the behaviour, or turning your head or walking away. Here are some useful questions you can ask yourself before using ignoring as a strategy:

- Is the behaviour destructive or hurtful to others? If yes, then it cannot be ignored.
- Is the behaviour reinforced by your attention? If the answer is yes, then ignoring may work. If no, ignoring won't make any difference. Or if the behaviour is being reinforced by the attention of others like your partner, friends, siblings

or peers, it won't be effective.

- Could you ignore the behaviour if it gets worse temporarily? There is a side effect to ignoring—the behaviour tends to get worse before it gets better. For example, if you are ignoring screaming, you can expect the screaming to get louder and longer before it begins to diminish. To start ignoring, and then pay attention when the behaviour gets worse, simply rewards worse behaviour. If you are unprepared or unable to deal with this temporary increase in the behaviour, you may be best off not using ignoring in the first place.
- Can you ignore the behaviour wherever and whenever it occurs? For example, if you can ignore swearing at home, but not at grandma's house, what will you get? Less swearing at home and more swearing at grandma's house.

So, ignoring may be the strategy of choice for minor challenging behaviours that cause little or no disruption to others. But when this is not the case, other strategies may be more useful...

Establish ground rules

As children get older, it's useful to have ground rules that apply to the whole family. It's always better and easier if you know what the rules are up front, rather than discovering them accidentally by doing the wrong thing. You might need to consider general family and household rules related to personal interactions (talk to each other nicely), safety (walk in the house), hygiene (wash hands before meals), as well as rules for specific situations (seat belts). The most effective rules state what you want to happen rather than what you don't want to happen ('walk in the house', rather than 'don't run').

Be emotionally neutral

In contrast to the way you respond to positive behaviour, try to respond to challenging behaviour in a calm, non-emotional way. Make it an issue between the child and the rule ("Jason, there is no hitting in our house, go to time out"), rather than between you and the child.

Be consistent

Responding to challenging behaviour is the time to be consistent. Children will learn better and faster if they get the same response every time the behaviour occurs. For example, rules like 'sit on chairs' will be learned much more quickly if you respond in the same way every time your child jumps on the couch.

Teach a new skill

If you think of a challenging behaviour as an indicator that your child needs to learn a more effective way of achieving the same result, focus on teaching your child that skill. Ask yourself what you would like them to do instead of the challenging behaviour. For example, ask for something rather than grab, stay in bed for the night rather than getting out of bed, being gentle rather than hitting.

Change the environment

One of the most effective things you can do to reduce challenging behaviour is to change the physical environment so the behaviour can't occur or is less likely to occur. For example, placing a child gate on the bedroom door to stop fights that occur when a young sibling disrupts an older child's games; separating children to stop fights in the car; putting away fragile objects so you don't have to constantly try to stop a young child playing with them; having two of the same toy so young children don't have to share.

Where to go for more help

You may find it beneficial to participate in a parenting program. Look for a program that has a practical emphasis on positive behaviour management, and provides real skills and activities for building strong relationships, teaching new skills and managing challenging behaviour. Some examples are Triple P (Positive Parenting Program), Stepping Stones and Signposts.

A parent support group will also give you a chance to share experiences, ideas and hope with others in your position, as well as provide much-needed emotional support. If your child is under school age, you are eligible to participate in the nationally funded MyTime Peer Support Program. For more information visit www.mytime.net.au.

A useful website to start with in looking for behaviour management and parenting information is the national parenting information website, www.raisingchildren.net.au, which has a section dedicated to parents of children with a disability (see page 20).

If you are already struggling to deal with challenging behaviour, and it is causing significant stress, frustration or anger, you are advised to seek professional help from a behaviour specialist like a psychologist, who will work in partnership with you to develop strategies for dealing with the behaviour and helping your child develop alternative appropriate skills.

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Medicare Allied Health Initiative

Did you know that you can access a number of allied health services (including psychology) through your GP - and receive Medicare support for them, via the Medicare Allied Health Initiative? Your GP will need to prepare an Enhanced Primary Care (EPC) plan for your child based on the existence of a chronic condition.

A booklet about the Medicare Allied Health Initiative can be found at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/health-medicare-allied-health-brochure.htm>.

Services available within this initiative include:

Aboriginal health workers	Audiologists	Chiropodists
Chiropractors	Diabetes educators	Dieticians
Exercise physiologists	Mental health workers	Occupational therapists
Osteopaths	Physiotherapists	Podiatrists
Psychologists	Speech pathologists	