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### **MANAGEMENT OF DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR IN YOUNG CHILDREN**

If you can understand something, you can usually handle it better than if you simply react to it.

Subconsciously, we all monitor our behaviour all the time.

ALL children experience behaviour problems and only 1 – 2 out of 10 children with Down syndrome are badly affected by them. Most learning disabled children do not know how to self-regulate their behaviour.

#### What causes difficult behaviour?

- Immature social skills Children’s social development is influenced by their understanding of the world around them. This can mean that those children experiencing delayed cognitive development may have difficulty in becoming socially competent and in controlling their behaviour. – This is where both parents and teachers need to understand the concept of developmental as against chronological age because the child’s actual behaviour may present very differently from what is expected from a child of his/her chronological age.)
- Hence behaviour depends on the developmental stage the child has reached.
- Behaviour depends on the kind of experiences the child has had.
- Children who are nagged constantly with “Don’t. . .” and “No. . .” tend to stop listening or trying after a while. They see themselves as naughty and behave accordingly. It creates a comfort zone for them.
- Children have ‘good days’ and ‘bad days’.
- You can cause bad behaviour because of the way you handle a situation as a result of your own experiences or stressed feelings.
- Inappropriate reinforcement - They did it before and nothing happened.
- Family factors.
- Frequent changes of caregivers They did it before and it worked.
- Personality conflicts.
- Limited or inconsistent rule setting.
- Physical health.
  - Communication problems:
    - Children experiencing difficulties with expressive language often feel frustrated.
    - Frustration.
    - Habituation – bad habits becoming customary. When children repeatedly behave badly, it is because they get something satisfying or rewarding from their bad behaviour.

### **Some possible solutions:**

- Give the child a sense of personal power.
- Set limits and use a coherent, consistent system of discipline (in all contexts) administered at the child's developmental age.
- Provide alternatives.
- Distract.
- Consider adjusting schedules.
- Increase predictability warn child of approaching change.
- Reward desired behaviours remember to be specific.
- Planned ignoring: this way you are not giving the child attention which may be what he/she wants – unpleasant attention is better than no attention.
- Avoid overprotection.

### **CREATING AN INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR PLAN - General Tips:**

- This approach depends on the use of positive encouragement and reward.
- You can use rewards to plan changes in your settings.
- Remember, behaviour depends on the developmental stage your child has reached, not the chronological age.
- The goal is to teach your child new skills and to give new confidence.
- Appropriate behaviour is most likely to occur if children know what is expected of them.
- Your child needs to see the adults he knows modelling kind and courteous behaviour.
- Always notice and praise appropriate behaviour. Then it is more likely to be repeated.
- Success builds confidence and self esteem. This means more efforts to do the same again.
- Negative reactions might control a situation in the short term, but can only leave the child feeling worse about himself in the longer term.
- Start with just one behaviour to work on at first: Choose either one that will be easy to change or one that is dangerous to others/ to the child himself.
- Work out what you think is keeping that behaviour going.
- What do you think you could do to change the situation? (Look at the cause; the behaviour itself; the way you react to it).

## **SOLUTIONS**

### **Changing The Cause** (What leads up to the behaviour?)

- Avoid the situation – don't let it happen.
- Distract, don't confront.
- Make sure the child can do what he is being expected to do.
- Ensure he understands what is required of him.
- Give specific, positive attention before bad behaviour starts.
- Cue him in and warn him when he is going to have to do something else.
- Try and be one step ahead of him and anticipate bad behaviour e.g. he may find being left to play freely/alone difficult because with his language difficulties, he may not be sure of what is expected of him.
- Give simple, clear directions: "No throwing" and repeat it several times.
- Model as much as possible. This makes it easy for him to understand what your words mean. Use signs wherever possible and words that he knows and understands.
- Choose a few, simple rules (3 – 4 at the most) and stick to them.

### **CHANGE THE BEHAVIOUR** (What does he actually do?)

- Stop it if you can. (Work out in advance what you will do when it happens – withdraw him; physically stop it etc.)
- Teach him new/alternate/different things to do. (Plan what you will do here, so that it is more likely that appropriate behaviour will happen.)
- Praise behaviour you like and discourage behaviour that you don't like. Model and use signs to make sure that he understands your words.

### **CHANGE THE CONSEQUENCES** (What is happening as a result of his behaviour?)

- Always be absolutely consistent
- Look for examples of appropriate behaviour to praise and encourage. Do this regularly.
- Ignore bad attention seeking behaviour when it is possible to do so.
- Make it fun to behave appropriately – use both concrete rewards and verbal praise together.
- Can try stickers/stars on a chart. Make sure the child knows exactly why he has earned a sticker/star. Never remove them. They were earned because something was done at a particular moment.

## **SUMMARY**

### **The best behaviour plans . . . .**

- Concentrate on one or two behaviours causing the most concern
- These behaviours must be clearly defined so that everyone knows what you mean and can see when that behaviour has changed.
- Always be totally consistent when tackling these behaviours.
- Use only absolutely necessary rules so that the child knows exactly:
  - a) what will happen if he does do it
  - b) what will happen if he does not
- Build in a reward for not doing the behaviour.
- Help the child to avoid the situations where the problem is likely to occur.
- Make it more fun/attention-getting to behave rather than to misbehave.
- Ensure that his self esteem remains positive.

## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

- Wherever possible, work together, in the same way as the class teacher
- Make weekly goals:
  - a) Break each goal down into smaller steps that the child can manage. (This makes it easier for him to be successful).
  - b) Support and encourage him each step of the way.
  - c) Aim for goals which are clear and measurable.
- Sometimes behaviour can worsen at the start of a behaviour modification plan.
- Give instructions without emotion – as if they were facts.
- Give more positive attention to appropriate behaviour.

### What to do when things do not work out

Think carefully about the following aspects:

- Are the rewards you are using effective and strong enough for the child? Try pairing a concrete reward with your praise.
- Does your facilitator have a good rapport with your child?
- Were your boundaries as clear and firm as they might have been?
- Did you take time to show the child what to do as well as what not to do?
- Were your approaches as consistent as they could have been in the circumstances?
- Does this child need more positive attention than you have been able to give so far? Are you still finding that you have to give more attention when there is misbehaviour than when there is appropriate behaviour?

**The Use of Contracts and Contracting** (This applies to children who are old enough to/capable of understanding the concept).

A contract is a joint agreement between child and parent/teacher to accomplish something specific (e.g. for a desired behaviour, or for a certain academic task.)

**N.B.** The behaviour described in the contract must be one the child wants to change, and the goal one the child wants to achieve. If the contract is to be effective, the child needs to be involved in deciding how it is going to work, if it is fair, and committed to changing his/her behaviour.

#### Guidelines

Time: Contracts may be made for short periods of time (e.g. 15 mins), a class period, a school day, or an entire week. For the child who has difficulty organising his time and structuring his own activities, it would not be realistic or profitable to agree to a contract that was for the entire term. Smaller bits of time work better because then the child sees success in a relatively short time.

Responsibility: The child is responsible for his contract, his behaviour, and his acceptance of the consequences of that behaviour.

Consequences: these should be realistic and relevant. A child needs to know what to expect if he completes a task and what to expect if he doesn't.

Types of contract: The most relevant for this purpose are as follows:

- Mini contract: a short-term agreement focusing on a specific behaviour.
- Academic contract: a daily, weekly or term agreement for completion of specific academic tasks. It may be drawn up for.
- An individual child or a whole class. If for an individual child, both child and parent/teacher discuss the child's academic status in a given area, his goal for the term, his goal for the week, and his daily goal. Each week they should review what was accomplished that week in relation to his goal for the term. The reason all three kinds of goals are determined is to allow the child to see realistically where he is in a given subject area, where he is going, and how he can, step-by-step, reach his goal.

The comments column is perhaps the most important part of the contract.

It is a space for **positive** evaluation of a child's work habits and attitude, **not** his marks.

If a child didn't do well that day, **no** comment is placed in the column. This is not a report reflecting graded performance. It reflects work habits and attitudes.

Consequences should be jointly decided upon by both child and parent/teacher. They should be stated positively if at all possible.

**CONSISTENCY** is vital at all times.

When choices are made that lead to the contract being broken, the child has to accept the consequences of his behaviour. Otherwise it becomes totally meaningless.