

Strategies for dealing with obsessive, repetitive, and difficult behaviours

Difficult or repetitive behaviours can cause a range of problems as they can manifest as temper tantrums, screaming (very loudly and for long periods), slamming doors consistently, self-harming or harming others, and/or poor sleeping. These can occur at any time, continue for long periods of time and often without much warning, at home, in public and/or school.

Such behaviours could be caused by:

- fear or confusion
- anxiety
- inability to communicate the source of the problem
- over- or under-sensitivity
- inability to cope with change
- the need for structure, routine, and ‘sameness’ in environments.

Identifying the cause of the difficulty will inform how it could be addressed. To begin addressing behaviours that are creating difficulties it is necessary to identify exactly which behaviours need addressing and which of those should be the priority. Multiple behaviours cannot be dealt with all at once, so prioritisation will be essential. Some specific strategies that could be used to address behaviour difficulties and repetitive behaviours would include:

- always using positive rewards for any positive behaviours demonstrated
- maintaining structure and routine as far as possible across all environments, e.g. having multiples of the favoured cup or even all crockery and cutlery, for use in all places – at home, school, or in public
- keeping rules simple and clear, displayed written and pictorial form
- using visual timetables to support understanding of what will happen next
- using calming techniques that are known to work with the child, e.g. soft music, stroking
- supporting the development of communication skills, verbal or non-verbal
- sticking to set mealtimes and resisting giving the child snacks in-between
- acknowledging the child’s over- or under-sensitivity and known fears
- using visual clues whenever possible to support understanding
- developing play and imaginative skills to divert attention to alternative and preferable activities
- introducing activities gradually and preparing the child for expected changes
- accommodating the child’s likes/dislikes and preferred activities as far as possible, but without allowing domination by the child
- incorporating the child’s repetitive behaviours in a planned approach to extend skills
- limiting choices to avoid confusion
- using time-out
- restricting repetitive or obsessional activities to set times only.

If one behaviour becomes more problematic, then a planned behavioural intervention may be implemented. First it is necessary to define precisely the behaviour(s) under consideration.

The ABC of behaviour:

Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
What happened immediately before the behaviour?	Describe the behaviour precisely, in clear terms.	What was the effect of the behaviour for the child?

For example, a simple scenario might be:

Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
Toy was taken by another child	Child screamed.	Adult returned the toy to the first child.

In this case the behaviour communicates ‘I am upset’ to the adult who returns the toy to the child.

From the information gained from the ABC analysis the next questions that need to be asked are:

- What can we do to reduce the frequency of the behaviours?
- What can we do when the behaviours occur?

A word of warning: analysis of behaviour is not always simple and straightforward. Human behaviour will always be determined by many factors and by many factors at different times. Children with autism often have their own idiosyncratic factors and responses. Observation, therefore, has an increased role to play.

Designing the intervention

Basic components of any programme to change behaviour and develop new skills will be:

- **Alter setting conditions first**
Change the context and situation in which the behaviour occurs to eliminate ‘triggers’ if possible. ‘Setting conditions’ need to be viewed broadly and many aspects of the child’s life considered, e.g. sleep patterns, diet, learning demands, environment, noise levels, and physical activity.
- **Have a positive focus**
There is likely to be greater progress under conditions that are positively reinforcing of desired behaviour. Care must be taken to ensure that the positive reinforcers/rewards are actually rewarding for the child. Smiles and cuddles can have the opposite effect on the young child with autism to that intended.

Rewards may take the form of food, drinks, activities, toys, breaks, or 'obsessions'. They should be powerful and meaningful to the child. They should be used consistently and predictably from the beginning of any change programme in order to be effective.

- **Teach alternative skills**

If the purpose and function of the behaviour can be identified by careful observation, then the child can be taught an alternative way of achieving these goals, for example using a symbol to indicate 'out' or 'more' instead of screaming.

- **Use graded change techniques**

A planned change in behaviour will usually entail careful analysis of the goal to be achieved, and the construction of a series of steps towards the eventual goal.

- **Building in measurement and evaluation procedures**

As in the initial recording of observation using ABC, any programme for behavioural change should be carefully monitored so that small changes are noted and the effectiveness of intervention may be known.

- **Say 'no' quietly but firmly**

When your child does something unacceptable say 'no' quietly and firmly with a hand gesture to reinforce it. Do not make a fuss, do not get angry and upset. S/he will gradually understand that his/her behaviour is unacceptable but s/he does not see you wound up and annoyed.

- **Reward good behaviour and ignore bad behaviour**

The golden rule of behaviour management is to reward good behaviour and ignore bad behaviour. The key is to ignore bad behaviour. If you make a fuss of bad behaviour, your child will get exactly what s/he wants, which is attention, and will have every incentive to carry on. If, on the other hand, you ignore bad behaviour, your child will achieve nothing (you do of course have to ensure that your child remains safe at all times). But at the same time you must give him/her attention when s/he behaves well. Parents should therefore give lots of attention to their child when s/he is behaving well by talking to him/her, praising him/her and acknowledging his/her good behaviour. On the other hand, if your child behaves badly s/he should be given as little attention as possible, or, even better, ignored (provided it is safe to do so) so that s/he learns that bad behaviour is not the way to get parental attention. Try to praise and reward your child for just playing nicely. If your child throws a tantrum, ignore it. Don't remonstrate or reason with your child just ignore him/her and wait for him/her to emerge from his/her tantrum. Never let it succeed, otherwise your child will learn that it is a good way to get what s/he wants and s/he will throw a tantrum every time s/he is thwarted.

- **Look for patterns of inappropriate behaviour**

If you examine the ABC of behaviour and can see a pattern emerging from the bad behaviour, try to pre-empt the situation before it occurs. Some situations that trigger bad behaviour are unavoidable so you have to develop a strategy for dealing with them. You might find it helpful to keep a diary of behavioural problems to identify trigger points and times of the day when particular behaviours occur. From this you could work out the behaviours to be tackled and in what order.

- **Be consistent and try to never give in**

If you have said 'no' you must stick to your decision and not give in because children must learn that when you say 'no' you mean 'no'. If a child knows

that you will give in is s/he persists, you are going to make matters worse for yourself. A child needs to know what the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are and s/he cannot if they are constantly changing. If you start to use these ideas on behaviour management you may find things seem more difficult before they get better because your child will be determined to break down your resistance and find out where those boundaries are. Be strong, stay firm and persevere. It is crucial that all members of the family agree to what is acceptable behaviour and what isn't. It is also crucial that all members of the family agree to the methods by which you will deal with any behaviours, and that all members of the family use such methods in a consistent and fair manner.

- **Respond immediately**

In situations where for example your child has hit another child, you should respond immediately to the bad behaviour, otherwise your child will not understand what you are talking about. You must also remember that when you praise your child or tell him/her off you must tell him/her what she is doing that is right or wrong. This way you are reinforcing your message. For the child's self-esteem it is important that you criticise the behaviour and not the child.

Further reading:

Cummine, V., Leach, J. & Stevenson, G. (2000). *Autism in the early years: a practical guide*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries*. London: The National Autistic Society.

Newman, S. (1999). *Small steps forward: using games and activities to help your pre-school child with special needs*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.

Wall, K. (2004). *Autism and early years practice: a guide for early years professionals, teachers and parents*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.