**Tips for preventing and responding to challenging behaviour**

Challenging behaviour is common in young children, including those with disabilities. For most children, challenging behaviour occurs when they are unable to communicate their needs and wants to others in an appropriate manner.

If challenging behaviour is not addressed it can lead to long-term difficulties. Challenging behaviour can limit a child’s ability to access the community, school, family outings, or any event outside of the home.

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) do not always respond in the same way to the parenting and behaviour management strategies that sometimes work for other children. The use of consequences alone or responses after challenging behaviour has occurred presumes your child is easily able to work out what they have done wrong *and* what they should have done instead.

This is often not the case for children with ASD, due to their communication and social difficulties. Research shows that the most effective way of changing the behaviour of children with ASD is to use a Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) approach. PBS means you:

* consider the purpose or ‘why’ of the behaviour
* mainly focus on preventing the behaviour from happening by avoiding or changing the circumstances that trigger the behaviour
* teach new behaviours or skills to replace the challenging behaviour.

**The purpose or ‘why’ of behaviour**

Challenging behaviour always serves a purpose (even though behaviours might not be ‘done on purpose’). This means there is something that your child is trying to communicate to you with that behaviour. To be able to prevent, respond and work out what your child might be taught to do instead of any difficult behaviour, it is important to be able to determine exactly why your child uses these behaviours.

By using challenging behaviours to communicate, your child might be seeking to:

* interact with you or another person
* escape or avoid a demand or request by you or others
* escape or avoid a disliked situation, object or person
* get a preferred object, activity, situation or person
* get some control or predictability over their day or the activity
* gain or avoid sensory stimulation
* reduce their arousal and or anxiety.

**Tips for preventing or avoiding challenging behaviours**

The most effective way to manage challenging behaviours is to try preventing them from happening rather than just focusing on what to do when or after the behaviour occurs. While preventing the behaviour from occurring can be difficult, appear time consuming and not possible in every situation, there are some changes that you can make which may reduce the likelihood of your child using challenging behaviour to communicate their needs and wants.

Collect information about the possible purpose of your child’s behaviour by:

* observing them, talking with other members of your child’s family or people who know your child well
* recording the situations, activities, environments, people and people’s reactions and responses that make this behaviour most likely to occur
* investigating and recording separately when this behaviour is least likely to occur (use the most/least likely chart on the Positive Partnerships website <http://www.autismtraining.com.au/orionfiles/upload/public/files/MostLikely_LeastLikelyChart.pdf>).

Highlight the common challenging situations, environments or activities for your child (the situations where there is a higher risk of challenging behaviour occurring). This might include:

* new or unknown situations or activities
* times when your child has to wait, share or participate for long periods
* unstructured or ‘free flowing’ activities where your child is unable to predict what will happen and what they need to do
* when you are hurried, rushed or unprepared
* situations or activities that might be noisy, busy, distracting or over stimulating
* activities or routines which include skills your child has not learnt yet
* when your child is tired, hungry or unwell.

Make a plan to avoid or change those ‘high risk’ activities or situations whenever possible for your child by:

* changing the physical environment to make it less stressful or challenging for your your child (reduce sensory challenges, avoid busy or unfenced areas, reduce distractions by packing away or removing items, have items or activities which you know calm your child)
* preparing the child in advance if possible (e.g. play birthday parties several times before attending one, use a story which you read over and over to your child to help them understand what happens at a birthday party, plan to stay for a short time if possible and leave while successful – stay a little longer next time)
* planning to provide more structure or information for your child in situations or activities that have an increased risk of challenging behaviour occurring (e.g. use simple, clear instructions, develop consistent rules and routines, use visual information such as a short list or daily schedule, provide something your child likes to do while waiting or after the activity, break tasks into smaller more easily achievable steps to start with “Just put the last train back in the box”, not “Pack up all the trains”)
* thinking about how you can motivate your child in common difficult or challenging situations (include their interests and strengths, provide a simple choice, ’do it together’, use them as the expert or person who helps others, provide a reward for completing a small easily achieved part of the task, give more information about what you want them to do by having a schedule, provide a favourite item for your child to carry and/or establish a routine)
* including, where possible, parts of the situations, activities or environments where the behaviour is least likely to occur into new or ‘higher risk’ situations or activities (i.e. letting your child bring a favourite toy to a new environment, including parts of your home eating routine when having a snack at the park, or starting with a preferred game, song or routine to establish calm).

**Tips for teaching new or ‘replacement’ behaviours**

Challenging or difficult behaviours are learnt and all children can be supported to learn new ways to express their wants and needs in appropriate ways, provided the skills taught to the child are relevant, meaningful and just as successful in getting their needs met as the challenging behaviour.

Children need to be supported and encouraged as they learn new skills and replacement behaviours. This involves explicitly teaching new skills to your child and providing clear and powerful praise and reward for doing so.

Think about what new skill or behaviour your child needs to learn:

* what was your child trying to communicate with the old behaviour?
* what skill related to this ‘communication or purpose’ doesn’t your child demonstrate (or doesn’t demonstrate consistently)?
* does your child need to learn a coping strategy such as asking for help or a break, or how to choose from three items?

Consider why your child would be motivated to learn a new or replacement behaviour:

* does the new behaviour give your child the same outcome as the challenging behaviour?
* do you need to provide an extra reward or reason for your child to learn the steps of a new behaviour?
* give lots of frequent reinforcement and praise to your child (don’t just wait until the end or when they can perform the whole of the new skill to give them a reward).

Plan for success:

* break the skill or new behaviour into small steps and pick a step which you know your child can achieve and be rewarded for doing (such as putting the lid on the toothpaste, not the whole teeth brushing sequence; work from where your child is at, not where you want them to be)
* think about the old triggers: can they be removed or changed, do you have new triggers (can you ‘trigger’ the new behaviour before the old behaviour can begin?)
* start small so you can achieve success and everyone (you, your family and your child) can learn how to change behaviour: this means that you might not choose the most difficult behaviour to start with
* choose only one behaviour to focus on at one time
* be prepared for changes or ‘ups and downs’ in behaviour - remember everyone is affected by changes (i.e. tiredness, boredom, hunger) – and look for improvements over a set time such as a month, not daily changes
* be prepared for a possible increase in the difficult behaviour when the new strategy is first introduced as your child may have to adjust to the change or new demands
* allow time for a new strategy or skill to work: do not give up if you do not see immediate changes (e.g. try it a number of times and or slightly change or modify the strategy rather than abandoning it).

Teach new skills away from times and places where the challenging behaviour will usually occur, and provide lots of opportunities for practise. Once your child is engaging in these new skills, it will be important to support your child to generalise these new skills during the times and places where the previous challenging behaviour occurred.

Consider and document your plan of action (the Positive Partnerships behaviour-recording sheet is an easy way to do this

<http://www.autismtraining.com.au/orionfiles/upload/public/files/PBS_RecordingSheet_04_07_12.pdf>).

Make sure everyone is aware of the new plan, including how to respond to your child. Consistency is very important for success.

**Tips for responding when challenging behaviours first start to occur**

When your child uses challenging behaviour to communicate something to you it is important to consider what will help bring calm to the situation as quickly as possible. You might consider:

* giving your child some feedback, such as a reminder of the reinforcement they are working towards or when they will get a break, what else they could do (i.e. ask for help or the item) or what they have already done well to remind them of their successes
* using a calm voice and clear language
* active listening, which can show you are aware that your child wants to communicate something: “I can see you are getting sad because you want….”
* distracting your child by talking about their interests or strengths, using simple humour that your child can understand, or doing something unexpected or unusual
* planning to manage your own emotions and responses as well as the responses of others in the family so as not to escalate the behaviour (i.e. give siblings something to distract them, remind yourself to take a few breaths, think of your past successes)
* creating a barrier to reduce any safety concerns such as leaving the room, moving other family members and yourself away from your child, and quietly removing any items that may be unsafe.

**What to do if behaviour escalates or continues to occur**

When your child is upset, anxious or displaying challenging behaviour, they are less likely to be able to understand and follow any instructions or suggestions you give them: this is not a ‘teachable’ moment.

Consider the safety of your child and other family members such as siblings and yourself:

* can you remove your child from the situation safely?
* do you need to remove yourself and other family members from the room or situation?
* do you need to remove items from the environment or room that could be unsafe when your child is upset?

Consider the language you use with your child to avoid escalation:

* avoid talking as much as possible (it is stressful for your child to have to try to work out what your words mean)
* use very short, simple instructions if needed (perhaps include a visual clue such as opening the door to show your child they can go outside to calm)
* use a calm even voice.

Try to regain calm as quickly as possible by:

* considering what will help your child calm as quickly as possible (time alone, access to an activity or item he/she likes that is calming, blocking sensory triggers etc)
* considering what will help you calm as quickly as possible (leaving the room, getting other family members organised so they won’t become involved, getting back-up, thinking about what you will do once your child calms)
* avoiding as much as possible escalating the behaviour by allowing lots of time for recovery (reduce demands for a set time, allow you and your child a break, remove triggers etc).

Work with your child’s school team to develop a plan to support your child to learn new skills and to manage times when challenging behaviour occurs (see [Positive Behaviour Support](http://education.qld.gov.au/asd-online-resource-kit/schools/learning-environment/pbs.html) in the educators section).

Seek professional assistance if behaviours are ongoing.

**In summary**

* Understand the purpose or communication of the behaviour.
* Teach new skills that address this purpose.
* Understand the role of environment on your child’s responses.
* Be realistic – new responses are learnt in small steps.
* Be consistent.

**Further information**

* Early Days (via Autism Queensland) to enquire about their Understanding Behaviour – a step-by-step guide for parents (<http://www.autismqld.com.au/page/388/Early-Days-Workshops>).
* Triple P to enquire about their Stepping Stones Triple P for parents of children with a disability (<http://www10.triplep.net/?pid=58>).
* Positive Partnerships website for information, workshops, video, and a positive behaviour support recording sheet useful for planning and recording (<http://www.autismtraining.com.au/public/index.cfm?action=showPublicContent&assetCategoryId=1029>).
* [](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/)The Raising Children Network website has tips and suggestions for managing behaviour in all children (<http://raisingchildren.net.au/behaviour/preschoolers_behaviour.html>).