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Behaviour modification – what works, what doesn't?

Points to note

- It is far better to put strategies in place to prevent or minimise inappropriate behaviour than to react to that behaviour *after* it has occurred.
- All behaviour has a purpose or function that produces a result. For a child with autism, the desired result may be to reduce stress.
- Children with autism need a support plan to address behavioural issues. Generally, as inappropriate behaviour increases, so too does punishment. Punishment teaches children that they have done something wrong. However, it doesn't teach what is appropriate or acceptable. This is especially important for children with autism.
- Children with autism should not be punished for inappropriate behaviour arising from their disorder, such as being inattentive, disorganised or misinterpreting verbal instructions.
- Time out may be ineffective for children with autism. In timeout, the 'punishment' is a break from a task that perhaps the child wanted to avoid in the first place. He is allowed to sit in the peace and quiet of the corridor which may be a great relief if the classroom noise causes him stress and anxiety.
- Short term strategies may keep the behaviour under control but long term strategies are required to avoid an increase in problems over time.
- When trying to decrease behaviours they will tend to get worse before they get better. In fact it is a good sign that the method is working if you notice increases in frequency and intensity for a short time.
- Remember to stay positive and look for small steps in the increase or decrease of the behaviour.

What you can do

- Complete a [Behavioural Profile Checklist](#), [Student Summary Form](#) and [The ABC of Inappropriate Behaviour](#). Use these forms to identify challenging behaviours requiring immediate action and develop a support plan to manage them. Involve as many people as possible in the information-gathering process - parents, support staff etc.
- Only tackle behavioural issues that affect the child's ability to learn, if it interferes with other students, or if it is a safety issue. Obsessive or odd behaviour may keep the child calm and does not necessarily inhibit learning. For example, the child may hum softly to himself or flick his fingers in front of his eyes to keep himself calm. If you tell him to stop he is likely to become even more anxious and upset as he tries to control the compulsive behaviour *and* cope with his stress at the same time.
- Introduce any changes gradually to minimise disruptive behaviour and use visual cues wherever possible.

- Most children with autism have an obsession or preferred area of interest. This interest can help teachers to identify appropriate rewards or motivators for the child. See Effective rewards and motivators.
- Maintain a consistent approach to inappropriate behaviour. Good communication between parents, teachers and support staff is essential in ensuring a consistent approach. Use a Communication Book.
- Questions to ask during information-gathering:-
Which behaviours are most difficult or disruptive?
What is happening immediately before the behaviour occurs?
What do you believe is being communicated by the behaviour? *What* skill/s does the child lack that may contribute to the inappropriate behaviour?
 Describe the consequences that have been tried to stop the behaviour?
Which consequences have failed? Which, if any, have worked?
What motivates the child? Think of his interests and obsessions.
What might be an effective reward system for good behaviour?
What strategies could be implemented to prevent this behaviour?
What consequences will be used when the behaviour occurs in future?
- Use the [The ABC of Inappropriate Behaviour](#) to develop an action plan for undesirable behaviour.
- Remember lecturing won't alter the behaviour. Try not to use threats.
- Identify the *consequences* of behaviours. A negative consequence would be punishment; a positive consequence is something the child looks forward to happening. Positive consequences are far more powerful to either increase or decrease a behaviour. Sometimes the consequence you are giving the child may actually be *reinforcing* the behaviour, such as the timeout example above. Another example might be telling the child 'Well done!' in a shrill voice or clapping loudly. If the child is sensitive to noise this becomes more a punishment than a positive reinforcement.
- **Time out.** Time out is a consequence where the child is transferred to a *less reinforcing* (more boring) situation for a period of time immediately following an inappropriate behaviour. As time passes more slowly for children, this is an effective way to deal with problem behaviours, especially if the behaviour involves non-compliance, hitting or antagonising others physically or verbally.
- Time out is often done *incorrectly*, making it unsuccessful in changing behaviour. In addition, it takes a period of time for the child to understand the process of time out and during this time their behaviours often increase and the amount of time used in taking them back to time out is considerable.
- Wherever possible, the situation or area the child is sent to should be devoid of any interesting or distracting objects. It should never be a dark room or small space, which could scare the child. It might be an empty hallway or quiet room. It can be a timeout chair rather than a room.
- **What to do.** Immediately following a behaviour say to the child in simple language that he is going to time out and the reason why. "Time out - no hitting." Remain calm. Take him to the time out area and do not engage in any other conversation. Ignore him during the time out.
- There are two methods to determine how long the child stays in time out - when he is calm or a set time limit. If you are waiting for the child to calm down and he is crying and likely to continue crying for some time, you can wait until he takes a breath and then say, "Good, no crying. Time out finished." If he continues to cry or be angry say "time out" and place him back in the room/chair. This can be done until he comes out of time out in a calm manner. With a timed response you may decide on 5 minutes and simply let the child out after that

period.

- **During time out.** If the child leaves the room/chair escort him back as many times as necessary until he has calmed down or the time limit has been reached. You can leave a buzzer to tell the child when time out finishes.
- **After time out.** If you put the child in time out because he refused to comply with a request, get him to do the required behaviour after time out and if he does not comply put him back in time out. Once the behaviour ceases it is important to act as normally as possible with the child and not to reprimand him again.
- The child should always have a clear understanding of the kind of behaviour that will result in timeout. He should be able to explain, write or draw the reason for being given timeout.
- Always check whether you think the time out could be *reinforcing* the behaviour and use it sparingly!
- **Use planned ignoring or extinction.** This method can be particularly useful for inappropriate behaviour that is being reinforced by attention from another person, however its use is limited. It can only be used when you have been able to identify what is rewarding to the child and when you are able to modify this impact. For example, if you ignore the child but other children give him attention this method may not work.
- Planned ignoring / extinction involves not attending to the child's behaviour in any manner including avoiding eye contact, continuing with your present activity and giving no verbal contact.
- As with any behaviour change the child's behaviour will increase before it decreases and as such any tantrums will increase. You have to continue to ignore the child and this can be very trying. If the child puts himself in danger of being hurt then without talking remove him from the situation and continue to ignore him.
- Don't give in at the wrong time! This can make the original problem worse.
- It is essential that this method be paired with a reward system so that the child can learn the difference between ignoring him and when you give him attention for a desirable behaviour. However make sure that NO reinforcement follows the behaviour you are trying to weaken.
- **Redirection and replacement.** Replacement is prompting the child to act appropriately BEFORE he starts to display an inappropriate behaviour. Therefore you are trying to prevent undesirable behaviours before they occur. If you see the child becoming 'wound up' you can intervene first and direct him into another appropriate activity. This means being in the right place at the right time, perceiving the child's signals and pre-empting the situation. Redirection is a method used AFTER you see an inappropriate behaviour and you then prompt an appropriate one. For example, instead of throwing sand out of the sandpit, direct the child to fill a container with the sand.
- **Incompatible behaviours.** This is similar to redirection in that you use it AFTER an inappropriate behaviour is displayed. However instead of moulding the behaviour to a more appropriate one you introduce an activity that is *incompatible* with the problem behaviour. For example, if the child is squealing, have him blow bubbles until his urge to squeal has stopped. If he is flapping or biting his hands, give him something to hold onto such as a stress ball and say 'squeeze.' This is also encouraged by constructive instructions. Tell the child the behaviour you *want* him to perform rather than the behaviour you want him to stop. Instead of 'no flapping' say 'hands down'.
- **Setting up the environment.** The environment can play a large part in the behaviour the child displays. It is also often easier to change the environment than trying to change a behaviour that the child is displaying. Therefore it can be useful to 'set up' the environment to

manage behaviours.

- An example of setting up the environment would involve shutting away equipment that the child likes to break *before* he enters the room and bringing it out later when there is an adult present to supervise or direct the child.
- Giving the child warnings of change, ie. when an activity will have to finish is also an important part of managing the environment. Therefore if you require the child to co-operate in carrying out some action, such as packing up, this can be managed more smoothly if he is warned in advance.
- Another way you can manage the environment is to alter time expectations. If 10 minutes is too long for him to sit with a group, change this expectation to 2 minutes and then slowly work your way up to the full 10 minutes. Alternatively you can put him outside the group and slowly bring him into it.
- **Offer choices - give the child control.** Many inappropriate behaviours occur due to requests or expectations that are too difficult for the child to accomplish. Constant commands and directions can also be frustrating for the child. It is important to give him choices so that he does not feel that he is constantly being 'bossed' around. Keep the choices limited to two and use visual cues as some children may only state the last or first thing they are offered rather than what they really want.
- In summary, an analysis of the negative behaviour needs to be undertaken, specifically looking at the *communicative intent* of the behaviour. When this intent has been identified, teachers and support staff can work on the skills the child needs to *acquire* to prevent this behaviour from re-occurring and put reward systems in place that will *motivate* the child to behave in an appropriate manner.