

Happy children do not engage in negative behaviour



One step at a time

Behaviours that challenge us in children with autism and other SEND serve a purpose. The key to effecting change is to understand what that purpose might be. **Jacqueline Wheble** explains

Pupils with autism and other disabilities often display behaviours we find deeply troubling. Their actions may, for example, be preventing them from learning or they may be disrupting the education of their peers. In some cases, the pupil may be inflicting physical harm on themselves or on others.

Clearly, we can't allow this to go on, but how do we begin to address it?

The first step is to understand the link between autism and challenging behaviours. Children with autism have reasons for behaving in the way that they do, even if these seem unfathomable to us. It is vital that we uncover what the reasons might be. Only then are we in a position to develop a support plan that will help them to communicate and fulfil their needs in a more socially acceptable way.

The following framework provides a systematic, step-by-step approach.

1. Describe the behaviours that are causing concern

It is hard not to become emotionally involved or make value judgements when describing a child's behaviour. One way to ensure you give an objective, dispassionate account is to imagine you have a video of what is happening and describe it to a colleague. Typical behaviours you might encounter include:

- hitting
- refusing to do a task
- crying
- rocking
- making strange noises
- running away
- not listening.

These are just a few of the possibilities, and the child is bound to display different behaviours at different times. You can't tackle everything at once. Decide which one is having the greatest impact on their learning and focus on that. Only move on to the next one when the first has improved.

2. Identify the function

All behaviours serve a function. That applies to everyone, but for children with severe cognitive or communication disabilities, what lies behind their behaviour may not be readily apparent.

So which of the following might they be trying to achieve?

- **To escape or avoid** – a demand, an environment, something sensory...
- **A tangible objective** – something concrete, such as a favourite toy, or access to a desired activity, like a computer game.
- **To gain attention** – to communicate frustration/emotion/protest.
- **To fulfil a sensory need.**

Behaviours stemming from sensory needs are often the hardest to unpick and even harder to address. Many adults with autism describe this as their greatest challenge: the more they do something, the harder they find it to stop, even when they know it is having a negative impact

STAR CHART

STAR CHART						
Pupil name	Behaviour to be observed					
Date	Time	Setting: internal or external	Trigger: might be unknown?	Action: what happened and what did you do?	Result: what did the pupil do because of your actions?	Staff name

on the quality of their lives. The same is true of us all. Take smoking, for example. It is not just the addictive aspect that gets us hooked, but the sensory habit; hence the success of e-cigarettes.

3. Observe and record settings and triggers

It is really important to spend time observing and monitoring what is going on. We use the S.T.A.R. chart developed by Zarkowska and Clements (see above) to collate the observations of different members of staff.

Triggers can be internal as well as external. Tiredness is a huge one. Sometimes it's impossible to put your finger on it and you have to guess – for example, it could be something that happened before the child entered your class and which you know nothing about.



Children at Pictor Academy burn off excess energy in the playground

Possible triggers

- Too hot or too cold
- Too bright or too noisy
- Too thirsty
- Too hard, too confusing or too boring
- Too stressful or too exciting
- Too many demands, too much talk

Possible settings, external and internal

- A subject the child finds demanding
- Assembly
- A windy day
- Friday afternoon
- Monday morning
- A supply teacher
- A change of routine

4. Modify the settings and triggers

List some changes that could be made to the classroom and wider school

Developing a support plan – proactive strategies

Make environmental changes

It is easier to change the environment than it is to change the child. Do they really have to go to assembly if they find that stressful? Can they have a drink if they are thirsty? Decide which challenges are priorities for now and leave others for later.

Improve the child's underlying deficits

Eric Schopler, one of the founders of the TEACCH programme, uses the analogy of an iceberg to describe the impact of the deficits associated with autism, where the observed behaviours are represented by the tip of the iceberg and the underlying causes are hidden beneath the water.

Take aggression, for example. Possible underlying deficits might be lack of social understanding, frustration, poor friendship skills and delayed language skills.

These can all be addressed, although it will take a long time. What would you like the child to be like as an adult? That is the ultimate goal, but you get there in small steps, in much the same way that you would draw up and develop an Education Health and Care Plan.

Teach coping strategies

We can't change every environment or remove every trigger and the pupil will need to learn strategies that help them to cope with stressful situations. These need to be regularly modelled by an adult and practised during stress-free times. Set aside five minutes twice a day for this.

Sometimes you have to condition a desired behaviour by repeating the same phrase and showing the same visual prompt every time a given situation occurs, awarding praise and a reward for any attempt to carry it out. For example, when the computer freezes, instead of screaming, the child is taught to say: 'Help... the computer stopped,' then close their eyes and count to 1,000 while you sort it out, knowing that this will earn them an extra 10 minutes of computer time. Eventually you might want to teach them how to perform some computer restart actions themselves.

Some children with autism develop extreme phobias or fears. For instance, we had a pupil who refused to go outside if he saw a flying insect in case it was a wasp or a bee, and ended up spending all his time indoors once summer started.

This might need specific de-sensitising sessions, with advice and support from an external agency such as CAMHS.

Use reward systems and motivators

Catch the child being good – 'Good sitting!' is better than 'Stop standing up!'

Find rewards that the individual will find motivating and award these on the spot whenever an improvement is observed, building them up incrementally. I am not personally a great fan of stickers and charts, which may not hold much interest for the child. Far better to find something purposeful they really care about, no matter how odd it might appear to you.

Replace inappropriate behaviours with an alternative

Children have the right to protest, but they need to be taught how to do this in an appropriate way and rewarded when they do. Likewise, they need to be supported to develop strategies that will allow them to fulfil their needs without impinging on others.

Sometimes, you need to think outside the box.

environment to modify the triggers that you have listed already.

5. Decide on a plan and carry it out for a set period of time

You need a plan, even if it doesn't work! It helps you to feel more in control. Take one thing at a time, and be proactive, not reactive (see box below).

Whatever strategy is being trialled, it must be applied consistently, otherwise it is likely to reinforce the behaviour rather than altering it. This means that everyone who interacts with the child needs to be aware of it. That is more difficult in the fragmented environment of a secondary school, but it can be done through the use of documents like pupil passports or with the support of a teaching assistant or key worker.

6. Review and evaluate

Setting a time limit is important. There is no point in continuing with a strategy if it is not having the desired effect. When you are developing your plan, fix a date for review and evaluation.

7. If it's not working, change it and start again

Every child is unique, so it's very much a case of trial and error. It takes time to see results, so be prepared for the long



School trips require pupils to behave sensibly and responsibly

haul and don't give up. There's always something you can do... Like Robert the Bruce, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again!'

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FIND OUT MORE

- **Problem Behaviour and People with Severe Learning Disabilities: The S.T.A.R. Approach** by Eva Zarkowska and John Clements: <http://bit.ly/sc238-35>
- **Advice, resources and reading lists from the National Autistic Society:** <http://bit.ly/sc238-36>
- **Team-Teach** – award-winning training in behaviour management, including positive handling techniques, backed up with abundant resources: <http://teamteach.co.uk>

We had a little boy in Reception who had a habit of pulling down his trousers and playing with his private parts in the dinner queue. We couldn't teach him about public/private, as he wasn't ready for that. Then we came to realise that it was a displacement sensory activity – he was getting bored and needed something to do with his hands – so we gave him a task to do while he waited, like holding the door open or carrying books for a teacher.

Explain social situations, conventions, rules and consequences

Use clear language and clear visual clues. Take nothing for granted and check understanding every step of the way.

Help the child to make the 'right' choices. When they fail to do so, be consistent in applying consequences you have discussed and agreed with them in advance: 'Remember, make this choice and such-and-such will happen.'

Ensure that these consequences work for the child, not against them. For example, some children might positively welcome the prospect of

being kept in at break time, while for others it could exacerbate their problem.

Communicate effectively

Avoid the 'bleep bleep' effect created by responses like a constant 'Sh! Sh! Sh!' to urge the child to keep quiet.

Make sure that everyone who works with the child uses the same words and phrases to explain things and pitches their language at the right level. Back up verbal communication with lots of visual aids to clarify and reinforce meaning. Keep checking for gaps in understanding or misconceptions.

Just as important as your choice of words, if not more so, are your tone of voice, the pitch and volume of your speech, your intonation and the speed of your delivery – what we call paraverbal skills (as opposed to non-verbal signals, such as body language or facial expression, which children with autism find difficult to read).

Create positive situations

It is very hard to get out of a negative spiral, and

as one thing leads to another, the point is reached where meltdown seems inevitable.

The same applies in reverse. A happy person does not engage in negative behaviour. The more you can do to create a 'happy cycle', the better the child will feel, making life infinitely easier for them and for those around them.

If a crisis does appear imminent, avoid, deflect, protect... do everything in your power to intervene early before it materialises. Once the child gets sucked into a conflict spiral, they won't hear what you are saying or respond to your overtures, no matter how hard you try to appear calm and reassuring.

In summary

- Be realistic when deciding on strategies. Is the child ready for it? Is it really worth it?
- Be flexible and keep things in perspective.
- Take one step at a time.
- Be consistent – have everyone agree to a plan and make sure they stick to it.
- Be cool and calm, confident and prepared.
- Create win-win situations – it's not a battle.