

Challenging Behaviour Tip Sheet

What is “challenging behaviour”?

Behaviour may be considered challenging if it:

- Limits a person’s ability to be part of a more enriched environment
- Causes harm to the person or others
- Causes disruption to the environment

Why is the behaviour happening?

Behaviour always happens for a reason. It has a function. A person may engage in challenging behaviour for any or all of the following reasons:

- To get something. Examples include: gaining social attention, preferred items or a sensory experience.
- To escape or avoid something. Examples include: social situations, demands, people or negative sensory experiences (crowds loud noises, etc.).
- There may also be situations when the behaviour is occurring as a result of a medical or biological issue.

It is not always obvious as to why the behaviour occurs, but there are techniques that can be used to find out this information. One way is to observe events that occur *before* the behaviour occurs. Another way is to look at how others respond *after* the behaviour occurs. Also, consider the time of day, what is happening in the environment and the expectations and routines. These observations can provide insight into when and under which circumstances the behaviour occurs.

Measuring behaviour:

By measuring the behaviour, we can see if it is improving or getting worse. These observations can provide some insight into how often, and how disruptive the behaviour is to the child, youth or family.

- Duration can be measured by timing how long a behaviour lasts from start to end.
- Frequency can be measured by counting specific behaviours within a set time frame.
- Intensity of behaviours can be rated on a simple scale.

Teaching alternative behaviour:

When behaviour is considered challenging, reducing the behaviour is important. Because the behaviour meets a need for the child, teaching them an alternative behaviour to meet the same need is a key component in decreasing problem behaviours. Examples may include: teaching a child or youth to say, “It’s too loud” or “I want a break” when in a noisy environment rather than flop to the ground or run away, or teaching a child or youth to make a simple snack rather than grab whole food items.

In order to be successful, the alternative behaviour being taught should:

1. Meet the same needs as the challenging behaviour
2. Be easier to do than the challenging behaviour

Preventative strategies:

- Develop predictability by being consistent with routines and expectations
- Schedule time to engage with your child with their preferred activities
- Environmental cues such as visuals can be helpful *if* the individual understands their meaning
- Incorporate preferred activities into daily routines to motivate your child
- Offer choices, such as choice of activity, or sequence of tasks
- Mix easier expectations with more difficult expectations to build confidence and cooperation
- Be mindful of sensitivities to sensory aspects of the environment. Where possible, and within reason, minimize unpleasant items or activities
- Set up the physical environment in a way that reduces the possibility of harm to the individual and others

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