

A longitudinal study examining interventions at decreasing behaviour that challenges whilst increasing emotive communication in a pupil with autism

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Executive summary

This case study will look at the long-term interventions of a pupil with autism and related learning disabilities from when they first started at BeyondAutism schools in year 7 to leaving BeyondAutism schools in year 14. This case study will address significant barriers to learning and increasing independent skills for this pupil and how interventions were put in place to support them to increase their emotive language and subsequently reduce behaviours that challenge over time. This study will also evaluate the impact of these interventions on the long-term outcomes for this pupil moving onto post-19 provisions and through to adulthood.

Introduction

The pupil started BeyondAutism schools in year 7. After initial assessments had been completed, significant barriers to learning and independence were evident. They were seen to display behaviours that challenged in the topographical form of aggression towards others, threatening others, smearing and property destruction. Initially assessments found that the function of these behaviours that challenge were due to setting events in the pupil's environment, such as changes in routine. Alongside autism spectrum disorder, they were also later diagnosed with bipolar disorder which would see occasions of extreme excitement followed by low periods of mood.

The pupil had an advanced form of communication skills when asking for preferred items or activities, however they couldn't express how they were feeling or use appropriate strategies to support them when feeling angry or annoyed, often expressing this through behaviours that challenge. Throughout the pupil's education

at BeyondAutism schools, reduction of these behaviours that challenge was a large focus of their program as these were a significant barrier to increasing independence, with the pupil requiring consistent 1:1 support in school and 2:1 support in the community. Instances of behaviour that challenge, could require up to 4 staff members to support.

Method

After a few years of ABA intervention, the pupil's behaviour that challenge had reduced over time but still remained at a level that posed a barrier to increasing independence. At this point, behaviours that challenge could occur multiple times during the week. A reward-based system was put in place in the form of a token economy to reduce behaviours that challenged. At the same time, in January 2017, a new intervention was put in to teach the pupil about their emotions, starting with identifying how others are feeling and what they could do if they were feeling angry. This then led to in-vivo sessions, when the pupil started to show pre-cursor signs that they were feeling annoyed, staff would support the learner to identify how they were feeling and what strategies they could use in these situations. Often the pupil would talk about hypothetical events or past events that they were thinking about which would act as a pre-cursor to behaviours that challenge. A script was created for staff to have a conversation with them to talk about how they were feeling and strategies to use if feeling upset.

During this intervention, a focus of the pupil's program moving away from maintaining a school schedule, instead the day schedule became more focused on how they were feeling at a given time, and emotional management support would be given at these key stages. By being more flexible and creative with the school schedule, this allowed the pupil to have conversations with staff with how they were feeling, ultimately reducing behaviours that challenged.

As the intervention moved on, fading the schedule of the token economy was considered. Initially the reinforcement schedule was dense, every hour a token would be given and exchanged after 3 tokens for a preferred item. After a term of no behaviours that challenged this schedule was reduced to exchanging 6 tokens, or a full day with the absence of behaviour that challenged, for a highly preferred item. This taught the pupil the value of delayed reinforcement. The impact this had on behaviour that challenged was closely monitored to ensure an increase wasn't observed.

Results

As indicated in Figure 1, the frequency of behaviours that challenged in 2016 was significantly higher than after the intervention of teaching the pupil to talk about emotions and appropriate strategies to support when feeling annoyed or angry. Graph A also indicates the long term implications of the intervention, with low level frequency of behaviour that challenged across 2018. Since 2018, frequency of behaviour that challenge has reduced significantly, with no aggression towards others observed at school since November 2018.

Discussion

It is evident from this case study that the pupil has made outstanding progress to reducing their barriers to learning and being independent. In 2016, the pupil required consistent 1:1 support, often requiring up to 3 additional staff members to support during incidents of behaviour that challenged. Since introducing and teaching about emotions and strategies to support their emotional wellbeing, this has had a massive impact on their outcomes for future adulthood. On joining sixth form, the pupil has attended multiple work experience placements, been able to access the community more independently and has had the opportunity to access the sixth form hub's college provision. At college, the pupil can transition around college with reduced support and is able to learn in small groups of 2-5 pupils without additional support. The impact of this intervention of the pupil's future has opened many more opportunities and aspirations moving into adulthood and life beyond Tram House School.

Figure 1

Frequency of aggression towards others

