

Understanding and approaching behaviours that challenge

Research shows that 59% of autistic individuals engage in one or more behaviours that are perceived to challenge¹.

Definition

Behaviours that challenge are behaviours defined as 'challenging' if they are particularly intense, frequent, or lengthy in duration – such behaviours pose a risk to the person and others and can impact on quality of life.

Some behaviours that can be observed include physical aggression such as hitting or kicking, verbal aggression such as swearing or spitting, self-injurious behaviours such as biting self and risky behaviours such as running away or stripping.

Functions of behaviour (what is a behaviour communicating?)

Behaviours that challenge occur for a reason – they serve a function for the individual. Often, the behaviours occur because the individual has difficulties with communicating their wants and needs. In order to understand the behaviour, we must understand the relationship between the individual and their environment. The environment can include situations, places, people, and activities that may trigger episodes of behaviours that challenge. By changing or adjusting the environment, this can greatly reduce behaviours that challenge.

Important

If your child is unable to say they are feeling unwell or in pain, they may engage in behaviours that challenge. Medical causes must be explored and ruled out first with your child's GP and/or other medical professionals.

There are four main functions of behaviour:

Escape/avoidance

Some behaviours occur as a person wants to get away from something or avoid something completely. This is known as escape or avoidance. If a task is too hard, boring, or even too easy, behaviours that challenge may occur to communicate this. Examples of escape behaviours include blocking ears if they want to block out a loud noise, or running off when a task is difficult. Examples of avoidance may include having a tantrum when the school bus arrives. The tantrum results in the individual staying at home and avoiding a negative environmental factor such as a difficult lesson, an exam, or a bully.

Attention

A child or young adult may engage in behaviours to gain some form of social attention. The desire for social interaction is present and this can include even negative attention or reactions from peers and adults.

Tangible

A tangible function of behaviour includes gaining access to items or activities. A child may run towards, grab, or cry for items or a desired activity.

Sensory

Some behaviours are repeated by an individual because they provide some form of sensory feedback. They feel good, are satisfying and self-stimulating. Examples might include playing with hair, tapping your foot or chewing a pen.

Assessing the function

Antecedent Behaviour and Consequence or ABC forms are commonly used as a means to record instances of behaviours that challenge, writing down what happened before (antecedent), what the behaviour was, and what happened after the behaviour (consequence).

Antecedent		Behaviour (What is the behaviour?)	Consequence (What happened after the behaviour?)
Setting (Where, when, who with)	Trigger (What happened directly before the behaviour happened)		

Once you have a number of examples, look at the patterns, and review which function of behaviour it may be that the behaviour is communicating. Patterns you may identify include whether the behaviour occurs at the same time in the day, after a specific event or with a specific person.

Teaching alternative behaviours

Once we understand what a behaviour is communicating, we can teach an alternative way for your child to communicate their needs more effectively.

Escape/avoidance

They can be prompted to either ask for help, delay the task, ask for a break or ask for work that is more challenging. Prompting for a functional communication response can result in the demand being delivered at an appropriate/ individualised level. You could also review the task – is it too easy, too hard, or uncomfortable in some way? Look at ways to adjust the task to make this more accessible for your child.



Attention

If your child is communicating that they would like attention through their behaviours, proactively schedule in more of the preferred attention and show when this is available on a visual schedule. You can also teach your child alternative ways of accessing attention e.g., by tapping an adult's shoulder, saying 'excuse me' vocally or even using adult names.

Tangible

If behaviours occur when your child wants something, proactively schedule in more of the preferred item and show them when this is available on a visual schedule. They can also be prompted to request an item in an alternative way e.g., using the PECS (Picture Exchange Communication Systems) symbol for a drink, or using their vocals to say 'iPad'.

Sensory

If sensory behaviours occur, the person can be modelled an alternative, safe behaviour e.g., instead of biting their hand, they can bite a chewie. Only teach an alternative if the sensory behaviour is unsafe, e.g., head banging or self-biting.

Top tips for managing behaviours that challenge

There are a few things you can do to help manage behaviours that challenge:

- Identify the common triggers (antecedents) in the environment that you may be able to adjust or adapt
- Identify your child's preferred method of communication so that they can express themselves including their wants, needs, frustrations, discomfort or pain
- Offer your child some choice so that parts of their day include engaging with events, people and activities they prefer and gaining attention from who they want
- Develop their coping strategies for when these preferred activities, events or people are not accessible – this can include breathing or counting exercises or access to fidget toys
- Model the behaviour you want to see and recognise these positive behaviours when they occur
- Respond calmly to the behaviour; this may include not commenting on the behaviour, giving your child some space or offering them a quiet space or a regulating item or activity
- If you are worried that your child is engaging in behaviours that are perceived to challenge, seek out advice and support from friends, family and professionals if necessary.
- Please speak to your GP who may be able to refer you to another professional.

¹ Autism Research Institute, 2021 Challenging behaviors in adults with autism - Autism Research Institute