

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR



Reaching Families

What do we mean by behavioural problems?

Most children are likely to be behaving differently in the current, highly unusual circumstances. Some might be benefitting from the slower pace of life and enjoying spending more time with their families. But others, and many of those with SEND, may be finding this particularly difficult, perhaps struggling to understand why life has suddenly become so different. As a parent, you may be trying to shield them from some of the details of what is happening, but also trying to explain why they are not going to school, can't see their friends or even go out at all in some cases.

Even people who don't usually consider themselves anxious are likely to have heightened anxiety right now and often anxiety can be expressed as anger. Family members may be tense and worried and when all thrown together for long periods this can be a very volatile situation. A child or young person with challenging behaviour related to their additional needs or disabilities is likely to need particular attention at the moment.

Behaviours that can usually be coped with because everyone spends at least part of the day apart may be magnified, new challenges are likely to be occurring and those behaviours that were under control and easy to cope with before, may now be becoming difficult.

Behavioural 'problems' mean anything that makes life difficult or unpleasant for the child or young person themselves or for other family members. They may be different for different families as we all have varying triggers and levels of tolerance.

What kinds of behaviour may be causing concern?

The behaviours that cause the most concern can include:

- Physically aggressive behaviour – kicking, punching, biting, scratching, hair pulling, etc.
- Verbal aggression and swearing
- Self-harm – head banging, biting or scratching themselves, pulling hair out, etc.
- Repetitive behaviours – rocking, sounds, movements
- Damaging property/ environment
- Being unusually withdrawn and quiet
- Obsessive or ritualistic behaviours
- Vomiting
- Smearing poo or other toileting problems

Reasons for behavioural problems

You will probably have heard the phrase 'all behaviour is communication'. This is largely true. The types of challenging behaviours listed above are ways in which a child or young person, who is unable to understand and express their own thoughts and emotions, can tell us that they are unhappy. As parent carers it is our job to interpret what they are struggling to tell us and try to put things as right as we can for them.

In the current circumstances 'putting things right' may be a great challenge. Providing the right environment for each child, if a family is confined indoors together, will be extremely difficult and there will be inevitable compromises. Some children will behave in increasingly provocative ways until you are forced to respond - often called 'attention seeking'. It could perhaps more accurately be called attention 'needing' and some children will seem to enjoy even negative attention.



UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

In these situations behaviour can get more and more out of control and extreme until you are forced to respond. It can easily become a 'battle for power'. Unless you break into this negative cycle by reacting differently and establishing alternative ways of behaving it is likely to continue and even escalate. The older the child is, the more difficult it can be to do this. For some children it may be helpful to set clearer boundaries and expectations and for others, explicitly demonstrating alternative ways of dealing with frustrating situations is the way forward.

Checking for any physical or sensory reasons for challenging behaviours first may help. Are they hungry/ thirsty/ uncomfortable or in pain? Are they bored or unstimulated or experiencing sensory overload (too much noise/ activity/ smell). (See also [Reaching Families Sensory Issues fact sheet](#)).

Another common reason for hard to manage behaviours can include difficulties with regulating emotions. A child can become so overwhelmed with feelings they can't control or understand that they lash out at others as a way of coping or driving people away. Additionally, some children can have a very low tolerance to frustration. This means that they can respond with anger or aggression if frustrated rather than exploring other ways of solving problems. Jumping in to help small children too quickly can make this worse and we need to encourage the patience to persevere and work things out for themselves in age and ability appropriate ways. Helping children to do things, rather than doing things for them for example. This can also give them a sense of achievement and pride.

Ways to help support good behaviours

Keeping children busy and occupied can be the best way of heading off unwanted behaviours – you are probably being swamped with ideas of things to do at the moment and it can be difficult to find the right things for your circumstances. You may find it helpful to provide a structure and plan for the day, using a visual timetable. Build in a variety of activities including school type work, fun and games, physical activity and practical things that need doing anyway.

- Educators talk about 'flow' and this is quite an important subject. How often do squabbles amongst siblings happen on the transitions between activities? When one game finishes and before they have decided what to do next? When finishing a game and coming to eat a meal? Don't be afraid to organise their time, many children will miss the structure of school.
- Keeping busy is important – dig out old board games, Lego (and other construction toys), card games, jigsaw puzzles, reading – books or listening to stories read aloud.
- Keeping up some routines may help. Without being too rigid, regular times for getting up and going to bed, mealtimes, washing and dressing, playing and exercising may sound simple but are likely to make things seem more 'normal'.
- If you have more than one child, build in times when it is their turn to choose what to do. Don't be afraid of having written or visual symbol rules for those who can understand them.
- You may have relaxed the usual rules on screen time to some extent, but preserve them in the evenings and at night time.
- Encourage all those things you don't usually have time to do – Yoga, mindfulness, learning to relax, etc.
- Distraction and diversion are first steps in an escalating situation. Divert attention away from the source of the frustration if possible. You may have heard of 'the Anger Mountain'. This describes the way in which anger can build up before reaching a peak or explosion. Looking out for triggers or signs that anger is building and intervening to distract and de-escalate on the way up the mountain can be a way of avoiding an explosion of anger at the peak.
- Giving time to calm down, removing the child (or sometimes yourself) from the situation is better than escalating by arguing back or even responding sometimes. Always try to restore calm and ask the questions later when things are less heated. Asking 'why?' rarely produces useful answers.



UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

- Children may be used to using colour codes such as green, amber, red at school. If they are able to notice and tell you they are at 'amber' you can ask "what will help get us back to green?" or "what will stop us moving on to red?" You can also use this technique to discuss 'What we could have done differently?' after a display of temper or loss of control when a child has calmed down.
- Don't underestimate the power of relaxing music. If you don't usually listen to classical music, now might be the time to discover new stations on the radio.

In Summary

1. Think about the sensory environment and make adaptations where possible.
2. Consider child's ability to emotionally regulate. Encourage by co-regulating - describe calmly what is happening and explore and label feelings without provoking further. Involve child as far as possible in considering what would make them feel better, what would help? Burn off excess energy by taking regular exercise. Teach strategies for calming down.
3. If easily frustrated – encourage varied activities for a short time, with frequent changes and rotation and slightly extend each time. Use a timer and visual timetable to give structure. Now, Next, Then for example.
4. Encourage positivity and a problem solving approach – How can we make things better? What will help? Find at least one good thing to be grateful for, one thing that went well to offer praise for every day.

Further reading and useful links

- **NSPCC** - Varied guidance for families on surviving the lockdown: www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/coronavirus-advice-support-children-families-parents
- **Challenging Behaviour Foundation** - information, email and telephone support during the lockdown: www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/information/covid19information
- **MENCAP** - information guides for carers looking after adults with a learning disability and challenging behaviour: www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/displaying-challenging-behaviour
- **Adoption UK** – a guide to managing aggressive behaviour: www.adoptionuk.org/shop/adoption-today-supplement-trauma-fuelled-violence
- **Family Lives** - information and advice: www.familylives.org.uk/advice/primary/behaviour/challenging-behaviour
- **Kooth** - information and counselling service for young people: www.kooth.com
- **Reaching Families** - ebook versions of our two popular parent guides, Making Sense of it All and Making Sense of Adult Life (14+): www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/ebooks.html

Our thanks to independent trainer and consultant, Jane Cross, for her help in producing this factsheet.

