Challenging behaviour and autism: prevention and management
Learning outcomes: to understand...

- Why prevention is crucial
- Key strategies for prevention
- How to ‘replace’ challenging behaviour through:
  - teaching new skills that provide the same pay-offs for the child — but in an acceptable way
  - developing coping and self-management skills
  - encouraging incompatible and alternative behaviour.
- Practical considerations when using rewards and sanctions
1. Understand the autism: looking below the waterline

2. Make sense of the behaviour: ask the right questions
   - Settings
   - Triggers
   - Results

3. Stop and think — what does it mean:
   - What results is he/she trying to achieve?
   - What does it say about how he/she is feeling?

4. Plan for prevention

5. Replace the problem: teach new skills — ‘grow’ other behaviour

6. Change the results of the behaviour
Step 4

Plan for prevention
Plan for prevention

- The first priority is ‘fixing’ the environment, **not** fixing the child

- Work *round* the autism — work *with* the autism

- What’s good for youngsters on the autism spectrum is good for a wide range of youngsters with SEN
Activity 4.1

Refer back to the case studies on John and Philip and Activity 3.5

• What changes to the routines and environment might reduce these difficulties?

• Are there any ways in which some aspects of the situation might be avoided altogether?
Prevention: build an autism-friendly environment (1)

- Add structure + predictability
- Answer the key questions — visually*
- Pick your battles
  - Does the child need to be exposed to a specific demand or situation RIGHT NOW
  - Watch out for your own rigidity
  - Reintroduce the child into the problem setting in very small steps
  - Short exposures to begin with — exit before stress or behaviour difficulties

* Make the environment replace verbal nagging
Prevention: build an autism-friendly environment (2)

• Simplify/clarify expectations and rules:
  o specific + explicit
  o accessible format — visual?
  o personally relevant (if possible)

• Address physical and sensory issues
Prevention: when push comes to shove, watch your language!

Less is **always** more
- Leave time and space for processing
- Remember: as stress goes up, understanding goes down
- Keep it short and simple

Get to the point
- ‘*First...then*’ reminders
- **Dos** not **don’ts**
- Don’t get personal — stick to general rules

Avoid the clutter
- Save the explanations and reasoning
- Keep non-verbal communications under control

Try visual cues
Pick your battles

Use visual structure to ‘work around’ challenges but sometimes it’s best to avoid some situations entirely.

Weigh up costs and benefits (to child or young person, peers and staff).

Reintroduce the child or young person carefully:

• limited exposure – be clear how long child is expected to participate
• withdraw after the agreed interval – even when he or she is coping well
• introduce relaxation strategy
• raise demands gradually – small steps.
Activity 4.2: building in the ‘good stuff’

Discuss with the person sitting next to you:

• The times when you most feel in need of chocolate/a glass of wine/a cigarette/a break.

• Does this tend to be:
  • When life is good and you feel energised or upbeat?
  • Or when you feel stressed, down or worn-out?
Prevention: building in the ‘good stuff’

• Individuals on the autism spectrum are much more likely to be:
  – isolated/lonely
  – bullied
  – anxious/depressed
  – stressed.

  Much higher incidence of mental health difficulty in adolescence

• Keep stress low and mood positive:
  – regular, scheduled access to special interests
  – give ‘down time’
  – expanded interests or positive experiences.

• What is the challenge for us?
1. Understand the autism: looking below the waterline

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   - What results is he/she trying to achieve?
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5. Replace the problem: teach new skills — ‘grow’ other behaviour

6. Change the results of the behaviour
Step 5

Replace the problem
Replacing the problem: teach and encourage new skills

- Deciding what behaviour we want to **stop** is the easy part
- The **harder** part is deciding what we want them to do instead
Replace the problem

Better ways to get the same result

• To communicate needs and get them met
• To resolve difficulties

Coping skills

• Learning to cope with change (using the schedule)
• Exit strategies (adult-cued) and asking for help
• Developing an emotional tool box

Growing other behaviour

• Behaviour that is incompatible
• Intervals when the problem doesn’t happen
Activity 4.3

Consider the child or young person in your setting whose behaviour you explored in Activity 3.4 (iceberg activity 2)

• Can you identify any new skills that could be taught or encouraged, that would help replace the problem behaviour?

• Can you think of any activities that could improve his/her wellbeing?
1. Understand the autism: looking below the waterline

2. Make sense of the behaviour: ask the right questions
   - Settings
   - Triggers
   - Results

3. Stop and think — what does it mean:
   - What results is he/she trying to achieve?
   - What does it say about how he/she is feeling?

4. Plan for prevention

5. Replace the problem: teach new skills — ‘grow’ other behaviour

6. Change the results of the behaviour
Step 6

Change the results of the behaviour
Using rewards and sanctions
Change the results of behaviour

Motivation *doesn’t* make the impossible possible — it just makes the possible more probable

In the case of youngsters on the autism spectrum:

- motivation may not be the main issue
- lack of understanding or skill is likely to play a significant part
- stress and anxiety make large contributions
- consider motivation **after** interventions to address these other issues are in place.
Any experiences of punishments that work?

What punishment won’t do

• Tell the child what we do want them to do
• Teach them how to do it

Punishment (and reward) works by influencing motivation

• Motivation doesn’t make the impossible possible — it just makes the possible more probable
Punishment: if, when and how

When:
  • preventive strategies are in place
  • new skills and behaviours are being targeted

If the pupil:
  • ‘knows better’ — has the skills and understanding to behave differently
  • understands what behaviour we do want from him/her
  • is likely to understand and remember the link

How:
  • use natural consequences if possible
  • clear visual prompts about the rule and the sanction.
What about reward systems that work?

Change is hard (early steps are often hardest). Youngsters need:

• rewards for improving
• rewards for trying
• rewards for coping with things they find difficult.
Rewards and incentives

A reward must reward and motivate

• Observe, ask
• Consider the weird and wonderful
• Often need to be tangible and linked to interests (certificates, etc., may not work)
• May be less responsive to praise and recognition

Rewards on schedules

• Immediate, consistent and frequent to start
• Slowly build in delays and reduce frequency

Offer choice and variety
Rewards - practicalities

• Make targets attainable to start with
• Increase demands slowly
• With ‘token systems’:
  o ‘carry over’ tokens if standard not achieved
  o if practical, link number of tokens to amount of reward — make sure every one has a value.
• Use visual systems
  o to remind of the choices available
  o to remind what he is ‘working towards’
  o to help bridge the gap.
In the longer term, we want new skills to produce better outcomes than those achieved by the challenging behaviour.

The aim is for external rewards to no longer be needed and that better outcomes make the skill self-reinforcing.
Activity 4.4

Refer back to the child or young person you considered in Activity 4.3.

What incentives could you build in to reward the individual and motivate him to use the new skills you have taught?

How could you plan for the individual to monitor his own success in using the new skills rather than the old behaviour?
Finally…

• It is rare for challenging behaviour to be ‘fixed’ by a one-off intervention.

• Progress may be gradual and erratic.

• Expect setbacks.

• You will need plenty of persistence, resilience and optimism!