

## Managing Your Child's Behaviour: A Parent Guide

### Who is this booklet for?

This booklet may be helpful for anyone finding it challenging to manage a child's behaviour. However, it may be particularly helpful for parents and carers whose children are unlikely to be able to understand or talk about their behaviour. This might be because of their age, a learning disability, or other communication difficulty.

### What do we mean by challenging behaviour?

By challenging behavior we mean any behaviour that causes a lot of concern or distress. This may include behaviours that:

- Could cause injury to your child (e.g. headbanging, running away, eating inedible objects)
- Could cause injury to yourself, another person, or property (e.g. kicking, biting, throwing things)
- Causes a lot of distress for another reason (e.g. spitting, seeming to enjoy when you show distress, being unable to soothe a child who is in clear distress)

### Why does my child show challenging behaviour?

Any child (or adult!) can show challenging behaviour. However, challenging behaviour is more common in children with a learning disability and/or other forms of neurodiversity. For example:

- Children with ADHD are more likely to find it difficult to manage their impulses
- Children with ASD can be more likely to show sensory seeking behaviours (which can lead to behaviours like headbanging), or to become overloaded by sensory information (e.g. noisy environments) which could lead to meltdowns.
- Children with a language delay or learning disability may not have another way to communicate their needs

It's important to remember that in most situations, children are not trying to be difficult, or to cause you or others distress. Challenging behaviours usually fall in one of two categories:

1. **Behaviours can be a way that children have learnt to get their needs met, especially if they find it difficult to communicate in other ways.** This might mean the behavior increases something a child likes, or removes something they find negative. This is the main focus of this booklet.
2. **Behaviours may be a sign that a child is completely emotionally overwhelmed, sometimes described as a 'meltdown'.** No one in this level of distress would be able to think or act rationally. The advice in this booklet may help with understanding the possible cause of meltdowns, which could help with prevention. However, in the moment the most important thing is to help your child to feel calm and safe. For further information on

meltdowns and emotional wellbeing see the resource section at the end of the booklet.

### **How can I manage my child's behaviour?**

Managing challenging behaviour can be difficult. This is not only because of the distress the behaviour can cause, but also because there are lots of different reasons that a child might show the same behaviour. Some general tips that can be helpful for managing challenging behaviour are below. If you try these things and find you are still struggling with your child's behaviour, the second section of this booklet talks about next steps.

#### **General Tips for Managing Challenging Behaviour in the Moment**

- 1. Try to keep as outwardly calm as possible:** This isn't easy, but often the most helpful thing you can do in response to challenging behaviour is trying to keep calm. Children pick up on our emotions, and being angry or very anxious can lead behaviour to escalate. Consider your tone of voice, eye contact, and when safe to do so allow your child some physical space, to help your child feel safe and contained.

Where possible it can be helpful to 'tag team parent' during challenging behaviour, especially if the behaviour has been directed towards you. This would mean another parent or appropriate adult stays with the child and helps manage the behaviour, to allow you to have a breather before needing to respond.

It is understandable that managing challenging behaviour can be distressing and frustrating, and it's important that you feel able to talk about this if you want to whether this is with a partner, friend, or professional.

- 2. Try to keep things simple and avoid increasing demands during challenging behaviour:** It can be easy to 'over talk' when a child is showing challenging behaviour, for example trying to explain why a behaviour is unacceptable. However, this is likely to be overwhelming for a child who is unable to understand, or is in significant distress. Try to keep talking to a minimum and where possible redirect your child's attention. For example, walking with them to a safe place, like a bedroom where it is quiet, and there may be comforting items.
- 3. Prioritise the safety of your child and others:** Any physical restriction should only be used as a last resort. However, there may be small changes around home that could improve safety and make it easier to manage challenging behaviour. For example, if your child tends to head bang where possible avoid door and drawer handles at head height, or considering ways to cover these and the corners of furniture.

## **General Tips for Promoting Positive Behaviour**

Below are a couple of key general tips, for more advice please see the 'Early Support Booklet' linked in the bottom of the booklet.

- 1. Praise and encourage positive behaviour:** Make sure to give lots of encouragement to positive behaviours. You know your child best and what they find most rewarding, this might be lots of attention from you, time with a favourite toy, or another activity they enjoy.
- 2. Consistency:** As far as possible aim for everyone caring for your child to use the same approach to managing behaviour, and the same rules r.e. what is and is not acceptable. If you have agreed a consequence make sure you follow through with this.

## **Next Steps**

If you are still struggling with challenging behaviour, the next step is to try and develop an understanding of why a particular behaviour might be happening. This isn't always easy, but if you can work out why a behaviour is happening, it is easier to do things that could make the behaviour happen less often.

Some guidance on how to do this is given below, but you might need support from a professional to help developing a plan for your child. Further details of more support are given at the bottom of the page.

## **Understanding Challenging Behaviour – ABC Charts**

The first step to understanding possible reasons for challenging behaviour is keeping a record of the behaviour. The most common way to do this is to complete ABC charts. An ABC chart is a way of tracking your child's behaviour, it allows us to look at patterns in when certain behaviours happen and how we and others respond. A guide and example of these is given at the end of the booklet.

Some important things to notice can be:

- Time of day
- Where are you? (e.g. is it familiar to your child or different, noisy or quiet)
- Who is around?
- What happened shortly before the behaviour? (e.g. were any demands made of your child, did something change such as you leaving the room)
- How does your child seem just before and during the behaviour? Do they seem frustrated, nervous, or quite calm?
- How did you or others react?
- Was anything given or taken away from your child?
- Did the reaction help, make the behaviour worse, or no difference?

Doing this can be a lot of work, but it is surprising how much more we can notice when we put things down on paper. We're also a lot more likely to be able to notice patterns in behaviour if we are able to look back at events when we feel more calm.

The most common reasons for challenging behaviour are described below. If you have managed to keep records of challenging behaviour, it can be helpful to sit down with this list and see if any seem to fit with your child. Examples of things that might help are given for each reason.

### **Common Reasons for Challenging Behaviour**

- 1. Physical Discomfort:** It is first helpful to make sure your child's behaviour is not because of a physical or medical reason. A common example of this is pain e.g. head banging may happen due to ear infections, headaches, and teething.

*What you might notice:* Behaviours get worse at times you know your child is unwell and improve when they are feeling better. For some children, you might notice behaviours are worse at times when your child is not distracted.

*What to try:* The first step would be to offer usual treatment or relief for these problems, or discuss with a doctor if necessary.

- 2. To Escape or Avoid:** Challenging behaviour can be a way for children to communicate they are unhappy or want to leave a situation. Because challenging behaviour is difficult to manage, it often leads to a situation or task being avoided. For example, in school if a child shows challenging behaviour they may be removed from the classroom. For a child who is becoming overwhelmed because they do not understand the lesson or the room is too noisy, the behavior can allow them to escape these things.

*What you might notice:*

Challenging behaviour might start shortly before or during a disliked activity, and/or improves when this stops. You may also notice that your child shows signs of feeling frustrated or nervous before the challenging behaviour.

*What you could try:*

- Where possible give your child a limited choice (e.g. of two different activities etc) 'Would you like to draw or to play outside'. This can help children feel like they have more control.
- If you know of particular activities that your child dislikes, but are needed, try to space this out as much as possible through a day or week, and follow them with a preferred activity
- Use visual timetables or 'Now...Next...' boards with a timer so children know when the activity will end and what they will be doing next

- Try to find a different way for your child to let you or others know they are unhappy or dislike something, this might be using a visual card. Resources to help with aiding communication with images are given at the end of the booklet.

**3. Sensory Needs:** Some behaviours can be a way for children to increase sensory stimulation. Examples of this can be head banging or putting inedible objects in their mouth.

*What you might notice:*

These behaviours may happen even at times when your child is seeming relatively calm (although they may increase if distressed), and whether or not you or others are around. Behaviours might decrease during activities that provide sensory stimulation.

*What you could try:*

Try to find a different way to meet your child's sensory needs that is not harmful. Examples include certain toys (e.g. those with lights), food or safe to chew items, some children like cuddles or massage. Items like weighted blankets can also help some children, but it is very important that these are matched to your child's size so always get professional guidance before buying these. Fledglings is one non-profit shop which sells many items to help with sensory needs: <https://fledglings.org.uk/>

**4. Increasing Time with/Attention from Others:** Understandably, challenging behaviour tends to receive a quick response from others. This means it can become a way to have more time with you or others. This can be particularly challenging for children who are not able to understand the need to wait. Sometimes it might be about the type of attention as well as the time. It is natural to respond to challenging in a more emotional way, for example our tone of voice might change or our movements may be more exaggerated. For some children this can be exciting or amusing. This is often especially distressing for parents as it can feel children are enjoying their distress.

*What you might notice:*

Behaviours become worse when your child seems bored, you or others leave or have not interacted with your child for a while.

*What you could try:*

- Make sure your child has regular opportunities for positive attention from you and others
- Work towards a different way for your child to get your attention, for example a picture card or gesture
- Offer lots of positive attention. When your child has managed time without you (e.g. whilst on the phone) or has used a different more positive way to get your attention, give this lots of praise and

attention. For children that seem to enjoy emotional responses, it may help to use an exaggerated happy response.

- Use 'Now...Next...' boards and/or visual timetables with a timer to help your child know if you might be less available and for how long
- If you are going to be less available try to give your child an activity or toy you know they enjoy (e.g. whilst driving if safe to do so, phone call)

- 5. To Get/Request Things:** Challenging behaviour can be a way of a child letting you know that they want something; this may be food, drink, a particular toy etc.

*What you might notice:*

You may be most likely to notice this through the way you and others react, and if this works. For example, if behaviour improves when a child has a snack or a drink, they might be trying to let you know that they are hungry or thirsty. Or if there is a favourite thing that is saved as a 'last resort' a child might learn challenging behaviour is a way to get time with the toy.

*What you could try:*

- Support your child to be able to let you know their needs, this might involve using visual systems like PECS (more information in the resource section). If these are used, give your child what they have asked for as soon as possible, and praise or another small reward.
- Where possible try to predict needs, for example making sure food and drink are offered regularly
- When safe and appropriate for your child keep things where they are able to help themselves
- Plan time in with any preferred things (e.g. favourite toy) if it can't always be available

### **Where to go for Further Support**

Some helpful resources are given below. If you are continuing to struggle with your child's behaviour, speak to your child's paediatrician or GP who could consider referring you to meet with a psychologist or to further support through other local organisations.

The Early Support Booklet linked below offers further general advice on managing children's behaviour. Pages 13-14 give instructions and an example of an ABC chart: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/early-support-information-behaviour>

The following information comes from the National Autistic Society. However, the information may be helpful for any children experiencing meltdowns or who could benefit from visual communication supports:

Meltdowns

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx>

Challenging Behaviour

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour.aspx>

Using visual supports to aid communication:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/visual-supports.aspx>

**Further information regarding sensory differences:**

<https://www.cambscommunityservices.nhs.uk/cambridgeshire-children's-occupational-therapy/activities-strategies-to-help/sensory-differences---online-learning>

If you live in Cambridgeshire and feel you need some further help with managing your child's behaviour, you can also access further support through Early Help. Early Help offer both individual support and parenting courses (e.g. the Stepping Stones programme for parents of children aged 2-12years old with additional needs), for further details please see their website below:

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/parenting-and-family-support/accessing-support-for-your-family>

If you have found you are struggling more with your child's behaviour in the current situation with COVID-19, this video provides useful suggestions for managing lockdown for those supporting neurodiverse children:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXPtqmHKNoE&app=desktop>