

Developing Behaviour Programmes for Children with Autism

Before beginning any approach to directly intervene in challenging behaviour displayed by children with an ASD, it is essential that you ensure the behaviour does not have an appropriate purpose and is not being triggered by issues associated with the core symptoms of ASD – see advice sheets ‘identifying triggers of challenging behaviour’ and ‘understanding the cause of challenging behaviour’ at www.AutismWales.org/en/parents-carers/information-for-an-autistic-child/advice-sheets/.

If the behaviour is not appropriate or desirable you may need to start some work around changing the behaviour.

When implementing a behavioural approach, remember the principle.

- If you reward a behaviour you will see more of it

This works for both positive and negative behaviours, for example if you reward a positive behavior with a treat, the child will be more likely to repeat the behavior. However, if you have a child that dislikes school, and then you reward aggression by sending the child home from school, the child will be more likely to repeat the behavior to obtain the reward.

Sometimes, the ‘reward’ for a behaviour is the attention you give to it. This includes negative attention such as shouting, statements of disappointment or lengthy attempts at problem solving.

In an individual with ASD the picture can be even more confusing, for example if the individual prefers to spend time alone, using ‘time out’ as a punishment could be rewarding. It is therefore important that you take the individual into consideration when deciding on how to give or remove rewards for a behaviour. When managing an individual with ASD’s behaviour, it is important that you adapt your communication as discussed earlier.

When trying to decrease an unwanted behaviour, it is important that you teach a new way of behaving appropriately at the same time. This will prevent other negative behaviours developing. To do this you will need to remove all rewards from the unwanted behaviour and look for ways to reward a behaviour that is wanted.

For example, ignore the individual when they interrupt you talking by asking for something, but respond immediately if they say ‘excuse me’. In this situation the individual will learn that they will only get the response they are seeking by saying ‘excuse me’ first.

Use your ABC chart to help to identify the unwanted behaviour, and ensure you have clarity about this before you start. Many behaviours are grouped together and you need to be sure you are addressing one at a time. For example, if a child is frequently refusing to comply with requests and kicking out at others during refusal, do you want to work on complying with requests? Or on reducing the aggression?

Be sure to recognise your own thoughts and feelings around the issue, and ensure they are not impacting on your management of the behaviour.

In order to help the learning of new behaviours it is important that your response is clear and consistent, you must respond in the same way each time, and ensure that others are following the same plan too.

Planning behavioural interventions for children with an ASD can be complex and implementing them can be challenging. Parents and carers should seek professional advice and support around this to ensure that programmes developed and implemented in an appropriate way.

An example of a behavioural management plan might be:

Problem: Daisy refuses to clear up her toys at the end of play, and when asked lies on the floor and screams.

Usual consequence of behaviour: mum clears toys away instead.

Supportive interventions: Daisy has been shown picture cards to ensure she knows what is expected of her. Mum has also demonstrated 'tidying up' but there has been no change. We are confident that Daisy understand what is expected of her and how to complete the task.

Desired behaviour: putting toys away.

Undesired behaviours: refusal to comply with request; screaming.

Behaviour Plan:

Daisy will be given a reward chart. She will earn a star initially for putting one toy away so that she achieves the reward. This will gradually be extended to two, three toys and so on until Daisy earns the reward for clearing all toys away.

Mum will ignore the 'undesired behaviours' (as long as is safe to do so) and carry on with other activities in the house as if the screaming was not happening.

(an advice sheet on how to use reward programmes is available at www.AutismWales.org/en/parents-carers/information-for-an-autistic-child/advice-sheets/)