

The Challenge of Challenging Behaviour



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The most frequent complaint of parents with children on the autism spectrum is that other people don't understand why their children do what they do. The disapproving glares in the supermarket, the mumbled comments about poor parenting or the child needing "a good smack" show that other people often don't understand why challenging behaviour happens and what to do about it. There are varying levels of understanding across the professional community too. This is why Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) professionals^{1,2} are reviewing the understanding of behaviour and support and promoting a modern evidence-based description that aims to help families, services and even behaviour specialists themselves.

The Aspect PBS team were inspired to review our own definition of PBS. We have aimed for the definition to be relevant and easy to read, to address common questions that occur and to embody the key values and principles of PBS so that we can build empathy for individuals on the autism spectrum and promote a positive behaviour culture. As part of 'Aspect Practice' we are also sharing our evidence-informed work around Australia with people with ASD, their families, communities and organisations committed to improving the lives of people with autism. We wanted to start a discussion and we welcome any feedback from the PBS and autism communities.

What is challenging behaviour?

Challenging behaviour is persistent behaviour that causes difficulties and limits a person's ability to have a good life. It's called 'challenging' because it challenges everyone who supports the person to understand why it is happening and to work together to find a solution.

Challenging Behaviour – why does it happen?

Challenging behaviour is part of an *interaction* between three things (1) an individual, their current and past experiences and what they have been taught (2) the other people in their lives and (3) the environments, communities and cultures they live in. We want to encourage a new culture where there is a careful use of language around behaviours of concern. We encourage parents and professionals to recognise that the ownership of challenging behaviour is shared among all elements involved in the interaction not just the individual. For example, it is more accurate to say

"there is challenging behaviour" than to say *"he/she has challenging behaviour"*.

Just as people who use a wheelchair have a right to everyday environments that meet their specific needs and allow them to access life freely and fully, people on the autism spectrum are the same. We know that providing a predictable day that allows for choice and control and gives access to preferred activities, using strategies to support communication, social and sensory needs, having well organised and structured environments and learning activities that build on a person's strengths are all part of autism-friendly environments. We wouldn't say that a person in a wheelchair has 'challenging behaviour' for not walking up the stairs. In a similar way we should focus on providing autism-friendly environments where there is challenging behaviour rather than labelling or blaming the person.

Challenging behaviour is sometimes viewed as a deliberate refusal to do what is asked and the punitive strategies that can be used in these situations may make the situation worse. It is important to remember that autism is a complex and varied condition. There may be many reasons why the person *can't* do what is asked, other than that the person deliberately *won't* do it. This can lead to misunderstanding about the causes of and solutions to challenging behaviour and those muttered comments in the supermarket.

What is PBS?

There are some 'quick fix' approaches that aim to stop challenging behaviours – a student is stopped from hitting peers at school once they are expelled, a person cannot take food from others at a cafe if they are locked in their home and don't go out, or they can't scratch their arms if they are forced to wear gloves. Although these strategies do stop challenging behaviour, they do not explain why it was happening and can result in people with disabilities having poor quality of life - as well as their human rights denied. One goal for PBS is to improve the quality of life for all involved and to respect personal human rights. We understand that providing good quality support for people on the autism spectrum requires additional knowledge that is beyond everyday parenting or teaching, as well as a range of supports. Without this additional knowledge and support (and despite everyone's best efforts) it is possible for there to be a mismatch between a person's support needs and



what is being provided to them. This mismatch can increase the likelihood of challenging behaviour. Unfortunately, there are often no long term 'quick fixes' for challenging behaviour and PBS is an approach that requires commitment and time for results to be sustained.

PBS is based in the science of learning and there is strong evidence for PBS as an effective approach for challenging behaviour. PBS is both *positive* and *proactive*. Positive means increasing and strengthening helpful behaviours through 'reinforcement' (not using punishment or negative consequences to reduce the challenge). Proactive means anticipating where things may go wrong and preventing them from happening rather than just reacting when things do go wrong.

Collaboration & coordination: A first step in PBS is to build collaboration and consultation with all of those involved. Each person has unique knowledge they can contribute to understanding the situation and the development and implementation of consistent strategies once these have been agreed on. PBS recognises that families are life-time supports and experts on their children and should be at the centre of all communication and decision-making.

Assessment: The Aspect team do an assessment of a person's quality of life, individual strengths, abilities and support needs and how well these are being met and can identify which services may be helpful in a particular situation. The team also completes an investigation into the challenging behaviour, often through observation and data collection. PBS understands that all challenging behaviour has a purpose or reason (this is called the 'function'); it is not random or meaningless. It is important to complete an assessment of the behaviour to work out *why* it is happening and then to teach an appropriate behaviour that replaces the challenging behaviour and gets the same identified need met. *It is essential to complete an assessment before agreeing on strategies.*

Intervention: Following the assessment PBS develops a support plan that has a number of parts. These include: developing an environment that minimises and removes the things that make challenging behaviour more likely to occur, as well as promoting positive behaviours; developing and reinforcing an appropriate behaviour that replaces the challenging one (this might be a new communication skill,

learning to wait or to manage anger appropriately); a plan to respond to the challenging behaviour and teaching other new skills as needed. The intervention plan needs to be implemented consistently across settings over time and its effectiveness reviewed and evaluated.

Who can help?

A range of services and supports exist to help individuals on the autism spectrum, their parents, teachers and others to get the information and strategies they need. Ultimately, Positive Behaviour Support is done by the individual, their family members, carers and teachers and other staff who see the person every day; but there may also need to be specialist support. There are a range of types of services which can assist where there is challenging behaviour and this depends on each individual situation. Aspect has developed a series of resources and checklists to help families and support services to make the most of Positive Behaviour Support and these are available on the Aspect website. www.aspect.org.au/pbs

We hope this information helps with understanding challenging behaviour from a Positive Behaviour Support perspective and that parents/caregivers will be less concerned by looks and comments in the supermarket and other misunderstandings.

Key messages

- PBS is a scientific approach that aims to protect a person's rights and to promote quality of life for them and their families
- Discipline is often interpreted as punishment. True 'discipline' is the hard work of PBS that is evidence based and promotes positive learning.
- Challenging behaviour results from an interaction between a person, those who support them and the environments they live in. It is no-one's 'fault' but often reflects a mismatch between a person's needs and what is provided
- All behaviour has a purpose or 'function'. It is important to work out what this is
- PBS is different from general parenting approaches or popular behaviour management programs in that it is purely positive and carries out an individualised comprehensive assessment of the individual and the behaviour and closely matches the intervention to the assessment considering the function
- PBS means we work positively and proactively
- Team work and consultation is an important part of PBS
- It includes an investigation or assessment *before* working out our individual support plan
- We implement our support plan consistently across settings and over time.

References

1. Gore et al. (2014). *Definition and scope for positive behavioural support. International Journal of Positive Behaviour Support* 3,2, British Institute of Learning Disability
2. *Personal communication (March 2014) with Glen Dunlap & Don Kincaid at the Association for Positive Behaviour Support in the US.*