

*Helping
you to help
your child*

Understanding & Responding to Challenging Behaviour

Simple, actionable ideas for parents, carers
and other supporting adults



The first step
to changing
behaviour is to
try to really
understand it

Introduction

Behaving in a socially acceptable way can be tricky for some children some of the time. In this guide, we'll consider first how and why to look beyond the label of 'bad behaviour' to gain a better understanding of what is going on for our child. Then we'll consider how we can respond in an appropriate way and support our child to reduce the frequency and intensity of tricky behaviours.

Towards the back of this guide, you'll find a behaviour journal and a behaviour change plan. These are designed to be printable and copiable; feel free to copy, use and share them.

Cherry-pick the ideas that you think might work for you and give them a go. You can always revisit others later if you need to.

Good luck!

Pooky x

Be Inquisitive

Before we can attempt to impact on a child's behaviour, we need to try and understand why the behaviour is occurring.



In many instances, the behaviour can be seen as meeting a need.

If we can identify what need the behaviour is meeting then we are halfway towards finding some practical ways forwards.

- What Need is being Met? -

Attention

Basic need
e.g. food /
drink

Escape

Sensory
regulation

Care or
connection

To be
heard

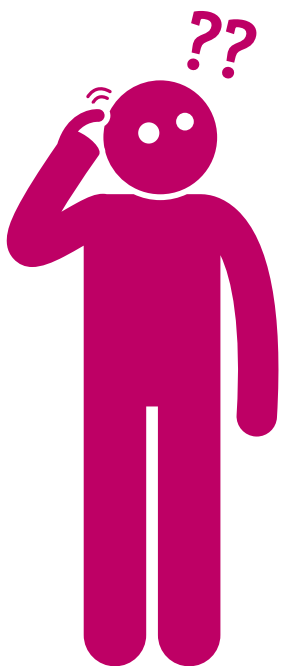


What need is being met?

It's important that we don't judge behaviour simply at face value. Two behaviours might look very similar but serve a very different purpose, whilst two different-looking behaviours might serve the same aim.

The simplest and best way I have found of working out what need is being met is simply to keep repeating the question 'why?'.

This idea is based on the '5 whys' approach to manufacturing pioneered by Toyota who found that by continuing to ask the question why (rather like a relentless toddler), we often come to a simple answer that can be acted upon.



Toyota's "5 whys" approach – a worked example:

– Why did the robot stop? –

The circuit has overloaded, causing a fuse to blow.

– Why is the circuit overloaded? –

There was insufficient lubrication on the bearings, so they locked up.

– Why was there insufficient lubrication? –

The oil pump on the robot is not circulating sufficient oil.

– Why is the pump not circulating sufficient oil? –

The pump intake is clogged with metal shavings.

– Why is the intake clogged with metal shavings? –

Because there is no filter on the pump.

Address the Right Issue

By taking a similarly inquisitive approach to children's behaviour, we can often gain a much clearer understanding of the issue and therefore develop a more appropriate response.

If we can talk to the child at a time of calm, then often they can work through the five whys with us; otherwise we can take a moment to explore this with other adults who've observed the behaviour.

It's important to do this at a time of calm – not when both child and adult tempers are flared up by a recent incident. Try to take a supportive, non-judgemental and genuinely inquisitive approach to the behaviour and remember that behaviour is not always a response to the immediate environment but could, in fact, be the result of what has happened in the preceding hours.

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Jekyll and Hyde?

Many parents of neuro-diverse children report that their children meltdown almost immediately upon reaching home, whilst their teachers report they have behaved well all day at school.

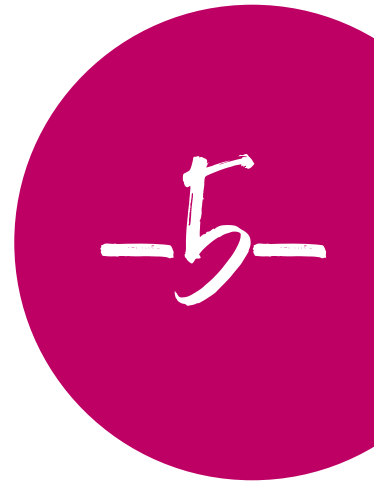
Parents sometimes interpret this as a sign of something being done wrong at home, when in fact it is likely that the child has worked incredibly hard to act 'normal' throughout the school day as they know that this is what is expected of them, but once they reach the safety of home, a whole day's worth of sensory and social over-stimulation boils over, resulting in a meltdown.

So don't assume that the site of the issue is the source of the issue or that you're doing something horribly wrong; children's behaviour is often most challenging to us when they are with the faces and in the spaces where they feel most safe.

Hunt for Patterns

It's worth taking time to observe patterns and gain a thorough understanding of what is happening in your child's world that is resulting in the distressing behaviour, whether that's anger, aggression, withdrawal, soiling, self-harming or any other behaviour of concern.

Keeping a behaviour journal can help too – this can help us to pick out patterns of behaviour and identify whether there is anything that needs to be avoided, managed or altered.



Behaviour Journal Supporting Notes

Keeping a behaviour journal can help us to understand more about a child's behaviour, putting us in a better position to sustainably support them.

Note the tricky moments

Keeping a journal of when behaviour escalates can help us to identify patterns. Note as much detail as possible about what happened, where, who was present, what was happening before, what happened next etc.

What went well?

It is also helpful to keep a note of any time when things went especially well, or if there was the risk of behaviour escalating but this was avoided, as we can learn a lot from these moments too.

Keep going for a few days

Keep a record for a few days then consider the what, when, where and who of when things go right and wrong. This can often help us gain a better understanding of both how to take steps to avoid distressing behaviour and can also identify situations that your child finds actively calming or supportive.

Give Your Child a Voice

Where possible the behaviour journal should be completed in the child's words, either directly or with the support of an adult. This will help them to feel a sense of ownership and will also help them to understand that there are steps they can take to change how they feel and that this is not completely beyond their control.

Name:

Behaviour Journal

Date / Time:

What happened?

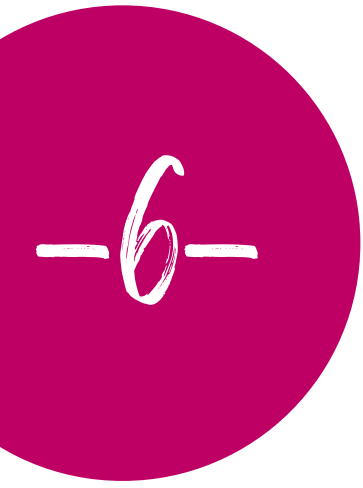
Where were you?

Who were you with?

What led up to this?

Did anything help or make things worse?

What would you do again or do differently next time?



Replace, Reduce, Reflect

Once we've taken the time to understand what need is being met by the behaviour, we can think about how else this need might be met.



Maybe your child needs to...

- calm anxious or angry thoughts
- release pent-up emotions
- communicate distress
- make things feel predictable
- take time out from sensory overload



Explore with the child and other supporting adults what might help. For example if their behaviour seems to be a result of a need to calm anxious thoughts, you might think with them about how they could use breathing or relaxation strategies instead. If the problem seems to be that the best way they have found of communicating their distress is through their behaviour, then maybe think about other options such as them showing you a red card, or using emojis or other symbols to warn you about how they're feeling.

Behaviour Change Plan Supporting Notes

Having achievable goals for a child's behaviour can be motivating for both you and your child.

Your child needs to feel supported

It's important your child feels supported but that they also understand it's important that they try, with support, to reduce the frequency of the distressing behaviour.

Achievable goals

It can be helpful to set small, achievable goals with the child and to celebrate each of these milestones as it's reached.

Regular reflection

It's important too to reflect back periodically and to understand what is helping and what is not with regards to changing their behaviour.

Curious not furious

Continuing to take a non-judgemental, inquisitive approach with them will best enable them to become more confident in talking about their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

When things go wrong

Be flexible and understand that things won't always go exactly as we'd hope. Instead of seeing these moments as failures, use a time of calm to revisit the five whys and reflect back on what happened. This way, the tricky moments become learning moments and can help us to make different, more supportive decisions moving forwards.

Name:

Behaviour Change Plan

What is the behaviour that you want to change and what need is it meeting?

RECOGNISE

How else might this need be met?

REPLACE

Set a small, achievable goal for reducing the behaviour

REDUCE

Revisit this in a few days time, celebrate successes and learn from challenges

REFLECT

Works Best When

It's important that you find the way that works best for you and your child, but a few things that can really help include:

You and your child are a team - be curious and try new things together

- Experiment -

Be prepared to try different things and notice what works and what doesn't. Noting patterns and changes will help you learn quickly if you take a flexible and curious approach

- Notice -

Notice what's going well, as well as when things begin to feel tricky. Talk to other people who spend time with your child and ask them to notice and feedback too. Be curious together.

- Forgive -

Forgive yourself if you handle an incident less than perfectly and forgive your child for those moments when things get tricky. Try to look forwards with curiosity rather than backwards with animosity

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- Thank You! -

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Pooky x

