

Intellectual Disability and Behaviour: understanding and responding to your child's difficult behaviour

As children grow and develop they typically have some behaviours that their parents or carers find difficult. There are many reasons why a child engages in difficult behaviour, and many ways parents and carers can help. The first step is to try to understand the reason why the behaviour may be occurring.

Why Does Difficult Behaviour Occur?

Developmental

Generally, very young children are impulsive and have not yet learnt how to control their behaviour. They don't stop to think about what is right or what is wrong. Children may use actions to get what they want because of their limited language skills.

At this developmental stage it is also typical for children to understand the world from one perspective—theirs. This makes it difficult for them to appreciate another person's perspective and to share. It increases the likelihood of children using behaviours like hitting, grabbing, kicking or biting to get what they need or want and to defend what they believe is theirs.

Children with intellectual disability often take longer to gain the skills needed to manage their impulsivity and to develop an understanding of another person's perspective. Also, they may need additional help to identify and understand these strong emotions, to communicate their needs and to work out how to solve problems.

Generally, as the child matures and develops skills, families see a reduction in difficult behaviours.

Communication

At times children use difficult behaviour because they may not know how to communicate to others what they want and may not understand what is expected of them. This is often the case for children with intellectual disability.

Almost any verbal message can be communicated through the use of difficult behaviour, including:

- To tell others that they want something such as food or a preferred activity
- To meet a sensory need, because the behaviour may feel good or generate interesting sensory sensations
- To initiate social contact or to gain attention

- To escape or avoid things that they find unpleasant, difficult or frightening
- To express feelings they have not yet learnt to express in another way, for example frustration or anger.

Communication difficulties can also lead to the child struggling to follow instructions. Instructions that have too many steps, or not readily understood by the child, may cause the child to become frustrated and use difficult behaviour.

There are many ways a child's developing communication skills can be encouraged and supported including: language stimulation, visual tools, communication boards, objects and gestures.

Unintentional rewards

Children learn a great deal from their environment. They quickly discover their behaviour can have an effect on the actions of others.

Sometimes there are unintentional rewards or hidden pay offs for the child's behaviour. If behaviour is followed by a desirable outcome, the child may repeat the behaviour. In this way the child learns to communicate through their behaviour. Unintentional rewards can include attention, material rewards, activities, or food treats.

When a child is behaving appropriately this is a great opportunity and the right time to reward them. Remembering to reward children when they behave well will help them learn what is expected and repeat the behaviour.

Environment

All children benefit from environments that have routines and structure. This is especially so for children with intellectual disability. A lack of routine and structure can lead to confusion and anxiety, and often results in difficult behaviour. Inconsistent boundaries will confuse a child because they will not be clear about what is expected from them and feel insecure in themselves and in their environment.

At times, a child may be bored and not know how to start a new activity. Instead they may do things that are not appropriate like picking at their clothing.

Many children with intellectual disability find noisy or crowded environments overwhelming, causing them to become anxious. They may use their behaviour to either avoid going to these places or to be taken away from them.

Poor sleep patterns can also result in children using difficult behaviour because tiredness affects their tolerance levels and ability to cope emotionally.

Health

While many childhood illnesses have obvious indicators, there are some situations which may be undiagnosed. Many children with intellectual disability have difficulties identifying and communicating about changes in their body such as pain or physical discomfort. In such instances, the only indicator of pain or illness may be a change in the child's behaviour. Therefore, if there has been recent change in behaviour it would be prudent to seek medical advice.

Sometimes children need to take medications for example cold and flu tablets, cough syrup, seizure medications. These medications can also affect how the child is feeling. Discuss possible side effects of the medication and any changes in behaviour with the child's doctor.

A child with intellectual disability often has reduced ability to cope and this is further reduced if they are sick, stressed or tired.

Family wellbeing

Children will often pick up on tension in their environment and a parent's or carer's wellbeing greatly affects a child's behaviour. When relationships are strained and there is tension and conflict in the home, children can feel unsafe and as a result become more aggressive, anxious or depressed.

Also, when a parent or carer is stressed it can be a struggle to manage their own emotions. This can lead to irritability, impatience and inconsistent responses to the child's behaviour. In these situations it is recommended that the parent or carer seek support or professional assistance.

Other influences

Children are influenced by their relationships with peers and by what others do. When they see others being aggressive and disruptive they may copy or imitate these behaviours.

Other influences on children's behaviour include watching movies, television programs, reading newspapers and comics or playing computer games.

Challenging behaviour

Challenging behaviour is a term that is often used to describe some of the behaviours that place the child or others at risk of injury, distress or being excluded from activities. These behaviours occur with such intensity and duration that they affect the child's ability to learn and participate in everyday events. They generally present a greater challenge to families and service providers than typical difficult behaviours.

Challenging behaviour can include:

- Aggressive language
- Hurting themselves or others for example hitting, biting, pulling hair
- Damaging or breaking things
- Stealing.

What you can do

It is important to remember that both difficult behaviour and challenging behaviour have a function and a purpose.

There are several things that may help if a child is using difficult or challenging behaviour, including:

- Check the child's health
- Check if there is something that can be changed in the environment for example is the area overly noisy or crowded, is the child too cold or too warm, does the child need a change in activity?
- Give plenty of positive social interaction when the child is behaving appropriately
- Simplify your language to help the child understand

- Provide clear structure and routines
- Where appropriate and possible, offer the child choices such as, "Would you like to wear the blue jumper or the red jumper?"
- Provide consistent boundaries and responses.

Sometimes challenging behaviour can become so frequent and intense that other aspects of a child's personality are overlooked. While it may be difficult, it is important to find the positive things the child does. The challenging behaviour is only one aspect of the child.

Where to find help

If a child's challenging behaviour has become too difficult for you to manage, remember you are not alone. You can get support and advice from:

- Disability Information and Referrals on 1300 786 117
- Child and Youth Health on 1300 364 100
- Your local GP
- parenting support groups.

References

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