

Supporting children with challenging behaviour



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Challenging behaviours are behaviours that may cause injury to self or others, damage environments and equipment, or interfere with learning and the development of pro-social relationships¹². They include what are known as externalising behaviours, directed outwards into the environment (such as tantrums, aggression, and noncompliance), and internalising behaviours, directed inwards (such as withdrawal, avoidance, and self-injury)³. These behaviours may combine in a cumulative way. For example, children may initially be non-compliant with a request, then become increasingly disruptive, before leading to a prolonged emotional outburst that disrupts other children and isolates the child from the group.

Challenging behaviours are often predictable responses to specific contexts or events that children engage in to meet specific needs⁴. It is therefore important to understand the purpose of the challenging behaviour and find other ways to meet the child's needs. While there is much research focused on supporting children with externalising behaviours, perhaps because of the disruption these behaviours cause, statistics show that a significant number of children have elevated internalising symptoms and/or anxiety disorders⁵. While these children engage in behaviours that are less likely to be experienced as challenging in early childhood environments, support and intervention are equally important for this group.

Children who regularly exhibit challenging behaviour benefit from early intervention and support, as ongoing challenging behaviours can have negative effects on children's development and learning⁶. Children with challenging behaviour are more likely to fail academically and experience rejection from peers and unpleasant family interactions. In later life, they are more likely to be unemployed, suffer from mental illness, and struggle to be positively engaged in their communities⁷. In school and early childhood settings, children with challenging behaviours may receive less praise, effective teaching, or guidance from teachers, and instead experience a greater number of punitive interventions⁸. Unsupported, children's challenging behaviours are likely to worsen⁹, and it becomes increasingly more difficult to change these behaviours as children get older¹⁰.

Research-based practices to support children and reduce challenging behaviours

International research shows that the occurrence, frequency and intensity of challenging behaviour is reduced when practices such as using plentiful positive attention, making routines clear and predictable, and providing direct teaching of behavioural expectations and social skills are consistently implemented¹¹. Also important in reducing challenging behaviour is ensuring children's engagement by adjusting activities for their interests and abilities, and specifically planning to address challenging behaviour through behavioural analysis and intervention¹².

Programmes that have been found to lead to significant improvements in children's social skills, and significant decreases in challenging behaviour and referrals for external support, focus on preventative factors in terms of positive classroom cultures for all children, structured teaching of social and emotional skills, and targeted individualised support for children's challenging behaviours¹³. Many of the evidence-based models for supporting children with challenging behaviour promote several layers of supports, with each layer building on previous levels.

Preventative factors

The first level of supports concerns preventative measures which are applied at a whole centre level. Research suggests that the single action of implementing centre-wide social and emotional learning supports can reduce or entirely eliminate problem behaviours without any need for further support or intervention¹⁴. This first level of support involves:

- **Developing positive relationships with children, which is found to prevent many problem behaviours¹⁵.** Research shows that children who experience high quality early childhood environments and sensitive interactions with caregivers are more likely to develop social competencies and have fewer behaviour problems¹⁶. Simple actions such as greeting children daily, asking them about their interests, actively listening to, responding to and extending child-initiated conversations, and giving children personalised attention each day are effective in building relationships¹⁷. Research suggests that teachers might aim to provide children with challenging behaviour with five times the amount of positive attention as negative or neutral attention¹⁸.
- **Ensuring rules and routines are clear, consistent, and predictable,** so that all children know what to expect and understand what to do. Consistency in terms of routines and expectations, alongside reliable consequences, helps children to learn self-regulation skills¹⁹. To develop consistent routines and expectations, teachers might discuss and agree on key routines, and determine what behavioural expectations might look like across different activities in the setting. Routines and expectations should be [culturally responsive](#) so they align with routines and expectations at home. Teaching and talking about routines and expectations with children²⁰ and using consistent language, as well as pictures and icons, modelling, role play, books, puppets, social stories, and games can help to teach and reinforce routines and expectations²¹. Teachers might need to structure routines and transitions carefully for children by providing warnings prior to transitions, using visual schedules, or preparing activities for children who complete transitions quickly while allowing time for other children to move more slowly into the transition.
- **Developing a stimulating programme in which children are highly engaged.** This might include providing plentiful opportunities for pro-social engagements with other children. Planning and preparing environments with a view to enhancing children's engagement aims to reduce the amount of time that children spend unengaged and at greater risk of problem behaviours²². Simple but effective changes include moving furniture to create clearly defined activity spaces which facilitate engagement, and ensuring plenty of stimulating materials and resources, as well as being highly intentional about extending on children's strengths and interests.

Direct teaching of social and emotional skills

The second level of support involves direct teaching of social and emotional skills, which may be targeted at all children but will work especially well for children who do not pick up social and emotional skills easily. For some children, naturally occurring opportunities enable them to learn the skills for interacting positively with others, persisting with challenges and difficulties, and regulating emotional responses, whereas other children need more **explicit teaching to learn the necessary skills²³**. This can help reduce challenging behaviour that is caused by a lack of social or language skills to meet needs in more appropriate ways²⁴. For example, children may seek to gain their peers' attention with annoying behaviour because they do not know how to enter into play with others. They may need a well-planned and highly focused approach involving **coaching and rehearsal**, and focused on learning emotional literacy, social problem-solving, friendship and cooperation skills, or how to control anger and manage frustration and disappointment. This teaching must take place when children are calm and receptive, rather than when they are engaging in challenging behaviour.

Stories and puppets may be used to teach children about social and emotional concepts, while role play and structured games can provide **structured practice opportunities** with teachers offering feedback. It can also be helpful to support children's language development, so that children can use words to solve problems and understand and express feelings, and [executive function](#) skills, so that they can inhibit impulses and focus attention in order to plan and guide their behaviour²⁵. It is important to note that alongside intentional instruction in social and emotional skills, children need time to rehearse new social behaviours and integrate them into their repertoire.

Targeted individualised support for specific challenging behaviours

The third level of support is aimed at children who are experiencing difficulties with challenging behaviours, and involves teachers developing individualised behaviour plans for targeted support based on a **careful assessment of the child and the functions of their behaviour**²⁶. Before deciding to provide targeted, individualised support to a particular child with challenging behaviour, it is recommended that teaching teams conduct environmental evaluations to see if all the aspects of the first two levels, in terms of strong relationships and engagement in the programme, clarity around rules and expectations, and structured teaching of social and emotional skills, are being well implemented. If some children are still experiencing difficulties, then targeted and individualised support may be required to help them decrease their challenging behaviours and replace them with alternative appropriate behaviours.

Identifying the functions of challenging behaviours

Working out the reason for or function of children's challenging behaviours can be difficult, as challenging behaviours can serve multiple functions for children²⁷, and the meaning and purpose of challenging behaviours will not be the same for every child. Children may use challenging behaviours to access attention from adults or peers, preferred activities, resources, or foods, while others may use challenging behaviours in order to avoid attention from adults or peers, or to avoid activities, events, and foods they do not like. Some challenging behaviours, such as deliberately crashing into things or throwing things, may provide much needed sensory stimulation for children with [sensory processing differences](#). Challenging behaviour can also be due to factors such as insufficient sleep, hunger, or situations at home such as family stress caused by bereavement, family break-up, or recent immigration.

It is also important to identify whether children's challenging behaviours are due to a lack of skills. For example, a child who has not learned how to ask others to move out of the way may use an inappropriate behaviour like pushing instead, which, when successful in achieving the goal of moving someone out of the way, rewards and reinforces the behaviour. Other children may be able to perform appropriate behaviours, but there is an environmental factor or circumstance that prevents them from doing so. For example, children who are ordinarily able to wait their turn may feel overwhelmed when there is a crowd of children at the sinks, and rush to go first in order to avoid the crowd. Rushing and pushing past others is rewarded because the child gets to leave the crowded space.

To gain an understanding of the functions and rewards for children's challenging behaviours, teachers need to **gather information** about how and when the challenging behaviours occur, including what precedes the challenging behaviour and what happens after it²⁸ (for example, in what ways the child experiences success for using the behaviour). It is also important to gather information about the situations and events in which children do not engage in challenging or negative behaviours. For example, a child may usually be quiet and withdrawn in the presence of other children, but become more animated and cooperative with others when playing with water. Teachers can also **test their ideas about what causes the challenging behaviour**. For example, if the challenging behaviour appears to follow

instances in which teachers ask children to do something, teachers might test this hypothesis by making several demands or requests of the child over a period of time and recording the child's response.

Simple ways to record data about children's challenging behaviours include frequency counts (tallying how often and when the behaviour occurs, perhaps in half hour increments) or behaviour rating scales (in which teachers develop a scale of 1 to 5 and determine what each number represents, before rating the child's behaviour in segments of time over a day). More focused observations can be undertaken for the times or contexts in which the behaviour has been noted to occur most often.

Families can also be drawn upon to help work out the meaning of children's behaviour and offer new perspectives. It may be important to develop **awareness of cultural expectations** for behaviour, as some behaviours that teachers view as challenging may be viewed positively in children's cultural contexts²⁹. An example is the use of overlapping speech, which can be viewed as appropriate involvement and engagement by families, but may be seen by teachers as disrespectful. Teachers can find out about cultural expectations for behaviour by sharing their perspective of the challenging behaviour and its impact in the early childhood setting, and seeing whether the family also holds that perspective or has a different perspective.

Once teachers have identified the function of children's challenging behaviour, they can respond by **adjusting the physical and social environment** (reducing both triggers for challenging behaviour and what reinforces it) by **teaching replacement skills, or by developing an individualised behaviour support plan**.

Adaptations to environments and interactions

There are many ways in which teachers can adjust physical and social environments to help minimise opportunities for challenging behaviour, and increase the likelihood of children's appropriate engagement. Teachers can alter the environment so that the circumstances which lead to challenging behaviour do not occur (for example, organising hand-washing so there are not crowds of children at the sinks). If teachers identify situations in which children are not engaging in challenging behaviours but using appropriate responses, they can plan to make more of these kinds of situations available to children (such as more water play with well-chosen peers) in order to help children practise appropriate, positive behaviours until these behaviours feel more natural to children and they become fluent in them. Teachers should take account of expectations in children's home and community contexts in order to be culturally responsive when planning individualised supports. For example, if a family uses humour frequently in interactions at home, then teachers may plan to use humour in interactions with the child in the early childhood setting. If a child is accustomed to direct requests ('wash your hands') rather than indirect requests ('Do you think you could wash your hands?'), then teachers might try reducing indirect requests in the early childhood setting and using more familiar forms of making requests.

Often children's challenging behaviours occur because activities and routines in the early childhood setting are not well-matched to the child's abilities and interests. Teachers can try reducing or changing expectations for children with challenging behaviour by adjusting the time that children need to engage in or complete an action, by providing more adult support and attention, or by adapting instructions so that they are easier for children to understand. Other adaptations include providing resources that enable children to meet their needs without engaging in challenging behaviours, such as providing fidget toys at group story times so that children do not disrupt others.

Making changes to the interactional style used with children with challenging behaviour has also been found to be effective, such as:

- **Allowing children to make choices**³⁰. For example, if children's challenging behaviour is found to occur whenever teachers make demands, teachers can try reframing their demands as choices, such as asking children to make choices about what to tidy up, and in what order, rather than just telling children to tidy up.
- Allowing children to practise new skills within **favourite activities or using preferred resources**³¹. For example, a child may be motivated to practise a skill like asking peers to join play if the play activity is a highly preferred one. Similarly, for children whose challenging behaviour occurs when they are asked to comply with particular requests, teachers can try embedding those requests into sequences of requests with which the child will typically comply. This can be very playful, for example 'touch your head', 'touch your toes', 'turn around', each followed by brief praise, and then inserting a direction the child finds more challenging, such as 'sit at the table'. The idea here is that having the child complete three to five easily accepted requests creates 'behavioural momentum'³² and increases the child's confidence to engage in behaviours that they might usually use challenging behaviour to avoid.
- Using **pre-corrective statements**, which provide cues and prompts to engage in a more appropriate behaviour to children before the challenging behaviour occurs, as well as **specific praise** which acknowledges and clearly identifies appropriate behaviour when it occurs. Both strategies develop children's knowledge of appropriate behaviour. Research has found that, as well as being effective for increasing positive behaviours, the use of pre-corrective statements and specific praise reduce teachers' use of reprimands with children³³.

Targeted teaching of specific skills

Alternatively, teachers may decide to **teach children more appropriate behaviours** to meet the function of the challenging behaviour, which is found to be one of the most effective interventions for reducing challenging behaviour³⁴. For example, they might directly teach children alternative social behaviours such as saying 'excuse me' and waiting for someone to move, rather than pushing. The new behaviour should be something that the child is capable of performing, and it should be able to meet their needs and achieve positive outcomes more easily than when they engage in challenging behaviours. For example, passing a teacher a picture card to gain access to an item should require less effort than shouting and acting aggressively. The aim is to support children to learn skills to manage their environment by expressing their needs and interacting with others in positive ways.

Older children might be supported in **monitoring their own behaviours**. For example, teachers might encourage children to monitor whether they played with peers or used a particular social skill during a session. Teachers can prompt children with reminders to self-monitor, or they can provide tools such as charts for children to mark or ask them to describe their behaviours to adults.

Individualised behaviour support plans

An individualised behaviour support plan should identify the context and functions of challenging behaviour, the strategies planned to support the child, and teacher responses to both challenging behaviour and the appropriate use of new skills. For example, an individualised behaviour support plan for one child might identify that challenging behaviour occurs when the child cannot access preferred activities or resources, when peers have turns at an activity, and when teachers give directions regarding

transitions. Functions of the challenging behaviour might include gaining access to preferred activities and resources, teacher attention, and avoidance of transition.

Strategies for this child might include:

- providing preferred activities and resources as much as possible, including embedding these into transition activities such as story-time
- teaching turn-taking and offering plenty of opportunities to practise with a peer with a consistent verbal cue ('first him, and then you')
- offering choices at times of transition
- ensuring regular (every minute) attention from the teacher at times when it appears the child is about to engage in challenging behaviour.

If the challenging behaviour occurs, teachers might plan to withhold teacher attention or the preferred activity for a short time (15-20 seconds) in order not to reinforce the behaviour, before prompting use of the new skill or redirecting the child. Finally, teachers might plan to reinforce new behaviours through praise, high fives, and cuddles. It is important to note here that children will have different preferences for reinforcers. For example, autistic children with [Pathological Demand Avoidance](#) may find praise threatening, and alternative reinforcers would need to be identified.

Data should be gathered on the frequency and severity of children's challenging behaviours while the individualised supports are being used, to monitor whether there is any change in children's use of challenging behaviours. This data can be used to evaluate the success of the individualised behaviour support plan and modify it as necessary. Individualised behaviour support plans should also be shared with families, which can increase success.

Endnotes

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