



Parent Notes

Module 3

Autism: Replacing difficult behaviour with useful behaviour

Contents

Purposes of difficult behaviour
Encouraging alternative behaviour
Using time out



In brief

Children's difficult behaviour always has a purpose. It might be to get attention, or to get out of having to do something, or be related to a number of other reasons. This module begins to help you identify the purpose of your child's difficult behaviour and develop strategies to replace that difficult behaviour with more appropriate behaviour.

Purposes of difficult behaviour

Obtaining physical pleasure and attention



See Module 3 pages 4 and 7

An individual with autism may enjoy the physical sensation of something which we may consider to be painful. Some examples of this might be how their throat feels when they are screaming, watching the blood trickle out of a sore they have scratched, watching your face when you screw it up when you are upset or angry. There may also be times when your child engages in behaviour like these for the purpose of gaining your attention.

Sometimes the use of a range of visual strategies can help to reduce this behaviour. It is important to monitor closely the way in which you respond to difficult behaviour, for example, your tone of voice, facial expression, body language. It may help to ask for feedback from another adult about your interactions with your child and whether any changes are necessary.

Engaging in a preferred activity



See Module 3 page 6

A preferred activity for individuals with autism may be their overriding need to do things in their own way, which we refer to as rituals and routines. We may interpret this as difficult behaviour or non compliance when in fact the behaviour is about them seeking sameness and predictability in their daily life, in order to feel safe and less anxious.

Several difficult behaviours



See Module 3 page 9

An individual with autism may have a limited range of communication skills and may use the same behaviour to communicate different purposes. For example, he may hit you if he is angry with you, wants you to do something for him, or is simply frustrated.

Encouraging alternative behaviour



See Module 3 Page 12

You will already know that working out the purpose of your child's behaviour and what he is trying to tell you is not always straightforward. Often the challenge in behaviour is for us to try and understand what it means and manage it effectively. We need to think creatively and always remember that the behaviour is not about hurting you but about what your child is feeling. A child with autism cannot take your perspective. These are the times when seeing the crazy and funny side of things allows you to move through a difficult period. Humour and laughter will often help to reduce tensions quickly.

Ensuring no consequence follows the difficult behaviour



See Module 3 Page 14

Remember that when you ignore a behaviour the level of that behaviour will increase for a time before it begins to decrease. This is particularly true of children with autism. You have to be confident that you can tolerate it getting worse for a while. If you can't tolerate it getting worse and eventually you give in, your child will learn that the way to get attention is to increase the level of his difficult behaviour. This is known as the escalation trap.

Taking away privileges



See Module 3 page 16

When considering taking away privileges as a negative consequence, the privilege needs to be a highly preferred activity or item otherwise it will not have the required effect on behaviour. We need to understand and appreciate that your child approaches life from a different perspective and his own motivation is based on his own special interest/s. This is significant when selecting a strategy for reducing your child's difficult behaviour.

Using time out



See Module 3 page 16

There are times when you will need to be creative when using time out. As already stated, it is time out from positive consequences and this can be achieved in many different ways. As children with autism often prefer to be left on their own, time out can be very rewarding if they are sent to their room or even ignored. An alternative action for these children may be to insist that they spend time out from their preferred activity but in close proximity to someone.

Example

Andrew, who is eight, tries to run away a lot and prefers to spend time on his own. When using time out, Andrew has to hold his mother's hand for five minutes while she goes about doing her daily tasks in the home such as putting the washing on or emptying the dishwasher. This has been a highly effective, creative use of time out for this family.

When the purpose is sometimes acceptable



See Module 3 page 20

Remember the use of visuals to support your language and increase your child's understanding.