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How to Reduce Challenging Behavior

How to Reduce Challenging Behavior for Children with Developmental Disabilities

A Fact Sheet Developed by the Beach Center on Families and Disability
1998

Have you ever heard the phrase, "Treat the symptom, ignore the disease"? Many people handle discipline that way. They try to eliminate disruptive or dangerous behavior without looking into why the behavior occurred. Positive behavioral support is different - even revolutionary - because it is based on "Why?"

Behavior usually happens for a reason. For example, an individual may use it seeking attention or self-stimulation. Behavior can be a form of communication - particularly for people with limited language capabilities - that may express frustration, anxiety, physical pain, other emotions, or needs. Then get rid of the challenging behavior, right? Not so simple. The goal in positive behavioral support is not merely to "eliminate" but to understand the behavior's purpose. The individual can then learn to substitute a more positive behavior to achieve the same function.

Ensuring fit with your values. If you use this approach, you will have to be ready to forge ahead (rather than waiting for others to take the lead). You will also have to be prepared to custom-fit the plan to the person you are focusing on. This is not a "one size fits all" type of plan. And, instead of accepting whatever happens, you must be ready to actively solve problems, even anticipate them. This approach, too, focuses on rewarding good behavior, not punishing challenging behavior. Keep these values in mind when deciding whether this approach will work with your family.

Putting together a collaborative team. You probably could do this approach by yourself. But the odds for success would not be in your favor. A better way is to involve family, professionals, friends, and community members. Also, find those who can best work with the child. Rapport - the ability to "connect" - can often be the miracle ingredient in behavioral changes.

Creating a vision. This approach is not an overnight, silver bullet cure. It takes time and effort. A vision of the ideal life for the individual with challenging behavior will fuel and help guide the journey. Typically, this vision begins with shared great expectations and incorporates to the maximum extent possible that individual's preferences for inclusive activities, relationships, and daily/weekly routines.

Completing a functional assessment. Challenging behaviors do not happen repeatedly without a good reason. Finding out "why" the behavior occurs is the key to positive behavioral support. Technically, the finding-out process is known as functional assessment and is a method of collecting and testing information. After you identify and clearly define the challenging behavior so that any one observing would know exactly what you are talking about, check to make sure you are on target about the probable purpose(s) of the behavior (for instance, to quit doing a difficult task). This can be done by someone who has knowledge of the person or by technical experts. (Call The Family Connection at 1-800-854-4938 for referral to positive behavioral support experts.)

STRATEGIES

Now, the next phase of positive behavioral support begins: Strategies to encourage behavioral changes. These include:

Teaching new skills. Challenging behavior often occurs because the individual does not know a more appropriate way to achieve a result. Determine necessary skills, then work together to encourage their development. Just as importantly, decide whether people working with the person

who has the behavioral challenge need to learn new skills.

Appreciate positive behavior. Gathering information for the functional assessment causes you to focus on the individual. During that time you should have learned what the person views as rewards. Using those rewards when the person exhibits targeted positive behavior reinforces the likelihood that those behaviors will happen again. At the same time you concentrate on rewarding target positive behavior, remember to recognize other appropriate behavior and work toward encouraging the individual to have a positive identity.

Altering Environments. If something in the person's environment influences the challenging behavior, organize the environment for success. When adjusting the environment, focus, too, on what happens between challenging behavior incidents as well as what happens when challenging behaviors occur. Arranging what happens during the day, when it happens, and how it happens decreases the chance of challenging behavior. The goal of positive behavioral support is not to avoid all places where challenging behavior might occur or simply to give in to all the individual's requests. Rather, the goal is to create a rich pattern of preferred activities and relationships that encourage desirable rather than undesirable behavior.

Changing systems. After working on the immediate environment, examine your system of services to see whether it is as responsive and personalized as possible. If not, do what you can to make it that way. You may find that despite your efforts, the system is not changing directions quickly enough for your family. In that situation, you may consider literally changing your system for another (e.g., changing schools).

MONITORING FOR IMPROVEMENT

As the support program develops, devise a recording system to find out what works and what doesn't. There will be fine-tuning and changes along the way. If the initial plan is not working, take care to understand why it is not working. You can then use that information to design a new approach for the plan.

For example, a person can get bored doing the same tasks with the same people for the same rewards at the same time of the day. Creating variation may solve this problem. The second roadblock is that the people overseeing the positive behavioral support may get bored and become less responsive to the person and his or her communication efforts. Taking a break and adding variety helps get past this roadblock.

In some situations, you may find that in spite of your best efforts, the behavior was not affected. Ask yourself whether you gave the plan enough time, or if you or others criticized the person exhibiting the behavior or pled with the person to behave well. Both tactics can actually increase the challenging behavior. Positive behavioral support also may not be effective in self-injury that gives the child sensory stimulation (e.g., children may poke their own eyes to make a visual effect), or is in response to not enough or too much stimulation. Self-injury or aggressive behaviors also can be initiated or set off by underlying psychiatric conditions, such as depression or obsessive-compulsive disorders. Some scientists have even suggested that some self-injury may represent a type of addictive behavior that gives a "high."

CRISIS ANTICIPATION

Also necessary from the start and throughout is a plan that anticipates dangerous situations. When someone has a behavioral challenge that results in property destruction, self-harm, or physical injuries, you can't be caught unaware. Devise a detailed, word-by-word script for how to respond to dangerous situations and distribute it to everyone in contact with the individual.

END RESULTS

Positive behavioral support draws from teaching, systems design, behavior management, and social support to frame environments where people succeed and feel good about themselves. The results of this evolving approach support the independence, productivity, and inclusion of people with disabilities.

This fact sheet was jointly developed by the Beach Center on Families and Disability in conjunction with the Research and Training Center on PBS.

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