

Promoting Learning and Positive Behaviour at Home

Behaviour Support Pack for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 1



This resource is part of a series of seven booklets on Promoting Learning and Positive Behaviour in the Home developed by the NCSE Behaviour Practitioner team. The series is for parents of children and young people with additional needs.

Contents

The aim of this Behaviour Support Pact is to support your child, you as a parent, and your family during this difficult time. This booklet is divided into 3 sections, the first two sections contain practical advice and strategies to promote learning and positive behaviour. The third section provides information regarding behaviour in crisis.

The sections can be read individually but we advise that you read the full support pack.

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Booklets in the series

Resource 1: Behaviour Support Pack for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 2: Home Routines for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 3: Using Reward Systems for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 4: Behaviour Contracts for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 5: A Total Communication Approach for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 6: Life Skills for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Resource 7: Transitioning for Children and Young People with Additional Needs

Understanding Behaviour

What is Behaviour?

Behaviour is anything that a person does that we can see or hear. It is how we act and how we respond in different situations. Behaviour can include laughing, eating, sitting, standing, walking, talking, singing and dancing. Behaviour is learned over time and through experience. This is common to everyone.

Behaviour is also communication. This includes talking to others and using body language such as signs and gestures to express how we think and feel. We sometimes use less acceptable behaviours to communicate. These can include using bad language, nagging, shouting and complaining. These behaviours can occur when we are striving to communicate, especially when we feel we are not being understood or listened to. They are often an expression of feeling upset, frustrated and overwhelmed and often children with additional needs may not have developed a set of calming strategies to respond to these feelings.

Are all behaviours a problem?

No, not all behaviours are a problem. Sometimes behaviours may seem unusual e.g., flapping hands, saying the same word or phrase lots of times, throwing items in the air and watching them fall. Your child may display these behaviours because it feels good or helps him or her to self-regulate. Even though these behaviours may appear bothersome to you and/or family members, you need to ask yourself if it is beneficial to worry about them at this time?

If however, your child's behaviours are preventing him or her from taking part in ordinary family life, these would be considered to be behaviours of concern. These behaviours can become a very powerful tool for your child, causing him or her and your family a lot of stress.



What do behaviours of concern look like?

Some children and young people with additional needs display behaviours of concern. Behaviours of concern can include any behaviour that puts either the person themselves at risk and/or those around them.

For your child, a behaviour of concern might be a bite, pinch, kick or head bang to either themselves or others. Other examples might be messing up a room in the house, name-calling, using bad language, screaming or refusing to do what you ask. Although these behaviours can be upsetting, worrying and challenging, it is important to remember that your child is using them to communicate with you about how they feel or what they need. It is important to 'tune in' to your child's behaviours and think about what he or she is trying to tell you.

Behaviours of concern will look and feel very different for every child e.g. some examples are:

Aggression towards others	Self injurious	Destructive	Withdrawn behaviour	Disruptive
				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting • Kicking • Biting • Hair Pulling • Spitting • Pinching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hitting own body • Biting • Head banging • Slamming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breaking • Throwing • Tearing • Swiping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer to be alone • Quiet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shouting • Screaming • Flopping • Eloping • Running away



Are my child's additional needs causing this behaviour?

Your child's additional needs are not causing behaviours of concern. However, some of the difficulties associated with your child's additional needs might result in behaviours that cause concern. For example, if your child has communication needs, he or she might find it difficult to tell you when they are feeling frustrated, uncomfortable, or stressed. Similarly, if your child has sensory needs, he or she may experience feelings of being overwhelmed and this can lead to behaviours that may be beyond his or her control.

Why is my child displaying these behaviours?

Often behaviours of concern have a hidden message, otherwise known as a function. Although these behaviours can be upsetting, worrying and challenging, it is important to remember that your child is using them to communicate with you in the only way they know how.

They may be telling you how they feel or what they want or need. Think of the behaviour as your child's voice and 'tune in' to the hidden message.

Hidden messages fall into two main categories.

1. To get something. This includes favourite things, visiting favourite places, asking/needing sensory input and wanting help. This can also include getting attention from people or even animals like the family dog. Often your child may enjoy all reactions, even reactions that you would think of as negative, e.g., reprimanding your child. Some examples of hidden messages are:



2. To get away from something. This includes behaviour that your child uses to stop something or get away from something that is causing distress. Examples include getting away from a noisy place, getting out of being asked to do something, becoming fed up with what they have or what they are doing. Some examples of hidden messages are:



What if I can't find the hidden message?

Keeping a diary is a useful method to try and fully understand a hidden behaviour message. You might notice that your child becomes irritated for example, every time there is particular noise. The best way to organise this information is to ask yourself the following questions:

- a. What happened before the behaviour occurred? (when did it occur?, who was present?, what was your child doing?)
- b. What did the behaviour(s) look like?
- c. What happened after the behaviour(s)?

It is also a good idea to collect some information on other events in your child's life such as toileting, sleeping pattern, feeding, and pain levels. Do not underestimate how these events can have an impact on your child's day or night time and negatively affect behaviour.

All of this information together will help you identify clues and enable you to manage similar situations in the future.

Often your child may need a more formal assessment that your child's school or a professional can help you with once your child returns to school after COVID -19.

In the meantime, if you require individualised support or materials for your child contact your school after the Easter holidays. School staff are available even though the school is closed due to Covid-19.

In the meantime, you can focus on supporting you child by using the prevention strategies in the next chapter of this behaviour pack.

It might also be useful to refer to the other resource booklets in this series: see contents page.

Prevention Strategies

Now that we have an understanding of what might cause behaviour(s) of concern, it is important to examine how we can try to prevent such behaviour from occurring. You have probably learned over time to think like a detective about your child's behaviour. Your observations are likely to show that behaviour happens at certain times, with certain people or in certain places. It is important to "tune in" and learn to recognise the signs of increasing tension, anxiety or frustration that might lead to more intense behavioural outbursts. Some of these signs may be very subtle – tapping foot, heavier breathing, repetitive vocals, tense body positioning. It is essential that you are aware of these signs and respond effectively using some of the following prevention strategies:

What can I change at home?

Quiet Space	Use Visuals	Identify Dislikes	Structural Changes
			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a quiet space. • Make the space cosy. • Make the space relaxing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use visuals to help schedule a day. • Be clear and consistent. • Plan for changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what irritates your child. • Turn off lights that buzz. • Use headphones to reduce noise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the space that you have. • Change the environment to help you and your child.

How can I encourage my child?

Include the Family	Listen to Feelings	Stay positive
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get everyone involved. • Take a break. • Give a break. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name the feeling. • 'Tune in' to your child's hidden message. • Use language appropriate to your child. • Provide options. • Remind him or her of what he or she can do to self-regulate e.g. find a quiet space. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay positive • Tell your child what he or she does well. • Reward your child. • Try not to make things too difficult. • Set your child up for success.

How do I keep my child motivated?

Use Communication System



- Have your child's communication system available.
- Practice throughout the day.
- 'Tune in' to your child's behaviour.
- Look for hidden message.

Offer breaks



- Plan for lots of breaks.
- Help your child to ask for a break.
- 'Tune in' to when your child shows he/she needs a break.

Use choices



- Use clear boundaries
- Use visuals to support choice making.
- Offer choice when possible.

Use Rewards



- Know what your child likes.
- Plan nice activities at intervals during the day.
- Keep special rewards for new or difficult tasks.

First-Next System



- First task, Next reward.
- Balance effort with reward.
- Use consistently.

Exercise



- Exercise helps to burn energy.
- Make it part of your child's routine, if it works.
- Vary movement activity, if possible.

Additional information on these strategies?



- **Quiet space:** Create a quiet space. This can be a separate space in the family room, an area of the bedroom or kitchen. The quiet space needs to suit your family and your home – e.g. a mat, a bean bag or an indoor tent. Help your child to identify the space. You might add objects, activities or sensory toys that you know can help your child to calm.



- **Use visuals:** Use visuals to organise and provide structure. Lay out the visual schedule in a clear manner so that your child knows what is coming next. Use the schedule consistently and daily. Refer to the booklet on Home Routines for Children and Young People with Additional Needs for more support.



- **Identify dislikes:** Turn off a light that is buzzing, use headphones to help block noise, use sunglasses to reduce light and be mindful of smells that your child does not like. Refer to OT resources on the NCSE website: <https://ncse.ie/online-resources-for-parents>.



- **Structural Changes:** It is important to use all the space that is available to you. For some that might mean using a table to divide a room or changing the furniture in a bedroom to prevent climbing. The changes you can make will depend on your home situation. Changes can help to increase independence and prevent behaviours of concern.



- **Include the family:** Your child might respond differently to different family members. Encourage other family members to use the strategies that work for your child. This builds confidence and gives your child an opportunity to practice skills with others. Also, do not forget, some people are more calming than others in certain situations.



- **Listen to feelings:** Do not brush aside your child's fears or tell your child not to worry. Help to give language to what he or she is feeling e.g. 'I can see that you are angry that our plans have changed.' If your child can identify that they're getting angry, encourage them to use strategies to calm down such as removing themselves from a situation, using a stress ball or offer other choices.



- **Stay positive:** Encourage your child when he or she is being good and particularly for staying calm during times of stress. Use positive language to describe what your child did e.g. 'I love how you tidied up your toys'. Try to give positive feedback more than correction or negative feedback. Make things too easy rather than too hard e.g. use velcro shoes or self-tying laces if tying is difficult. In stressful situations, your child may not listen well. Using clear language appropriate to your child's needs will help.



- **Use the child's communication system:** Your child's communication system is your child's voice. It needs to be available to him or her at all times. Make sure all pictures are clear and available in the system. Extra pictures to communicate can be attached to a wall / cupboard around your house or you can wear them on a lanyard around your neck. These can be used if your child forgets his or her communication system. If your child's system includes sign, make sure everyone in the family understands the signs that your child uses. When you see a subtle behaviour that might lead to a behaviour of concern, try to help your child use his or her communication system to express what he or she needs or wants.



- **Offer breaks:** Be sure to provide regular breaks when your child asks. This teaches your child to trust this option e.g., If he or she asks for a break, give him or her a break. If your child forgets to ask or has not learned this skill yet, plan for regular break throughout the day.



- **Use choices:** Everyone needs to feel they are in control of aspects of their life. Offering your child choices will help with this. The choices can be as simple as which activity they want to do first or what jumper they want to wear. You as a parent can maintain some control when you offer choices. Not everything will be available at any given time.



- **Use rewards:** Identify what rewards your child likes when their behaviour is good and reward him or her for this behaviour. It is important to also reward your child for making an effort. Support your child when things are becoming difficult. Refer to the booklet on Using Reward Systems for Children and Young People with Additional needs.



- **First-Next:** First-Next boards are useful to help your child understand what they need to do, and that there is something nicer coming next. Balance effort with reward. Ensure that the pictures used can be clearly understood by your child. Some children and young people might use photographs or others might use images or objects. Use this strategy consistently. First-Next boards are one example of a visual schedule. Refer to the booklet on Home Routines for Children and Young People with Additional Needs for additional ideas on First-Next boards.



- **Exercise:** Exercise is an important part of everyday life for all children and young people. Some need rewards to motivate them to exercise. Examples of exercise include dancing, gentle movement, going for a walk, yoga, scooting, cycling or playing ball. Some children and young people will like to vary exercise, others will prefer to do the same exercise each day. This is ok. It is important to know what and how to use exercise to suit your child and young person. Refer to the OT resources on the NCSE website: <https://ncse.ie/online-resources-for-parents>.

Managing Behaviour in a Crisis

What is behaviour in crisis?

Some children and young people with additional needs will have a tantrum or meltdown even after we have tried to do everything to stop this from happening by trying a range of preventative strategies. Your child might feel frustrated because he or she wants something, to go somewhere, or to get away from something that is causing distress. He or she may also be feeling overwhelmed. Your child may sometimes communicate these needs or wants by displaying behaviours of concern.

Sometimes your child's meltdown might be intense and the situation is difficult to manage in the home. The behaviours of concern can pose a risk to your child and everyone else in the family. At this point we say that the behaviours of concern have reached a crisis level.

My Child is in crisis, what should I do?

It is important to remember that every child and situation is different. Not all information here will be relevant to everyone. Here are some ideas that might help in a crisis. They will need to be tailored to your own situation.

1. Keep your child, you and your family safe.
2. Remove anything dangerous that can be thrown, broken or used in a way that can hurt or injure.
3. Do not remove rewards.
4. Reduce language, use visuals where suitable and stay with your child.
5. Be calm. Your child is trying to communicate.
6. Wait. Give your child enough time to calm down.



How can I support my child after a crisis?

Once the meltdown has stopped and your child seems calmer, you might think that he or she is ready to carry on as normal. However, your child might still feel upset, their muscles might still be tense and they might still be thinking about what happened. It is very likely that your child may become upset again after the meltdown.

1. Use your child's visuals such as First-Next boards to help. Refer to the booklet on Home Routines for Children and Young People with Additional Needs for more information.
2. Ask your child to do something that is easy to do. Watch how he or she reacts.
3. If your child is calm, then offer a reward. Refer to the booklet on Using Reward Systems for Children and Young People with Additional Needs for more information.
4. If your child appears to be still upset, give him or her more space. Remember the guidelines for calming down a crisis discussed in this booklet.
5. For more information, See the booklets on Home Routines and Behaviour Contracts for Children and Young People with Additional Needs.



What are the most important points I need to remember?

- Remind your child that he or she can go to their quiet space. Refer to the section on Prevention Strategies for more information.
- Consider your child's personal boundaries.
- Your child is trying to tell you something. It is important to 'tune in' to the hidden message. Refer to the section on Understanding Behaviour for more information.
- Listen and talk to your child when he or she is calm and ready.
- Keep a diary. Write into it soon after the crisis occurs. Refer to the section on Understanding Behaviour for more information.
- During a crisis your child cannot listen well. It is important to calm the situation down and keep everyone safe.

Final Message

Always remember, if you are concerned about your child's behaviour or you are seeing new behaviours or a change or increase in a pattern of behaviour, you should contact a medical professional.

Each child and young person and their situation is different so not every strategy will work for your child every time. You might find that you need extra resources and details about your child to support him or her. Your child's doctor, HSE services and school may be able to assist you. It might also be useful to refer to the other resource booklets in this series: see contents page.

Other relevant resources are available on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie/online-resources-for-parents.

Remember to continue with what works for your child and your family, and take breaks when you can.

Helpful links:

- <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/meltdowns.aspx>

Reference:

- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Challenging%20Behaviors%20Tool%20Kit.pdf>
- <https://www.scopeaust.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ChallengingBehavior-fact-sheet.pdf>
- www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk
- www.callaninstitute.org
- www.bild.org.uk

