

# Understanding And Managing Difficult Behaviours

Some students with special needs display challenging behaviours. These behaviours can significantly interfere with the quality of the student's life and with the lives of the people with whom they live and work. Examples of challenging behaviours include aggression (hitting, biting, scratching others), self-injurious behaviours (head banging, hand biting, face slapping), tantruming (screaming, destroying objects), or stereotypical behaviours (hand flapping, rocking).

Understanding and managing such behaviours is an important priority for many school teams who support learners with special needs. Why should people try to understand and manage the student's behaviour? Students with challenging behaviour are often crying out for help and support. They may be using their behaviour to express their unhappiness and frustration, an important message that adults must respond to.

As well, students who display challenging behaviour can become isolated. They are sometimes excluded by peers and occasionally excluded from inclusive settings if their behaviour is highly disruptive to other learners. Often students with severe behaviour make less school progress than expected because of the amount of staff time and energy spent on responding to the behaviours. In order to improve the student's quality of life and their acceptance by peers and adults, school teams can systematically address the student's behavioural needs. The following Behavioural Detective Kit includes the tools and processes for developing an understanding of the student's behaviour and then guides teams through a process for developing intervention strategies.

## Beliefs About All Behaviour

- Behaviour communicates - although you have to listen in different ways. The current research on behaviour tells us that it goes hand in hand with communication. In fact, the behaviour often is a way for the student to communicate an emotion or desire. Teaching other, more acceptable ways to communicate is usually an important part of any plan to reduce challenging behaviour. For example, teaching the student to use a card to request a break is more acceptable than using tantruming for the same purpose.

- Behaviour serves a purpose for the student. We say that the behaviour is functional - it may get a student a break from work, it may help the student get a toy or an activity that they want.
- Behaviour that serves a purpose for the student is usually difficult to suppress. If the student has been successfully using the behaviour months, even years, it can be quite a challenge to change the behaviour.

## **First Things First**

Challenging behaviours are very complex and no one, not even an expert could answer the question: 'What are we supposed to do with Tommy?' right away.

To solve problems and to develop effective solutions that go beyond a band-aide approach we need to recognize that it takes teamwork and it takes time.

*Understanding why **this student** engages in **this behaviour** at **this time** and in **this setting** is one of the most important things we can do.*

In order to understand why a student is doing what they are doing the team will need to engage in some **Behavioural Detective work**. It is after the detective work has been done that the team can develop their intervention plan.

## **Interventions**

Typically, interventions for students focus on **three major elements**: **Building and Maintaining Rapport** building is an on going element of any successful relationship. The foundation of all behavioural intervention is when the student and staff have closeness, empathy and mutual liking.

### **Accommodations**

Making changes to the environment to fit the unique needs of the student is called Accommodating.

Providing a student with 'Velcro' running shoes instead of lace-ups when the student has struggled for some time unsuccessfully to learn to tie knots and bows is a type of accommodation.

### **Assimilation**

Instruction that attempts to help the student adapt to current or future environments is Assimilation.

For example, teaching a visually impaired student to use a cane is assimilation.

## **Understanding Behaviour**

### **Motivators - What Does the Student Want to Communicate?**

There are four or five categories of motivators that can trigger challenging behaviour according to Durand (1990).

#### Social Attention

Some challenging behaviours can be reinforced by the attention of others. Social attention can have negative effect if it becomes a regular response to challenging behaviour, especially if attention is almost never given to the student otherwise.

#### Tangibles

Tangibles (food, toys, activities, etc.) also serve as positive reinforcement for some behaviours. Some students use challenging behaviour to request a tangible that they see but can't get to, others use behaviour to protest that a preferred tangible has been taken away from them.

#### Escape

Some students engage in behaviour to remove themselves from situations they don't like. Students learn that if they want demands or other unpleasant situations to end, then engaging in challenging behaviour will serve that purpose.

Maybe the task is too complex or too hard.... or too boring or repetitive. Possibly the student needs more activity, more choices or to take a break.

#### Sensory Feedback

The sensory feedback provided by some behaviours ( auditory, visual, tactile) have been suggested as a source of enjoyment by some students and therefore reinforcing. For example, some people bite their fingernails, chew on pencils, chew gum, or rock back and forth because they are calmed or soothed by the sensory stimulation.

#### Multiple Influences

Some students have a single behaviour that is motivated by more than one consequence. For example, one student used a pretend karate kick as a social bid on the playground trying to get the interest of other children (Attention), but he also used the same behaviour to his assistant whenever he was upset about having to do work that he didn't like (Escape). Occasionally he did the pretend karate kicking routine by himself in the gym and the motivation seemed to be Sensory.

## **Setting Events - Some Possible Sources of Difficulty**

Setting Events can be typical but unwanted events that occur in many people's daily lives. While these events themselves may not be the trigger for challenging behaviour they often can put the student in an uncomfortable or irritable state where they are likely to have more challenging behaviour.

### Medical/Health Contexts

**It is a good idea to first check to see if the student has a physical reason for the behaviour.** This doesn't mean that if the student does have a medical problem that you can then just ignore the behaviour, but rather that information on the sources of some of the student's behaviour would help the team design some supports. Some examples of medical sources of behavioural challenges include:

- Sleep Disorders - Fatigue, Irritability
- Seizures
- Pain
- Medication side effects - Irritability, Confusion...
- Organic Influences - Autism, ADHD, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Rett's Syndrome

### Social Contexts

- Sibling disputes at home
- Changes in living arrangements
- A change in Teacher Assistants (i.e. Substitute)
- Changes in student's schedule
- Change in transportation

### Physical Contexts

- Crowded setting - hallways
- Certain clothing
- Noise levels
- Washrooms

## **Being a Detective**

### **The Detective Kit**

Gathering information about a student, their behaviours, the context in which the behaviours occur and the home situation allows a team to begin their first stage of the Behavioural Detective Kit. By completing Step 1 through 9 of the Detective Kit the team should be able to answer the *What, Where, With Whom and Why* questions. The '*So What Do We Do Now?*', comes next.

The Steps have corresponding Forms and Summary Pages that are placed at the end of the Behavioural Detective Kit.

### Step 1

**Describe each behaviour in detail-** be scientific and clinical here.

*Don't*

Student tantrums

Student has a fit

*Do*

Student screams and/or throws himself on the floor.

Student rips paper and yell.

### Step 2

Complete the **Subjective Problematic Behaviour Form** with other concerned adults- teachers, teacher assistants, parents. The purpose of the form is to determine the seriousness of the behaviour. If there is more than one Behaviour, complete a form on each and then prioritize which behaviours to respond to first. Don't select more than 3 behaviours at a time to focus on.

### Step 3

For any behaviour that is identified by the team as a safety risk for the student or others, a **Crisis Intervention Plan** should be developed now. Although you will want to continue to explore the causes of the behaviour and develop more of a focus on preventative, proactive plans, it is critical that safety be addressed first.

### Step 4

For each behaviour that the team has selected to work on, begin to record known information on the **Behaviour Summary Sheet**.

Continue to record summary information on each behaviour as indicated on the Summary Sheet.

### Step 5

**Complete an Observation of the Student.**

This needs to be done by a third party, someone who is not also trying to teach the class or work with the special needs student. Observations can last an hour or more and there are various ways of looking at the student and their behaviour.

- Record like a news reporter and write down everything you see the student do. Or..
- Record only the incidence of challenging behaviour that occur and write down what immediately preceded the behaviour and what followed the behaviour. This is an **ABC (Antecedent/Behaviour/Consequence) Chart**.

### Step 6

Complete a **Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS)** for each behaviour.

Either a team or individuals can complete each MAS. Enter the information on the Behaviour Summary Sheet(s). Look carefully at the results - look back at the Detective Kit and review the information that you recorded under the heading Motivators - What Does the Student Want and consider what this means!

### Step 7

Have staff who work with the student complete a one-week or two **Scatter Plot**. Up to 3 behaviours at a time can be recorded. The Scatter Plot will show the frequency of the behaviour as well as any patterns. For example, the student may hit others only during gym time and circle time. The discovery of these patterns usually leads the team to insights regarding the student's behaviour.

### Step 8

Have the family or caregivers complete a one or two week **Setting Events** form (during the same time frame as the Scatter Plot). You can then compare the student's behaviour at school with events at home.

### Step 9

**Interview** individuals who have extensive knowledge of the student. This includes family and school personnel as well as staff from other agencies who may work with the student. The questions on the **Student Profile** should serve as a guide to the interview.

*All summary information should be recorded on the Behavioural Summary Form*

## **Analyzing the Information and Developing Hypothesis**

So now you've gathered information; you've completed a number of Motivation Assessment Scales, you've done your student observations, the Scatter Plot and Setting Events information is in..... now what? In order to clarify how the data can help the team understand the student's behaviour, and develop a plan to manage that behaviour, a student example has been provided.

### **Josh's Story**

Josh is a 9-year-old boy with cerebral palsy. He is presently in a grade 2/3 split classroom. He communicates by vocalizing and facial expressions, but does not speak. Josh has a manual wheelchair that is pushed by an adult. Josh sometimes reaches for objects with his right hand although he has some trouble

grasping items. He is dependent on adult support for all his daily needs. Josh is not on any medications and beyond his CP he has no known health problems.

His school team requested behavioural support for him. Josh has always been a vocal student but now he is screaming and shrieking a number of times a day. One incident went on for almost half an hour, although more frequently these episodes last about 15 minutes. The teacher and teacher assistant are unsure what to do and they are becoming upset about the noise level and how this is interfering with other students.

The behavioural support team worked with the school staff and parents to begin completing the first steps of the Behavioural Detective Kit. The *Behavioural Summary Form* from the Reference Manual has been reproduced for this section.

### Review the Information

#### Behavioural Summary Form Page 1

#### Josh

##### Behaviour # 1

**Describe:** Josh screams and cries for as long as 15 - 20 minutes at a time. This can occur up to 2 or 3 times a day a school. Josh is usually exhausted by the end of his screaming and crying and sometimes falls asleep.

##### Subjective Assessment of Problem Behaviour Scale :

Behaviour is not life threatening nor a safety risk to student, peers or staff. It is highly disruptive to classmates and upsetting to Josh himself and contributes to his isolation from peers and his removal from the classroom.

##### ABC Chart Results

Antecedent - Josh was in the hallway with the teacher assistant. The assistant began talking to another adult. Josh became agitated, began making squawking noises. He pushed his BIGmack off his tray. The Teacher Assistant picked up the BIGmack but did not put it on his tray and continued to talk to the other adult.

Behaviour: Josh began screaming and crying, banging his head back against his headrest. This continued for almost 15 minutes.

Consequence: The teacher assistant attempted to calm him down. Wheeled him into a 'quiet room' and took him out of his chair.

Antecedent: Josh was on the school bus with the class. He was out of his wheelchair and safely strapped into his bus seat. His Teacher Assistant was seated beside him. The bus had stopped at the farm, but because of the rain the students were not allowed to get off the bus. They sat waiting for over 5 minutes. Josh began squawking and then banging his head against the seat. Teacher assistant was telling him that they had to wait a little bit longer.

Behaviour: Josh began screaming and crying, - head banging against the seat. This continued for almost 10 minutes

Consequence: Teacher Assistant continued to talk to him. Finally he managed to get him out of his seat and up to the front of the bus. Once he was off the bus Josh calmed down somewhat.

### **Observation Summary and Questions**

Josh seems to have few choices during his day. Often when he begins to express displeasure (squawking) the Assistant changes the activity to something else more appealing to him. Teacher Assistant seems to be dealing with Josh by herself. Classroom teacher is very busy. Josh is often not engaged in any activities - frequently he sits and waits- this seems to set him up for problems. Josh has many 'whispers' of behaviour that come before the full-blown screaming and crying. The Assistant usually picks up on these quite quickly and offers him something that he wants. The wants include: going for a break by traveling in the hallway, crumpling paper, listening to music on headphones, eating, having a peer read to him.

## **Behavioural Summary Form** page 1 continued

### **Josh**

### **Motivation Assessment Scale Results for Behaviour # 1 -(Screaming, Crying..)**

\_\_\_\_\_ Sensory      \_\_\_\_\_ Escape      **X** Tangible      **X** Attention

### **Scatter Plot Information**

Frequency of Behaviour      During the two-week observation period the behaviour occurred 15 times.

### Where/When does behaviour occur most frequently?

At the end of activities that Josh likes ( computer time, 'riding' his adapted tricycle)  
Generally more behaviours are occurring in the late afternoon between 2:00 and 3:30.  
Challenging Behaviour is quite frequent during Library time.

### Where/When does the behaviour never or rarely occur?

Recess time  
Lunchtime  
Swimming  
Reading Buddies

### **Setting Events**

### What is the correlation between Setting Events (home) and school behaviour?

When Josh has had a poor sleep the night before there is somewhat increased challenging behaviour the next day at school. If the challenging behaviour occurs at home before school, then it's likely to occur again at school shortly after Josh arrives.

## **Analyzing the Information**

The second page of the **Behaviour Summary Form** is where you can record your responses.

**Why is the student doing what they are doing?**

Look at the Motivation Assessment Scale results, the ABC results and the student observations for the answer to Why.

Example:

**Behaviour:**

**Suspected Motivators:**

These are the results from Observations, ABC Forms, Motivation Assessment Scales

*Josh squawks*

*He wants something - a tangible.*

*But sometimes he seems to do this behaviour for attention from his assistant.*

*Josh screams and cries*

*Same as above - Sometimes a tangible, sometimes for attention.*

\* Remember that Tangibles, Escape, Attention and Sensory are called Motivators.

**Look for Common Themes related to Motivators**

Select the top motivators for each behaviour of concern. Then provide more details and examples of student behaviour related to that motivator in order to discover *Common Themes*. In this section you are trying to find out more about the motivators, for example under what conditions does Josh try to escape, or what tangibles is he trying to get.

For Josh, the top motivators are Tangibles and Attention.

**Behavioural Summary Form - page 2 continued**

**Behaviour: Squawking, Screaming, Crying**

**1. Motivator for Josh: Tangible**

**Team recalls other behaviours that seem to fit under the heading Tangibles**

• In the last few weeks Josh squawked then screamed to get: off the bus, his favourite toy, the computer program he wanted, paper so that he could crumple it, his favourite music tape. So, what specific tangibles does Josh want?

**Common Theme include: Josh wants movement when he has been sitting too long with nothing to do. Josh also wants some specific computer programs ( Early Switch Use ) , his favourite toy ( unbreakable small mirror), paper to crumple and to listen to his favourite music ( tapes of Irish dance music )**

## **2. Motivator for Josh: Attention**

### **Team recalls other behaviours that seem to fit under the heading Attention**

- In the last few weeks, Josh has squawked, screamed and cried when the Teacher Assistant has not paid attention to him and he was not engaged in any other activity.
- He complains for attention after only a few minutes if he is not actively engaged.

So the **Common Theme** is...

**If Josh is not engaged in a meaningful activity he demands attention from the Teacher Assistant. Items/Activities that appear to engage him are the Tangibles listed above - movement, computer, favourite toy, favourite music.**

## **Developing Core Interventions to Decrease Problem Behaviour and Increase Appropriate Behaviours**

Once a team has determined what the specific motivators are for the student's behaviour ( Attention, Escape, Tangible or Sensory) and they have identified some specific Common Themes then they are ready to design the interventions. There are four elements to consider when planning behavioural strategies. To clarify how they are used, Josh's story continues from analyzing his behaviour to developing his proactive program.

### **Building or Maintaining Rapport with the Student**

As an ongoing part of the behavioural intervention staff and family continue to work on building or maintaining a relationship with the student that is characterized by closeness, empathy and mutual liking.

In Josh's case the Teacher Assistant was excellent and enjoyed working with Josh and the team could see that Josh had clear affection for his/her . Unfortunately he was exhausted by trying to deal with Josh's behaviours alone. In order to ensure that staff, students and Josh maintained their good rapport, the Teacher Assistant needed support. Schedules were re-arranged so that another TA who knew Josh would relieve the primary assistant each afternoon for an hour.

### **Accommodation**

How can the environment be changed to accommodate the unique needs of the learner so the behaviour decreases and appropriate behaviour increases?

Several recommendations were made for Josh under the heading of

Accommodation. His IEP was carefully reviewed to ensure that he was working on functional, meaningful goals. Many of his previous school activities seemed to have little interest for him - he was not interested in workbooks, he did not like art and he really disliked having to sit quietly for too long. It was recommended that his schedule be re-designed to reflect his preferences and needs. Home and school worked together to generate a list of preferred activities so that Josh had a rich supply of motivating, meaningful activities to do during the school day.

The team also recommended that an Object Calendar System representing Josh's day be developed for him. The intention was to provide Josh with more information about what was happening in his day, what was coming up and when something was finished.

## **Assimilation**

What can the student learn to do that would meet his or his/her needs (for Attention, Escape, Tangible or Sensory) but in a more appropriate way and thus reduce the challenging behaviour.

The team knew that Josh's behaviour was a way for him to communicate. They agreed that his messages of wanting a tangible or wanting attention weren't unreasonable in themselves but it was the way that he communicated that was so challenging. So, in addition to making positive changes to his environment (Accommodations) and thus decreasing Josh's need to scream and cry for attention, the team also wanted to ensure that Josh learned some new skills that would also help him manage his behaviour (Assimilations). Josh had already demonstrated that he could make choices, now staff worked to increase his choice making opportunities significantly. If Josh was able to communicate what he wanted, they reasoned that he would be less frustrated and his behaviour more acceptable. The staff was also hoping that Josh could learn to wait a little longer for Attention or a Tangible. A plan was developed where Josh was rewarded for waiting just a few more minutes more for a preferred activity.

## **Case Study**

Sonya is an 11 year old with a suspected genetic disorder that has resulted in severe mental handicap. She is a tall, mobile girl who is non-verbal and not toilet trained. Her adaptive skills are at approximately a 1-year level. Sonya has had many incidences of self-injurious behaviour. She frequently hits her face. This happens numerous times a day - in fact it seems to be on the increase.

<b>Behavioural Summary Sheet</b>
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<b>Sonya</b>
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**Describe:** Sonya hits her face with her open palm hard enough that her cheek turns pink and the slap can be heard by staff and students.

### **Subjective Assessment of Problem Behaviour Scale**

Injurious behaviour to Sonya, upsetting to children and the behaviour seems to be on the increase.

### **A.B.C. Results**

Numerous incidents of the face slapping were observed:

Antecedent: Walking in hallway with her class. She was walking with her assistant and as the class approached the gym door, Sonya began to hit herself.

Behaviour: Hitting her face - 4 or 5 times

Consequence: Staff intervened - talked to the student, held her hands.

Antecedent: In gym with classmates, Sonya was enjoying herself in gym - rolling the ball with some other girls. Class was asked to sit in a large circle, a few of the girls sat near her, Sonya began hitting herself.

Behaviour: Hitting her face - 4 or 5 times

Consequence: Students and Staff Intervened - talked to her, held her hands.

Antecedent: In class - kids are sitting in a circle listening to story, Sonya is also sitting on floor near some girls.

Behaviour: Hitting her face 2 or 3 times and then tried to grab a peer's sweater.

Consequence: Students and Staff Intervened

### **Observation Summary and Questions**

Sonya doesn't seem to have an understanding of what is happening in her day - she is always being taken somewhere - there doesn't seem to be much expectation that she communicate with anyone. She seems to get agitated by changes- is the problem the actual transition? Or is she doing this for attention?

### **Behavioural Summary Form - page 1 continued**

**Sonya**

### **Motivation Assessment Scale Results for Behaviour**

\_\_\_\_\_ Sensory      **X** Escape      \_\_\_\_\_ Tangible      **X** Attention

### **Scatter Plot Information**

Frequency - 10-15 per day

Most Frequently - on the way to gym, on the way to the washroom, when in the class and students are walking near her or sit near her.

Also lots of face hitting when he is in a brand new environment, for example when he started going to Donna's for respite.

### Least Frequently (Rarely or Never)

Face slapping almost never occurs at the After School Program that the student attends! Why is this? Face slapping rarely occurs at home. Why is this?

### **Setting Events**

No correlation was noticed - Sonya spent the weekend with her respite worker - no noticeable change on Monday

## **Behavioral Summary Form - Page 2** **Sonya**

### **Behaviour: Face Slapping**

#### **Details for Top Motivators:**

#### **Motivator for the student - Attention**

• Sonya hits her face when groups of adults or children are near her . After she has slapped her face the peers and adults always intervene - talk to her, take her hand, etc. This occurs with various adults and children. However the behaviour only seems to occur in specific situations- - hallways, gym, classroom when kids are moving about. Why is that?

#### **Common Theme is :**

**When groups of people are near her or moving close by her, Sonya slaps her face. Although the Motivation Assessment Scale results suggested that Sonya engages in the behaviour to get attention, it now seems that this is not too likely. Instead.....**

#### **Motivator for the student - Escape**

- Sonya hits her face when she is distressed by too much activity or people moving around...
  - in a crowded hallway - going to gym or washroom
  - in a busy gym
  - in class when kids are moving around near her or sitting too close to her
- Sonya hits her face when she is in new environments (new respite home)
- Sonya is fine at the After School program - large space but very few students!!

#### **Common Theme is:**

**Sonya hits her face when she is upset or in some kind of distress. She appears to get upset when she is too close to active groups of students - in the gym, in the hallway, etc.**

## **Interventions**

Sonya's challenging behaviour was first seen as a possible bid for social attention, but as more information was reviewed the team came to understand that Sonya

was in distress when she had to walk in the hallway with others or if there were too many people sitting near her or interacting with her. It was her distress and agitation that caused her to engage in self-injurious behaviour.

## **Building and Maintaining Rapport**

While staff had good intentions with Sonya, one of their frustrations was in communicating with Sonya's mother. Possibly due to her own frustration or embarrassment over her daughter's behaviour, her mother rarely attended school meetings and would not agree to a doctor's visit for a medical opinion on Sonya's behaviour. She was also distressed if the school staff commented on Sonya's behaviour to her when she came to school to pick up her daughter. Much of the school staffs' energy was spent on trying to find ways to involve Sonya's mother in a positive way. Finally, a school counselor decided to do a home visit. Sonya's mother was somewhat more comfortable with meeting one on one in her home and she agreed that the school should spend time trying to determine her daughters' behavioural needs.

## **Accommodation**

Since Sonya experienced such distress when groups of students came too close to her, changes were made in the environment at school. Staff arranged for Sonya to travel in the hallways when they were least crowded. For example 5 minutes before classes changed Sonya and the Assistant would leave the room and make their way to the next class. (That way Sonya could avoid huge groups of students moving near her.) In addition, the teacher talked to classmates about 'Sonya's Space'. This was a phrase used to describe the amount of personal space that Sonya required, so that classmates could understand and then respect that need. A special large pillow seat was purchased for Sonya so that when she joined in Circle Time or other floor activities she would have a designated place to sit. This helped the other students give Sonya the space that she needed. As well, more meaningful activities at Sonya's developmental level were included in her personal timetable. The team developed a list of preferable activities for Sonya that was used to create a more motivating day for her.

## **Assimilation**

The staff determined that Sonya did not need to learn a new skill related to her behaviour. Instead they recognized the need for adults to make changes to Sonya's environment in order to support her.