



## Positive behaviour support and how it can be helpful

When your child shows behaviour, which is difficult or challenging, you can feel under a lot of pressure to ‘solve’ or stop the behaviour. It can also be confusing to know which approach will work best for your child.

We know that parents and carers can feel very alone, and it can be a relief to discover that other parents and carers feel the same. All children are different and a “one size fits all” approach doesn’t work. There are often complex reasons behind a child’s behaviour, and it is rarely anyone’s ‘fault’.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) is an approach which can help. PBS shifts the focus away from trying to stop challenging behaviour, to understanding why a child is behaving in a particular way, and what we can do to help the child.

### What is challenging behaviour?

Just like us, children behave differently at different times. Feeling upset, sad, cross, frustrated and lots of other kinds of emotions is a normal and healthy part of their life. Many children go through phases where they are likely to behave in ways that can be hard to understand when they are tired, ill or stressed. It is normal for younger children to have tantrums some of the time, while older children may sometimes shout, storm out or throw things.

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For additional Parent Tips see [www.ihv.org.uk](http://www.ihv.org.uk)

The information in this resource was updated on 03/05/2022.

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'Challenging behaviours' are behaviours that happen often and over a long period of time. They are difficult for parents/carers and children to manage, and may look like:

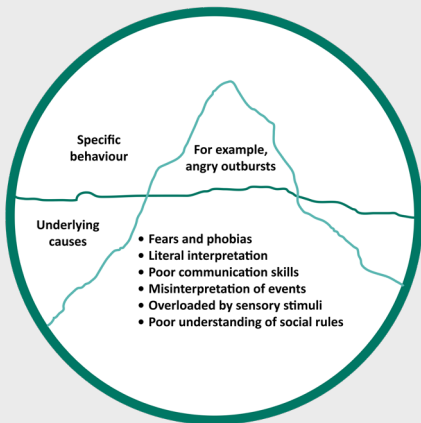
- Having lots of angry outbursts
- Often shouting, swearing and being very argumentative
- Frequently hitting, biting or kicking others
- Hurting themselves (e.g. head-banging, eye-poking, hand-biting)
- Kicking, smashing or damaging things in their home, nursery, or school
- Often getting into trouble at nursery or school
- Eating non-food items (e.g. bedding, paper, sand, dirt)
- Other behaviours (e.g. spitting, smearing poo, running off)

## Understanding the messages of behaviour

It can often be difficult for parents/carers to work out what their child is trying to tell them through their behaviours. What do these behaviours tell you about your child's needs? What's happening for them?

Behaviour can be viewed as a form of communication. Behaviours also often have a purpose. When a child behaves in this way, they are often trying to tell us something, and they are also possibly meeting one of their own needs. Working out exactly what they are trying to tell us, and why they are doing it, will help us understand our child and their behaviours better. However, it's not easy to work out what's behind their behaviours, and the reasons are seldom obvious or easy to detect.

Your child's behaviour can be a way for them to express:



- **frustration:** they can't do something or can't tell you what they want.
- **fear:** they are frightened of something.
- **strong feelings:** they are unhappy or angry about something; they dislike or are unhappy about a situation.
- **anxiety:** they are feeling confused, worried, stressed, unable to think well.
- **discomfort:** they are in pain and can't tell you.
- **attention:** they have a need for attention and interaction, and want to spend time engaging with you. Spending time with your child is important as it helps them develop a secure attachment which lays the foundations for future healthy relationships.
- **difficulty with understanding:** if your child has difficulties with understanding, they may not know what is expected.

## How do we work it out?

**Record:** it can be helpful to keep a diary, or a behaviour chart, to try to learn more about it. An example is an ABC chart:

**A** stands for antecedents – what happened before the behaviour?

**B** stands for behaviour – what the child is actually doing, what the behaviour looks like?

**C** stands for consequences – what happens in response to the child's behaviour? What do other people do and say? What does the child do?

Antecedents	Behaviour	Consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is around leading up to the behaviour?</li> <li>• What is happening?</li> <li>• Is the environment busy or noisy?</li> <li>• Other demands being placed on the child?</li> <li>• Does the child understand what is happening now and what is happening next?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does the behaviour look like and how long does the behaviour last?</li> <li>• How intense or serious is the behaviour?</li> <li>• What impact does the behaviour have?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do people respond to situations where challenging behaviours occur?</li> <li>• What are the immediate reactions to the behaviour from everyone involved?</li> <li>• How does the child respond to these reactions?</li> </ul>

The ABC chart can help you to be curious about what could be happening for your child and what support they might need to get their needs met. Thinking about your child's sensory environment is key to helping understand behaviours. Think about the lighting, the smells in a room, the level of noise. What do these look like? Are the walls filled with overstimulating material that is distracting? Are these triggers that your child/young person is trying to communicate through their behaviour? For an ABC chart, [click here](#).

[More information on Page 3](#)

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## Top tips for parents/carers

- **Keep Your Expectations Realistic:** It is important for you to know and understand what your child can and can't do. When you expect too much or too little from your child it can lead to problems and frustrations for both of you.
- **Plan Ahead:** Try to think of what your child may do, or need, in various situations. Plan ahead to set your child up for a good experience. Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Always have a back-up plan!
- **Clearly State Your Expectations in Advance:** Some difficult behaviour occurs because your child can't act differently; at other times it occurs because your child simply doesn't want to act differently. Either way, it helps to remember that your child cannot read your mind. Keep it simple, give your child one clear instruction so that they know what it is that you want them to do. Have a look at [iHV Parent Tips: Using positive statements to guide our children](#).
- **Offer Limited, Reasonable Choices:** Children are not born with the built-in ability to make decisions and then accept the consequences. Children need to learn to take personal responsibility and they will need plenty of support and practice with this.
- **Catch Your Child Being Good:** As parents/carers, we often spend too much time telling our child what they should not do. Instead, try giving specific, positive attention to the behaviour that you want to see. This is much more effective as it will teach your child what you want them to do and increase the likelihood that this behaviour will occur again and again.

## When challenging behaviour does occur:

- Take time, stay calm and neutral.
- Give reassurance in a way your child is able to understand.
- Be supportive, caring and listen.
- Keep language simple and give clear messages to your child about what you want them to do, or show your child how they can engage in a more appropriate behaviour.
- If needed, ask other adults and children to leave the situation.
- Look and sound confident – even if you're not feeling it.
- Intervene quickly, try diverting or distracting your child.

**Most importantly, look after yourself**

None of this is easy, especially when you are tired. We all need time to relax and take care of ourselves. Parents/carers are often so busy thinking about everyone else that they can find it very hard to set aside time to do something they really enjoy for themselves. It may be as simple as having a bath in peace, reading a book, or seeing a friend. Without taking a break from caring, your health can suffer.

### Keep a focus on:

- Sense of purpose (having goals and something to aim for makes you better equipped to deal with difficult times).
- Positive mental attitude (having a positive but realistic approach to what you can achieve/manage).
- Connection with others (asking for help, sharing, talking).
- Determination (taking the first steps to change things and not giving up).
- Taking control (recognising the things we can change and what that action might be).
- Looking after yourself (having a healthy lifestyle, taking time to relax).
- Talk to your health visitor, they can offer you support with understanding your child's behaviour and help you understand what may help. Remember they are also there for you, so if you are struggling or are feeling down ask your health visitor for support.

(adapted from *Matthew Curtis: Managing Resilience in Difficult Times*: [cranfieldtrust.org](http://cranfieldtrust.org))

### Further information:

- **A short animation:** The British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) has produced an animation which summarises PBS. <https://bit.ly/3NVKzpG>
- **Information sheets:** The Challenging Behaviour Foundation provides information and support for family carers of people with severe learning disabilities and behaviours described as challenging. <https://bit.ly/2Z7mtTZ>
- **DVD for family carers:** "Challenging Behaviour: Supporting Change". This DVD is free to family/unpaid carers in the UK. To order it, download the Challenging Behaviour Foundation resource order form via the link: <https://bit.ly/2XJmCg0> or email: [info@theCBF.org.uk](mailto:info@theCBF.org.uk)

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