

## TIP SHEET

# General Strategies For Dealing With Problem Behaviours

The function of any behaviour is either to escape or to obtain objects, activities, attention, or sensory stimulation. It is important to thoroughly assess each situation and work to make the problem behaviour irrelevant, inefficient, and ineffective.

Problem behaviour can be made irrelevant by using preventative strategies such as modifying the environment, routines, tasks, personnel, teaching methods, grouping, and the timing of events. To make problem behaviour inefficient, teach an alternative to the behaviour by finding something that will serve the same function for the child but will be simple for him to do and that will work every time. The last step is to make the problem behaviour ineffective by changing the end results. It no longer helps the child to escape or obtain objects, activities, attention, or sensory stimulation. For instance, throwing puzzle pieces no longer gets the child out of completing this activity. He is helped to complete the puzzle before moving on to the next activity.

Remember--When attempting to change a behaviour, it may get worse before it gets better. Be patient and persistent when attempting to make change.

The following are general strategies for dealing with problem behaviour that serves the following functions.

### **Obtain Objects and Activities**

When the purpose for problem behaviour is obtaining an object or activity,

- Provide an appropriate replacement. Give the child another way to get the object or activity. For example, make access easier or provide more materials.
- Look for alternative methods of requesting the item or activity such as using the Picture Exchange Communication System, gestures, vocalizations, and words.
- Don't respond to problem behaviour as if it is communicative. For instance, when a child is screaming because he wants something, do not treat it as a request for that item.
- Do not provide any type of reinforcement for the inappropriate behaviours. Provide as little attention as possible. Redirect the child in a very neutral manner.

### **Obtain Attention**

If problem behaviour seems to be motivated by the need for attention,

- Attempt to ignore or provide as little attention as possible.
- Provide exaggerated attention and praise when the child is doing the right kinds of things.
- Teach the child to seek attention more appropriately by calling the person by name, taking the adult by the hand, tapping the adult on the shoulder, or by producing a specific sign or exchanging a picture symbol to make this request.

Remember that negative attention can be just as reinforcing to some children.

### **Obtain Sensory Stimulation**

If the child is seeking sensory stimulation in an inappropriate way,

- Replace! Determine what input the child is seeking and provide it in a more appropriate manner. For example, the child who constantly touches or pulls long hair might be able to get that same tactile input from a cheerleader pompom. An occupational therapy consultation will be helpful when identifying safe alternatives.
- When possible, direct the child's attention away from the sensory feedback by getting him busy with other activities.

### **Escape Objects and Activities**

As teachers you need to think carefully about children who attempt to escape certain kinds of objects or activities.

Consider these questions:

- Is the task too difficult for the child?
- Are the expectations clear?
- Are there sensory concerns?
- Was a warning provided prior to the transition to the activity?

If all of the above points have been addressed and the behaviour continues, the following strategies will address the behaviour.

- Ensure follow-through. Initially, this may mean that the child is expected to participate in the activity for an extremely minimal amount of time (e.g., sit at the snack table for twenty seconds).
- Provide reinforcement following the completion of the task or for any cooperation during the task.

- Introduce a task or activity that is easier and similar to the desired task.
- Teach the child to indicate his desire to end an activity by asking for a "break", saying/signing "no", or using a picture symbol.

### **Escape Attention**

Children who don't like attention may be trying to send you a message. Think about the following questions:

- Is the interaction too difficult?
- Is the child stressed?
- Are there sensory concerns such as difficulty with loud noises?

Try to:

- Slowly pair yourself with things or activities the child loves. This will make your attention much more tolerable and perhaps even fun.
- Reduce or modify your expectations.
- Teach coping strategies and stress-release techniques.

### **Escape Sensory Stimulation**

For children who do not like certain kinds of sensory stimulation,

- Modify the environment and play materials to reduce sensory input.
- Gradually expose the child to similar sensory experiences.
- Seek a consultation with an occupational therapist.

Most of all, it is important to remember not to force the child to participate in activities that he really does not like.

### **For more information:**

- Visit our workshops on [Sensory Stimulation](#) and the two-part series on [Understanding and Changing Behaviour - Why does he do that?](#) and [Planning for Change](#)
- Learn more about the [Picture Exchange Communication System](#) and all about [Using Visuals](#) in your classroom. They can make transitions easier, expand a child's play, and help teach social skills.
- Take a look at the tip sheet on [Changing Behaviour Through Attention and Ignoring](#).