

POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR TOOLKIT

PARENTS AND CARERS | EDUCATORS

Children with Down Syndrome may encounter various challenges that impact their behaviour and communication abilities. Understanding these challenges and implementing effective strategies can support their development and well-being. This fact sheet explores common challenges faced by children with Down syndrome and offers strategies to address them.

SOME CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME

These challenges encompass various aspects of communication, social interaction, and behaviour, which can pose significant hurdles for both the child and their caregivers. From difficulties in conveying needs to navigating language barriers, each challenge presents its own complexities that require thoughtful consideration and intervention.

Challenge #1 – The Needs of the Child

Every child has a right to be heard, and to be able to show us what they need.

For children with additional needs, it can be challenging for them to convey what they need. Even though their method of communication may be inappropriate, it is still crucial we (as trusted adults) seek to understand what is causing it.

Challenge #2 – Language Barriers

We know that individuals with Down syndrome can have difficulty with communication, particularly expressive language.

This can make reinforcing good behaviour difficult, as we can't always rely on using our words to explain why a certain behaviour is acceptable or not.

Challenge #3 – Attention

Individuals with Down syndrome are generally very social people, with great capacity to connect emotionally with others.

Especially in young children, this can show itself as a desire for attention – any kind of attention! Sometimes this means that negative behaviour can be unintentionally reinforced.

Challenge #5 – Showing Alternative Behaviour

Even if we can show children that a certain behaviour is undesirable or unacceptable – how do we show them the replacement behaviour?

For example, if a child shows love and affection with inappropriate physical contact, how can we teach them an appropriate way to show affection?

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Whilst understanding the challenges faced by individuals with Down syndrome is useful, it is more important to understand effective, proven strategies, tailored to meeting the needs of these individuals. The following section outlines some strategies which can be implemented in both home and school settings.

Strategy #1 – Build Relationships

Attachment theory has taught us that, for children, attachment to their caregivers is fundamental for healthy, happy lives.

Caregivers includes not only parents and carers but extended family, classroom teachers, assistants, professionals and specialists.

Some Research About Relationships

It can take longer for children with intellectual disabilities to build relationships with new people.

Once this attachment is formed, it is very strong, and children with Down syndrome have a clear preference to spend time with people to whom they have a strong attachment. They will also show a clear reduction in challenging behaviour for caregivers with whom they have a strong connection.

Some evidence suggests that children with an intellectual disability have a smaller scope for ‘networks’ of close relationships and they prefer a smaller group of strong relationships over a larger group of casual relationships.

An Interesting Finding

Many researchers into the area of special education find that – for the best educational and social development of children with additional needs, particularly intellectual disability – the relationship between caregivers is just as important as the relationship between these caregivers and the child.

This means that positive relationships between all stakeholders (parents and teachers, teachers and SLSOs, parents and specialists and so on) is fundamental to the optimal development of the child.

Implications

Children with Down syndrome will often demonstrate different behaviour (less desirable) with people they do not know very well.

Caregivers who know the child well will be able to ‘read’ the child’s emotions and needs, and will be able to pre-empt challenging situations before they arise (such as a trip to the hairdresser or dentist!)

In an environment like a school (particularly a secondary school) there are many caregivers. In a primary school, the main caregivers are the classroom teacher and Student Learning Support Officers/Teacher’s Aides. In secondary schools, this “pool” becomes much wider. This may result in children displaying different behaviours at school than they typically do at home.

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Strategy #2 – Use Visuals

Almost every study into the learning profile of individuals with Down syndrome indicates that they are far stronger visual learners than verbal learners.

Visuals are key to success, both at home and in the classroom.

Some Research About Visuals

Typically developing adults rely heavily on spoken language. When we are upset or frustrated, we rely on spoken language more.

More words, especially when they are spoke quickly, are even less likely to be processed by the child.

Not only does a visual schedule allow individuals with Down syndrome the opportunity to understand what is being asked of them, it naturally leads to the creation of a routine – which in itself is proven to be successful for almost all children.

Less is more when it comes to visuals.

Strategy #3 – Set Up the Environment

Children thrive on routines. Children with an intellectual disability thrive on routines more.

For our loved ones with Down syndrome, each day can sometimes present itself with more challenges, simply because it is harder to navigate the world.

Consistency makes it easier for children to make sense of the world, to predict what is coming next, and to know what the world expects of them.

Some Research About Environments

Environment typically refers to the space – the home, the classroom, the playground, or the office – where a child with additional needs might spend their time. It also refers to the people in these spaces.

For children with additional needs, navigating an environment where things are constantly changing is similar to adults spending time in a foreign country where no-one communicates, acts, eats or behaves in a familiar way.

The more consistent and ‘the same’ the environment and the people in it are, the more academic and social gains are observed.

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Implications

Environments cannot always stay the same. Children change grades, change schools and move houses. Consider how these changes can be made smoother by integrating what is familiar.

Sometimes, keeping an environment as “the same” as possible is actually a detriment to the child (though this is more prevalent in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder) as the child never experiences small-scale change – meaning that when a large-scale change happens, it is incredibly traumatic. In short: some change is good!

Setting up an environment also means making the lives of parents and carers easier – how can you structure the environment to make your life run more smoothly too?

Strategy #4 – Create a Reward System that Works

This is sometimes called a ‘token economy’. In schools, this is often literal. Children receive physical tokens for making good choices, which can be ‘cashed in’ for a reward. Children are often encouraged to work together to earn these.

For children with an intellectual disability, it is a tangible way to connect desirable behaviour with something pleasant and enjoyable.

Rewards vs. Bribery

Some parents and caregivers have concerns about the idea of a reward system as it feels a bit like bribery.

The question can be: shouldn’t our children/students behave appropriately because of what society expects of them, and it is the right things to do?

For children with additional needs, the answer is quite simply: no.

For children with an intellectual disability, the evidence shows clear and distinct differences in the brain. Things like task mastery and learning/retaining new skills are difficult – more difficult than it is for neurotypical children.

We need to define what ‘good behaviour’ is, and acknowledge it visually and physically when it occurs. For a child with an intellectual disability, a pat on the back could mean anything!

Implications

Reward systems, or token economies, can be very simple. They can be a sticker chart, a smiley face on a post-it note or a stamp card. Tokens are collected to reach a certain target, then they are “cashed in” for a reward.

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When a new behaviour/rule/pattern is being taught, the tokens should come fast and frequently. Name the behaviour when it occurs, using the same language every time.

Don't overload the child with expectations. Choose one or two areas you would like to focus on. This might be getting dressed in the morning, or a bedtime routine.

Keep the reward in the near future. Just as a consequence for a bad behaviour is meaningless if it comes too far after the event, a reward is meaningless if it is too far removed from the desirable behaviour.

Let the child set the reward. It could be going to the park, playing a game with mum or completing an arts/craft activity.

In supporting our loved ones with Down syndrome, it becomes evident that while challenges abound, implementing effective, consistent strategies provide a supportive environment for individuals to thrive.

For guidance on understanding behaviour triggers and understanding Positive Behaviour Support, we encourage you to explore our other fact sheets. We also have a range of printable resources, linked to research-based best practice, aimed specifically at supporting young people with Down syndrome. These include First/Then Boards, Routine Charts, Social Stories and more.

See our linked fact sheets:

[Understanding Common Behaviours in Children with Down Syndrome](#)

[What is Positive Behaviour Support?](#)

[Teacher Toolkit: Positive Behaviour Support for Students with Down Syndrome](#)

References

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