Understanding behaviour

This is a template for recording a particular behaviour that your child is displaying that you are finding challenging or distressing. The aim of this template is to help you to work out what the function of the behaviour might be so that you can try out new strategies to reduce the frequency or severity of the behaviour.

What do you mean by “function”?

The starting point is to think of all behaviour as a form of communication and a way of meeting needs. The function of the behaviour is the underlying reason why the person is showing the behaviour.

Why does this matter?

Sometimes a behaviour might be inappropriate or unacceptable. Traditionally the response to this has been punishment or consequences. Unfortunately, if the reason for the behaviour is not understood, then the behaviour may continue to occur. By trying to understand the underlying needs resulting in a behaviour taking place, we can help to find other ways for these needs to be met in a more appropriate way.

For example:

*Robert, a 5-year-old boy, has been getting into trouble at lunchtime by hitting out in the playground. As a consequence Robert gets sent inside, but the behaviour keeps on happening. Robert’s teacher realises that when he gets sent in, the boy calms down quickly and does not seem to mind that he is missing out on playing with friends. He seems happy to sit quietly at his desk or in the library corner. Robert’s teacher changes the lunchtime routine and lets Robert choose to stay in after he’s finished his lunch for a while before having a shorter play time outside. Robert’s hitting out behaviours reduce dramatically.*

In the example above, the function of Robert’s behaviour was to escape the busyness of the playground and to access the quiet and calm environment of the classroom. He was not able to communicate that this was what he wanted so he got overwhelmed and hit out. When he got sent inside as a consequence this reinforced the hitting behaviour as a way to escape the playground, so it started happening more. By addressing the underlying need, rather than punishing for the behaviour, Robert was able to begin to behave more appropriately.

Instructions for recording the behaviour and next steps:

1. Pick one key problem behaviour at a time. If there are several behaviours that concern you pick the one that is concerning you the most at the moment.
2. Use the form to write down details about this behaviour and any ideas you have at the moment for why it might be occurring.
3. Decide how long you are going to record the behaviour for. It is suggested that you try this for one or two weeks.
4. Use the form to record when the behaviour takes place as close to the time it happens as possible so that it is fresh in your mind.
5. When you are writing down the consequence, this means what the child actually experienced (rather than the action you took). So for example, if you gave the child a time-out, the consequence would be what the child experienced, e.g. sat alone in his room for 5 minutes.
6. You might have ideas as you go along, use the last column to write these down.
7. Once you have recorded the behaviours over your chosen time period look through the form for patterns across each column.
8. What does the pattern tell you about the behaviour’s function and what predicts its occurrence? You might want to think about the categories described below. These are not exhaustive.
9. What can you do with this information? What are you going to try? How are you going to know that it’s working? (e.g. reducing the frequency of the behaviour or exchanging it for an alternative behaviour?)

Possible predictors of behaviour

1. Demands/requests
2. Difficult task
3. Transition from one setting to another
4. Interruption of enjoyable activity
5. Alone/not receiving attention

Possible functions of behaviour (some examples):

Get or obtain… Escape/avoid…

… attention … demand/requests

… desired item/activity … activity

… self-stimulation/sensory feedback … person

… sensory overload

Key problem behaviour, describe what happens:

D

D

How long has this behaviour been happening?

How often does this behaviour take place? (circle the appropriate answer):

*Several times a day*

*Every day*

*Several times a week*

*Once a week or less*

*Once a month or less*

Thinking about the behaviour as communicating a need, write down any ideas about why it might be happening:

D

D

D

If you think there are particular times of day, situations, or events that make the behaviour more likely, write them here:

D

D

Thinking about the behaviour in this way might already have given you some ideas about strategies to try, if so write them here:

D

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Child’s name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Brief description of behaviour (e.g. kicking): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Day/Time | Location | What happened just before? | What happened afterwards/as a consequence? | Ideas about possible function of behaviour |
| *Example (behaviour – hitting self):*  *Monday 12 noon* | *Example:*  *Livingroom at home* | *Example:*  *Television was switched off, asked to come to table for lunch.* | *Example:*  *Hit self for around five minutes. I held him close and spoke to him softly. By about 12.15 he had calmed down enough to come for lunch but was tired/distressed.* | *Example:*  *Transition from one activity to another (watching TV to sitting down for lunch)? Could try extra warnings re: transition to lunchtime, possibly with pictures/visual timetable to support understanding* |
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