

# Quick Read Challenging Behaviour Guide



The Challenging  
Behaviour Foundation



This quick read challenging behaviour guide gives tips and strategies to help you and your family member during a period of new or increased challenging behaviour.

It will give you a quick start to using Positive Behaviour Support principles to reduce challenging behaviour. In reality there will be times when your best efforts cannot prevent a crisis, so there are also tips to plan how to respond.

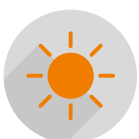
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## What is Behaviour that Challenges?

You will know what is challenging for you. Behaviour that challenges can be very distressing for a child or adult with learning disabilities and their family and carers.

Children and adults with learning disabilities may display behaviour that poses a challenge to others and/or puts their safety or others' at risk. Challenging behaviours can include:

- Aggression (e.g. hitting)
- Self-Injury (e.g. head banging)
- Destruction (e.g. throwing)
- Pica behaviour (eating inedible objects)
- Sexually inappropriate behaviour (such as undressing or masturbating in public areas)
- Other (e.g. sitting down and refusing to move)



## Why does it happen?

There is always a reason for challenging behaviour. It may not be easy to see at first. It is the child's or adult's best attempt at telling you something.

In many cases, challenging behaviour is a way for your family member to control what is going on around them, to get their needs met in order to make their confusing world more predictable. They also might be ill or in pain, or want to get something. In times of change, disruption or stress, your family member's behaviour can increase.

It is important to **understand the reasons** behind challenging behaviour and see it as a form of communication to know how to respond.

It shows that something is not right for the child or adult and they need some help and support.

## What can you do to reduce the likelihood of it happening?

There are ways to help the your family member display this behaviour less.



### Think about possible reasons for the behaviour.

What was the child or adult trying to communicate to you: what did they want or need?

### Look for triggers - what happened before the behaviour.

Who, what, when, where are all good questions to ask.

This will help build up a picture of things that may affect your family member's behaviour and give you the opportunity to make changes.

For example, is it on a Friday dinner time? Is that because they don't like fish? Has someone entered their space who they don't get on with? Is the neighbour's dog barking more than usual?

Consider what the child or adult "got out of" the incident. Was it attention? Something tangible? Avoiding doing something? Sensory feedback? If so, you can try to support them to meet this need in a more appropriate way next time.

Who?

What?

Triggers

When?

Where?

## Think of ways to help the child, young person or adult stay happy and calm.

What makes a good day for them? Can you make their favourite activities available? How can you help them to communicate with you or understand you/what is happening? Discuss these ideas with family or other carers, then try them out.

These are called 'proactive' or 'Green' strategies

Some examples are:



**Teach simple communication,**  
e.g. a sign for "finished"



**Teach skills, e.g. waiting for an activity**



**Talk to the child, young person or adult**  
in a way they respond well to e.g. firm,  
funny or calm



**Adjust the environment e.g. low**  
lighting, free of clutter



**Rewards**  
Can be spoken praise e.g. "well done",  
"that's great"; a thumbs up sign, pat on  
the back or something more tangible  
e.g. stickers on a board. It is important  
that the reward is given immediately so  
there is an association between praise  
and positive behaviour.



**Routine and structure**  
Make a visual plan of the day for the  
child or adult to follow so they know  
what will happen next. Be consistent  
with the routine(s) – predictability is  
important and will help your family  
member feel safe. If you need to change  
the routine, try to make gradual changes  
only and inform the child or adult about  
what will happen next. This will help to  
reduce any feelings of anxiety, keeps  
them involved in their day and is less  
anxiety provoking.



**Boundaries**  
Setting rules is important so that the  
child or adult knows what behaviour  
is expected of them. Use a variety of  
communication methods to help them  
understand what to do, e.g. pictures,  
signs and speech.



**Proactive strategies aim to keep your**  
family member in their "baseline"  
behaviour i.e. their usual, "good day"  
behaviour. The skill here is to identify  
what keeps them here and plan  
around these.

**Sometimes your family member will go**  
off their baseline and their behaviour  
will begin to change - this may be  
quite subtle.

## What can you do when behaviour becomes challenging?

Recognise the early warning signs of the behaviour (when your family member becomes anxious) and think about how to respond when you see these.

Knowing what helps them maintain their baseline or keep them calm/content means you can offer those things they like.



Always have a stack of prepared activities, distractions or diversions and use these to help calm the situation.

These are 'active' or 'Amber' strategies.

Some examples are:



Divert or distract



Use body gestures/signs



If safe, not responding to, or 'ignoring' the behaviour



Giving the child or adult what they need



Withdrawal from the situation



Stay as calm as possible

## Pain and illness

Always consider if your family member is in pain, discomfort or is ill. This may include such things as:

- Ear infections
- Urinary tract infections
- Constipation/bowel problems
- Epilepsy
- Dental problems
- Sensory needs
- Eyesight
- Pica (has the child or adult swallowed something inedible?)
- Side effects of medication

**If you think they could be unwell, contact their GP or call 111.**

Despite your best efforts, there will be occasions when a crisis incident does happen. This is not a sign of failure – new experiences happen, things change that you cannot control or have anticipated BUT it is important you plan for any such incident.

## What can you do if the behaviour is happening or about to happen?

When behaviour occurs, there are strategies to make sure your family member, you and others nearby are safe.

These are 'reactive' or 'Red' strategies.

Some examples are:



**Divert or distract to a preferred activity**



**Introduce a "new face"**



**Use body gestures/signs but never point your finger**



**If safe, try not responding to, or 'ignoring' the behaviour – but not ignoring the child or adult**



**Give your family member what they need** – you will need to understand how they communicate their need or want and use this option at the start of any escalation



**Withdrawal from the situation**

– an increase in space between you and your family member may help to defuse the situation



**Stay as calm as possible**, think about your breathing and try to exclude other people if you think they might make matters worse

In a crisis, people are often very anxious. Most of our communication is non-verbal, so we must be aware of what our body and face are communicating. If you appear anxious or panicky, you may increase the level of anxiety in your family member.

Use a low-arousal approach:



**Appear calm (even if you are not)** – lowering your voice & smiling to encourage mirroring, which helps to decrease the child's or adult's anxiety.



**Give personal space**



**Listen, don't bombard child or adult with questions.**



**Observe and be prepared to respond if required.**



**Consider eye contact, touch and noise** – your family member may be very sensitive to being "watched" and could increase their level of anxiety, so observe the child or adult from a distance.

Do not attempt to teach your family member new skills or ask them to think about what they are doing right now: this may lead to further escalation and when in a crisis, no one learns new skills no matter how hard you might try to teach them.

**Recognise the signs that the child or adult is recovering and calming down.**

## What can you do after the behaviour?

Be careful as there is a risk of the behaviour escalating again. Your family member will need time to return to their usual behaviour and may need extra space or time to calm down. It is a time to keep an eye on them but not be too intrusive.

These are 'post reactive' or 'Blue' strategies.

Some examples are:



Give them time and space



They may need a rest or a sleep



Something to eat or drink



A calm activity like TV



Go for a walk or sit in the fresh air if you can



Talk to someone and reflect



Check everyone is okay – do they or you need first aid or medical attention?



Share information with people who need to know



## What can you do if the Police are involved?

Some children and adults with a severe learning disability may come into contact with the police. This might be for a variety of reasons including that the child or adult is a victim of crime themselves or is in a 'crisis' that requires external support.

Whatever the purpose of a visit by the police, we know that this can be a scary prospect both for children and adults with learning disabilities themselves, and their families.

Concerns might include:

- How the police might perceive particular actions or behaviours
- How the police may respond to behaviours that challenge
- How the child or adult themselves might respond to the presence of the police in their home or 'safe' environment or to being spoken to by the police

We know how difficult crisis situations can be for children and adults with severe learning disabilities, and their families, particularly when it comes to communication. It can be difficult for the police to receive the information they require about a child's or adult's individual needs, either from the person with a learning disability or from others.

Please see the CBF's Police Grab Sheet to find out how to inform the Police about the needs of a vulnerable child or adult before, or during a crisis situation.

CBF's Police Grab Sheet



<https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/learning-disability-assets/cbfpolicygrabsheetfinal.pdf>

## Notes

You might find it helpful to note down on this page the behaviour that is challenging you right now, so you can think it through before speaking to CBF's Family Support Service or joining a CBF Behaviour Chat.



## More information

For more information about behaviour support, related topics and what support the CBF can offer you, please see our website:

**Support for families**



<https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/supporting-you/for-families/for-families.html>



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