

Understanding behaviour

How do we change 'difficult' behaviour and encourage 'good' behaviour?

Social strengths

Most researchers and observers agree that social understanding is usually a real strength for children and teenagers with Down syndrome. From the first months of life, they are smiling and enjoying interaction with everyone around them and they tend to be good at understanding emotional cues and social behaviours. This does not mean that they are well behaved at all times – like all other children and adolescents, they will often want more independence and control than is safe or appropriate for their age – but longer term, most teenagers and adults are socially competent and friendly individuals.

Behaviours are learned

Almost all of our behaviour is learned – much of it from imitating others in our social worlds from infancy to adult life. Social behaviours are mostly learned from imitating the behaviour of those around us, and other more educational, vocational or practical skills are usually taught. Rewards play a significant role in shaping our behaviour – think of the reaction of infants when we clap and praise them and how this almost always leads them to repeat the action. We are usually very responsive to pleasing others and being praised, and equally sensitive to being criticised or making someone cross, especially a loved one.

Psychologists have made systematic studies of behaviour over many years and shown that behaviours that are rewarded tend to increase and appear more often, while behaviours that are not rewarded tend to disappear. The technical term for a reward that increases a behaviour is a *reinforcer* (this may seem unnecessary jargon but some of the most common reinforcers are not always obvious rewards e.g. just getting attention is often reinforcing for a

child even though the attention may involve being told off).

Behaviours can be unlearned

It follows that if behaviours become more persistent when rewarded that they should disappear if not rewarded. In the jargon – if we want to extinguish (change) a behaviour, we must stop rewarding it. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that the adults around a child (and possibly the other children) need to change their behaviour if they want the child's behaviour to change. It is no use 'blaming' the child and expecting the child to change because we ask them to – especially when the child has limited language comprehension. We need to think about how we are reacting each time the child behaves in a difficult or inappropriate way and to realise that our reaction is usually rewarding – then decode how to stop rewarding the behaviour.

Behaviours need to be replaced

Often 'difficult' behaviours occur because a child does not have the positive or appropriate behaviours for the situation. For example, a child may throw toys or may disrupt other children in preschool or school because he or she does not yet know how to play constructively with the toy, or how to join in with the lesson. It is often, therefore, more important to decide what positive behaviours to teach a child rather than spend time deciding how to get rid of a behaviour you do not want.

The first two articles in this issue are both concerned with ways in which we can help children to develop appropriate behaviours. The first article is on sleep and covers more than behaviour issues, but the authors do explain that many of the bedtime and night waking

difficulties are behaviours that we, as parents inadvertently end up reinforcing – thus turning them into learned behaviours. The second article is concerned with managing daytime behaviour, with an imaginative emphasis on strategies for classroom or home which really focus on rewarding positive behaviour rather than spending time on the negative behaviours.

Build on the social strengths

Often children with Down syndrome are using their good social understanding to be 'naughty' or 'in control'. It is because they know how to get the adult to react the way they want that they are often so successful at the 'naughty' stuff! What we need to do is to help them to use their strengths to be fully socially included and successful, and this starts with not 'babying' or 'making excuses' for their inappropriate behaviours – a word with granny, auntie or even dad, may be needed here. It certainly helps to be sure all teachers, school staff and other children also do not 'baby' a child but expect age-appropriate behaviour.

It's worth the effort

Behaviour change programmes such as those described in the two articles really do work if you plan well and you are consistent. Difficult behaviour creates much stress for everyone and we are certainly not acting in a child's best interests when we allow difficult behaviour to continue. Being able to behave in a socially acceptable manner allows a child or teenager or adult join fully in the social life of the family, school and community – to have friends and to be happy.

Editor