

# Understanding challenging behaviour in children



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Find out more about how you can understand and respond to challenging behaviour in the children you care for

## **An introduction to challenging behaviour in children**

Behaviour is communication: it's the way children let us know what's happening to them emotionally and psychologically. When a child's behaviour is challenging, it's usually serving a purpose for them.

It may be a way of letting you know they're anxious or scared, or a way of them managing the big emotions we all have:

- rage
- terror
- delight
- horror
- despair
- shame.

Some children may show behaviour that doesn't match the emotion they're feeling. For example, a child who is raging may in fact be feeling despair. The mix-up here will come from experiences that have not helped them understand their own emotions or response to them.

This is an area that [children with autism](#) may struggle with. They often use behaviour to communicate and it's important that you recognise how their condition might shape the way they communicate.

Your organisation may use a particular model to work with children with autism and you should follow that model.

## **What lies behind children's behaviour?**

It's useful to be curious and ask yourself what the child's behaviour is trying to communicate and what they might need as a response to this behaviour?

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>What might be going on</b>
Distant, disengaged, shut off	'freeze' survival mode
Defiant, angry, aggressive	'fight' survival mode, feeling threatened/afraid
Looking for attention	needing attention, trying to make a connection
Withdrawn	fearful, cautious
Rude	self-protective, rejecting before being rejected
Not engaging	not feeling safe yet

Self-harm

coping strategy for emotional pain

Remember the above are possible reasons, not definite explanations for each situation.

The key to this will be the relationship you build with the young person and your ability to help them feel safe. Remaining emotionally warm, even when you're disagreeing with the young person will help to reduce their anxiety and sadness and help them regulate their emotions (engage their 'upstairs brain' – see below), more quickly.

## **The idea of an 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' brain**

A useful way of thinking about the impact of trauma on a child is an 'upstairs' and a 'downstairs' brain. The downstairs brain is where we process danger. This is linked to:

- Breathing
- Fight or flight reactions
- If you can't get away, you freeze. For babies this means sleep. For others disassociation.

The upstairs brain is where higher thinking skills happen:

- body control
- play
- empathy.

If a child is stuck in their 'downstairs brain' (shut down or screaming or running off), you'll need to use all your skills to help them feel safe enough to climb the stairs to their 'upstairs brain'. It's like literally holding their hand to climb the stairs. They will need all your patience, reassurance and consistency.

## **Providing a safe and supportive environment**

It's never too late for an emotionally warm, safe and supportive environment to make a difference. As a residential child care worker, you can play a really important role in helping children and young people:

- feel safe
- build their resilience
- learn the skills they will need to develop healthy relationships and navigate through life.

## **Dealing with challenging behaviour in children**

You must try to prevent challenging behaviour from happening in the first place by doing your best to make sure staff and other young people living in the home avoid any of their known 'triggers'.

If a child is communicating through behaviour that's difficult, the first priority is keeping yourself, and others physically and emotionally safe. Remember it may be the child is functioning from their 'lower brain' so there will be no point trying to reason with them. Their behaviour may be triggered from something in their past that will be hard for you to understand.

There are a number of ways to deal with challenging behaviour, including:

- putting space between the child and other children
- being a calm and reassuring presence, without using too many words
- giving the child enough space that they don't feel physically threatened but not so much that they feel abandoned

You should follow the child's care plan and this will have detailed information about how best to manage any challenging behaviour they may experience. Your home will have its own models but you may find this [video about 'Positive Behavioural Support'](#) useful.

[Online 'Positive Behavioural Support' course](#)

## **Restoring a feeling of safety to a child**

Remember the child may have experienced trauma and so the best thing you can do is restore their sense of immediate safety. Show them you care and help them to find calm.

## **Talking to a child about challenging behaviour**

Later, when things have settled down, chose a quiet moment and ask the child to think about what happened. Encourage them to be curious and reflect on their feelings. You can't help children change their behaviour by making them feel bad for what they've done. Remember they already feel bad.

Children who behave in the most difficult ways may need the most patience. Stick with it: a consistent, caring, calm adult can make a huge difference to the

child they are and the adult they will become. Sometimes the smallest gestures can make the biggest difference. By doing this you can help them change their behaviour.

Showing respect for the young people in your care, helping them talk through their problems and keeping calm (not shouting or yelling at them) has been shown to reduce stress and risk-taking behaviour in young people.

[Mind of My Own](#) produces apps for young people and adults to help them communicate their thoughts.

## **Supporting children to build trust**

For young people who find it hard to trust, being able to trust someone is a huge risk and takes time. They can see trust as 'all or nothing'. This can leave them feeling isolated and open to being exploited because when they do trust, they trust unquestioningly. Or else they feel horribly let down over what might seem like relatively trivial things.

Helping young people understand that trust is built up of lots of small things and people can be trustworthy in some areas and not in others will help them keep themselves safe.

You can model healthy relationships by being:

- kind
- consistent (so they know what to expect)
- empathic (children need empathy to be empathic)
- saying sorry if you get it wrong (we all do sometimes).

and above all you'll help them by keeping going and sticking with them.

## **Building children's resilience**

[Four ways to help young people in residential care build their resilience](#)

## **Useful resources (understanding challenging behaviour in children)**

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

## **We want your feedback**

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).