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PROMOTING POSITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON BEHAVIOUR

**Understanding Behaviour
A Behavioural Approach
Behaviour and Unmet Needs
Behaviour and Social Experience
Assisting to Understand Anger**

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PROMOTING POSITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON BEHAVIOUR

Imagine that you have just begun supporting someone who you hear has “significant behaviour problems”. As a Direct Support Provider (DSP), what immediately comes to mind for you? Often people feel afraid or think they will be unable to help, if the individual’s behaviour is of concern. This section is an introduction to the area of behaviour and is not intended to be prescriptive. The areas covered in the section include:

- ◆ Understanding Behaviour
- ◆ A Behavioural Approach
- ◆ Behaviour and Unmet Needs
- ◆ Behaviour and Social Experience
- ◆ Assisting to Understand Anger

The interpretations contained in this section are general in nature. Please refer to the resources section for additional information.

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR

The first step in understanding behaviour and supporting the individual is to focus on the importance of building a positive relationship with the person you support. This can be done by listening to the person, showing an interest in their life and experience, and guiding them to understand the affect of their behaviour on others.

Determining whether or not a behaviour is a “problem” is often a very personal issue. For example, in some families swearing might be seen as a serious concern, while in others it may be seen as a legitimate expression of anger.

If you’re unsure about whether or not a behaviour is a problem, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Is someone being hurt by this behaviour?
- ▶ Does the behaviour present the individual in a negative way, or will the behaviour push others away?

For Example

If someone:

- ➔ talks loudly in church while others are quiet, or
- ➔ walks away without paying for their lunch at a food court, or
- ➔ hugs a stranger on a transit bus,

He/she may be seen as not able to:

- ➔ attend church, or
- ➔ be independent in public, or
- ➔ have opportunities to form relationships with others.

Because acceptance is important if individuals are to be included, we may need to provide information and guidance about appropriate ways to act in various settings.

Describing Behaviour

Often, when someone's behaviour is inappropriate, our frustration may lead us to refer to the individual in a negative or demeaning way. We might say the person is aggressive, mean, depressed, or bad. Instead of using judgmental labels such as these, try to describe the behaviour as it was observed; tell specifically what you saw.

Instead of saying:

John is an aggressive bully.

Say:

John hit his co-worker on the arm at 9:15 this morning.



Incident Reports: In some situations, behaviour will need to be reported in a written format. Review the Department of Families ***Direct Support Provider Orientation Manual*** provided by your supervisor to determine if a written incident report is needed. Follow the format outlined in the manual. Ensure that your descriptions of the behaviour are clear, accurate, and non-judgmental.

Initial Explorations

For individuals who have difficulty with verbal communication, behaviour may be the only way of letting others know how they feel. When you think about someone's behaviour, initially ask the following:

- Is there a physical or medical explanation for the behaviour?
- Is the individual experiencing major changes in his/her life?
- Is it possible that the person has a psychiatric disability?

The individual's behaviour may be communicating that there is a problem in these areas and that professional help is needed.

Interpreting Behaviour



The way you respond to someone's behaviour depends on how you interpret it. Therefore, it is important for the DSP to understand the individual and his or her behaviour in order to support successful outings in the community. Using the following case study, we will consider four different interpretations of behaviour. Each interpretation will lead to a different response.

Consider the following Case Study:

You are a DSP supporting a twenty-four year old woman named Susan. She lives with her parents and you spend time with her each Wednesday evening. During the day she attends a day program. Susan has three younger brothers and sisters and her family is very busy. Your role is to support Susan to develop interests outside of her home and explore various activities in the community.

Susan's parents feel that she spends too much time watching TV and that she needs to get out more. You sometimes have difficulty getting Susan to come with you and while you try to choose typical, age-appropriate activities to do with Susan, she seems reluctant to tell you what she enjoys.

Last week when you were at A&B Sound looking at music CDs she sat down on the floor beside a CD rack and refused to leave the store. She was holding five CDs and she refused to return them and get up and leave the store. As you tried to persuade Susan she began to cry and when you tried to take the CD's from her she screamed and kicked at you to get away from her.

A BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH

This approach looks at changing a behaviour by influencing:

- ① the antecedent – what happens before the behaviour
- ② the behaviour
- ③ the consequence – what happens after the behaviour

This approach holds that if behaviours are followed by a pleasant consequence they are more likely to be repeated. If they are followed by an unpleasant consequence they are less likely to be repeated.



If you look at Susan's situation and say, "I'm going to ignore Susan's behaviour," or "I'm going to get Susan to sit in the car for a timeout," or "I'm going to get her to hold more CDs so she'll get tired of doing that," or "I'll get Susan to repeatedly apologize to the staff in the store for the disruption," you are using behavioural approaches. You are providing something unpleasant that may decrease the chances of Susan repeating her actions. These are negative responses and can lead the individual to feel like they have little control. It is better to use positive consequences to encourage desired behaviour.

You might also try to influence Susan's behaviour before you go to the store. If you know that she has difficulty in situations like the music store, you might prepare her by reminding her about appropriate behaviour when shopping. You might also suggest that after your visit you will do something

she enjoys – like going for a walk in the park. In this way you reinforce her good behaviour at the store with a positive consequence.

Important points about Reinforcement:

Reinforcement should:

- ➔ *Be appropriate to the age of the person.*
- ➔ *Occur in a natural setting and be as natural as possible.*
- ➔ *Be truly positive for the person. Things that are reinforcing to you might not be reinforcing to the person you are working with.*

Never:

- ➔ *Make your relationship dependent on the individual's good behaviour.*
- ➔ *Make food (meals, snacks, drinks) dependent on a behaviour.*
- ➔ *Deny the individual their right to privacy and personal possessions.*

Remember

Whenever we attempt to change or stop someone's behaviour, no matter how good the reason, we are influencing their freedom to make choices about their own actions. This requires thoughtful reflection on our part and support from the other people in the individuals' life.

BEHAVIOUR AND UNMET NEEDS

This perspective suggests that inappropriate behaviour occurs when someone is attempting to get their needs met. Abraham Maslow is the

psychologist associated with this approach. He described several levels of **need** that human beings have.

**What Do
You
Think?**

When you consider Susan's situation, let's suppose that you concluded she became upset in the music store because she wanted the CD's so that she could show them to her friends and gain social acceptance. This would demonstrate her need for belonging.

Susan was trying to fill this need by getting something that would impress others. Her behaviour was motivated by a desire to meet this need. If DSPs understand that the need for belonging is very important for Susan, they will try to ensure that she develops friendships and stays in touch with the important people in her life.

Promoting Positive
Perspectives on
Behaviour

If you think the individual may have Unmet Needs, ask yourself:

- Does the individual feel physically comfortable? Do they have enough food, clothing, and shelter?
- Does he/she feel safe and secure?
- Does the individual feel a sense of belonging in this world? Are they accepted and included in the community?
- Does the individual feel confident and self assured? Do they have opportunities to be independent?
- Does the individual feel fulfilled in life? Are their gifts and contributions valued?

If an individual learns to meet their needs through appropriate behaviour, they may no longer need to act in inappropriate ways.



BEHAVIOUR AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

Psychologist, Herb Lovett, wrote about the relationship between **behaviour** and **social context**. He pointed out that even though someone's behaviour may be hard to understand, it in some way makes sense to them. Individuals respond according to their personal experience.

People with disabilities in our society often do not have the same opportunities as others. If we imagine a woman Susan's age that doesn't have a disability, we might envision someone:

- ◆ Working at a good job
- ◆ Having just completed post-secondary education
- ◆ Living in her own small apartment which she decorated with the help of her friends
- ◆ Dating a guy with a red sports car

- ▶ Taking vacations in Mexico
- ▶ Planning to spend a year teaching English in Japan

If Susan, in our example, wants to do these things it will be more complex because of her social context. As a society, we have not made it very easy for someone with a disability to achieve the things that their peers take for granted.

**What
Do You
Think?**

When you think about Susan in terms of how her behaviour is influenced by her social situation, you might observe:

- ➡ *Susan is in the store watching customers purchase CDs*
- ➡ *She would like to do the same thing that she sees others doing*
- ➡ *She picks up the CDs she would like*
- ➡ *She is told to return her CDs and she becomes upset*

Here the real problem is that Susan has no money. This is not an issue related to her disability – it is related to her lack of opportunity for employment. This is her social context. Her behaviour makes sense in light of what she has observed. In this instance, being poor is more of an issue than having a disability.

We need to more fully understand the social situation of the individuals with disabling conditions that we support. Lovett would argue that getting to

know the individual and their unique social situation is the most important step in understanding and assisting people.

ASSISTING TO UNDERSTAND ANGER

Anger is a natural human emotion. It can range from mild irritation to intense rage. The more you can provide helpful information about anger to individuals you support, the more they will be able to manage their anger. In situations where someone's anger seems to be out of control it is important to have some strategies that will help the individual regain control.

- ◆ **Communication:** Try to have the individual tell or show you why he or she is angry. For people with communication difficulties this may require patience and focused listening on your part. Acknowledge the person's anger. If you think there is something underlying the anger – try to understand what it is.
- ◆ **Understanding Emotion:** Talk with individuals about different emotions such as happiness, anger, fear, and sadness. This will help individuals to describe what they are feeling.
- ◆ **Relaxation:** Try to slow the action down when someone is becoming angry. For some people it helps to count or say something repetitive, for others, it helps to breathe slowly and deeply, and for others it may be helpful to leave the situation in order to collect themselves. Encourage the individual to find a strategy that works and to practice it when they feel themselves begin to become angry.
- ◆ **Problem solving:** Anger may be the outward expression of feeling hurt, being frustrated, or feeling powerless. As a DSP it is important to recognize that anger is the result of these feelings. Responding in an angry or punitive way will

not help the person. It is important to determine the problem at the source of someone's anger.

*For more information on problem solving see **Promoting Effective Communication** in this guide.*

- ▶ **Using Humour:** Humour can be helpful in diffusing anger. It can sometimes break a pattern of increasing emotional tension. It can help the individual see things from a different perspective and diffuse anger. However, humour is a very personal and unpredictable thing. Sometimes it will work and sometimes it will not. Sarcasm and personal put downs are never effective uses of humour and should be avoided.

So . . .

It is often very difficult to understand someone else's behaviour. It can be caused by many different things and even with our best efforts we may never truly understand what someone else is feeling. In spite of this, always try to understand what the person is telling you through their behaviour. You might ask yourself, "If I was behaving in this way, how would I be feeling, and, what might I be trying to communicate to the people around me?"

When someone you support becomes upset:

- ➡ *remain calm and helpful*
- ➡ *ensure the safety of others by having them move out of harms way*
- ➡ *speak to the person in a gentle and supportive way*
- ➡ *provide helpful guidance to the individual*
- ➡ *always model respectful behaviour*
- ➡ *if possible, help the person “save face” by providing a way out of the situation*

These strategies will help you build a meaningful relationship with the individual you support.

Individual Reflection:

- 1 Think about the various ways that behaviour can be interpreted. These include: Behavioural Approaches, a Needs Approach, and a Social Experience Approach. Even though the descriptions were brief, decide which example most closely resembles your typical response to difficult behaviour. Is there another response you would like to try?
- 2 Recall an incident where you did something that others might describe as “inappropriate behaviour”. Maybe you yelled at your neighbour, or lost your temper in traffic, or were upset with your child at the store. When you were in the “moment” of feeling most angry or upset – Is there anything someone

could have said or done that might have been helpful? Could the situation have been turned around?

Group Discussion:

- 1 Have a member of your group of DSPs describe someone who has a behaviour problem that is harmful to him/her or others. As a group, try to increase your understanding of the person by addressing the following questions:
 - Describe the person's history or story.
 - Imagine how you might respond to the person's situation if he/she didn't have a disability.
 - Identify the individuals in this person's life who truly love him/her.
 - Try to figure out what the behaviour means for the person. What is he or she trying to communicate to you through the behaviour.

As a group develop a list of possible responses to the person's behaviour.

Resources

Hingsberger, D. (1996). **Behaviour Self: Using Concepts to Understand and Work with People with Developmental Disabilities**. Eastman, Quebec: Diverse City Press.

Lovett, H. (1985). **Cognitive Counseling and Persons with Special Needs**. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Lovett, H. (1996). **Learning to Listen: Positive Approaches and People with Difficult Behaviour**. Baltimore: Praeger Publishers.

McGee, J., & Menolascino, F.J. (1991). **Beyond Gentle Teaching: A Nonaversive Approach to Helping Those in Need**. New York: Plenum Press

The following Websites may be useful:

- 1) www.gentleteaching.com for information about Gentle Teaching
- 2) www.BehaviorAdvisor.com this is a good site for lots of general information about behaviour. It's fun and interesting.
- 3) Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift. These names will lead you to an excellent site on behaviour and disability.
- 4) www.peacepower.info/ is a site that describes various ways of supporting adolescents struggling with identity and aggression
- 5) Check out Nathan Ory's website. Type in Nathan Ory and you'll get some great information on the relationship between disability and language.