

What is Challenging Behaviour?

Note: Please also see the 'What is Positive Behaviour Support?' information sheet at autismspectrum.org.au/pbs#Resources

Challenging behaviour is persistent behaviour that causes difficulties and limits a person's ability to have a good life. It's called 'challenging' because it challenges everyone who supports the person to understand why it is happening and to work together to find a solution.

Why does it happen?

1. People on the autism spectrum have a range of strengths, abilities and specific support needs. For example, all people on the autism spectrum have some difficulty in being able to communicate and will feel strong frustration if they are not supported to communicate their needs. In this situation a person may use other ways (such as behaviours) to get their message across. Often, these behaviours 'pay off' - parents, teachers and others respond and give the person what they want and then the behaviour is learned over time (this isn't to say you should just ignore behaviour). Over time, a build-up of challenging behaviour can result in fun activities being stopped, relationships being strained and negative perceptions of the person, all leading to a poor quality of life for the person and their family. It can be difficult to escape from these situations.
2. Providing good quality support for people on the Autism Spectrum requires additional knowledge that is beyond everyday parenting or teaching, and a range of supports. Without this additional knowledge and support (and despite everyone's best efforts) it is possible that there is a mismatch between a person's support needs and what is being provided to them. This mismatch can increase the likelihood of challenging behaviour. Our bodies are made to react to challenging situations in a particular way ('fight, flight or freeze') and it can be difficult to respond calmly and rationally to challenging situations. Challenging behaviour is sometimes viewed as a deliberate refusal to do what is asked and the punitive strategies that can be used in these situations may make the situation worse. It is important to remember that autism is a complex and varied condition. There may be many reasons why the person can't do what is asked, rather than that the person deliberately won't do it. It isn't helpful to try to work out any difference between 'autistic behaviour' and 'typical behaviour'; in reality how you understand it and respond to it should be in the same positive way. PBS recognises that families are lifetime supports and experts on their children and should be at the centre of all communication and decision-making.
3. Just as people who use a wheelchair have a right to everyday environments that meet their specific needs and allow them to access life freely and fully, people on the autism spectrum are the same. We know that providing a predictable day that allows for choice and control and gives access to preferred activities, using strategies to support communication, social and sensory needs, having well organised and structured environments and learning activities that build on a person's strengths are all part of autism-friendly environments. We wouldn't say that a person in a wheelchair has 'challenging behaviour' for not walking up the stairs, and similarly, we should focus on providing autism-friendly environments where there is challenging behaviour rather than labelling or blaming the person. We live in a society that tends to favour more emotionally driven reactive and punitive approaches to challenging behaviour (of any type) - sometimes referred to as 'tough love' or 'old fashioned discipline'. Real discipline is using effective ethical and evidence based proactive and positive approaches. This can lead to misunderstanding about the causes of and solutions to challenging behaviour and those muttered comments in the supermarket.

We encourage a culture where there is a careful use of language around challenging behaviour. We encourage people to recognise that the ownership of behaviour is shared among all elements involved in the interaction not just the individual. For example, it is more accurate to say "there is challenging behaviour" than to say "he/she has challenging behaviour".

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