

# Learning to become a **Behaviour Detective**

An educational handbook for families that include children with neurological/cognitive differences.



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# Learning to become a **BEHAVIOUR DETECTIVE**



Inside, you will find tips and tricks for understanding challenging behaviour, possible causes of the behaviour, and some ways to help limit or avoid challenging behaviours. Keep in mind that these are not one size fits all solutions, not all of these strategies will work for all individuals and you might need to try more than once.

## What are Neurological/Cognitive Differences?

Neurological/cognitive differences refer to individuals whose brain wiring differs from what is considered typical. This includes individuals who are neurodiverse (including autism, ADHD, PTSD, FASD, and more).

## What Is Challenging Behaviour?

Challenging behaviour is behaviour that threatens or is likely to cause harm. Your child may make threats, hit, bite, scratch, swear or curse, or throw objects at others.

Challenging behaviour is not always the same. It may be mild or dangerous and could last minutes to hours.

Your child may seem angry with you, and this may hurt your feelings. But remember, this is not their goal.

Most challenging behaviour in children living with neurological/cognitive differences happens because they cannot communicate their wants and needs.

Remember, your child is NOT being challenging to make you angry or sad.

# Why is my Child's Behaviour Challenging?

ATTENTION	ESCAPE	SENSORY ESCAPE	NEED OR WANT SOMETHING
<p><b>"Pay attention to me please!"</b></p> <p>Example: When Sophia's mother is on the phone or feeding her little brother, Sophia pulls the dog's tail.</p>	<p><b>"Get me out of here! I'm scared! I don't want to do that!"</b></p> <p>Example: At the doctor's office, Logan runs away from his parents, throws items at the doctor and hides under chairs.</p>	<p><b>"I like/don't like how this feels/sounds/looks/tastes/smells; this object or action makes me feel better/worse."</b></p> <p>Example: When Pablo's mother tries new shoes on him at the store, he kicks her cries and melts down on the floor.</p>	<p><b>"I would like to have/keep this; go there/stay here; do this/keep doing this"</b></p> <p>Example: Whenever it's time for bed and Grace's parents have to take her ipad away, she bangs her head against the wall and cries for hours.</p>

# Behaviour Detectives

## look for clues!

**What is your child trying to tell you? When your child's behaviour becomes challenging, take note of the behaviour and the environment. You will likely see a pattern over time. Knowing what situations and environments trigger your child's challenging behaviours can be helpful for solving the mystery of what they may be trying to tell you, and how to prevent them in the future.**

### Behaviour Clues

- What does the behaviour look like?
- Who or what is it directed toward? (Person, object, pet)
- Is the child using words or gestures?
- Do they seem sad, angry, or excited?

### Environmental Clues

- Who is present? (mom, dad, siblings, other visitors in the home, pets, teacher, peers, strangers in the community, etc.)
- Where does the behaviour happen? (In the car, at school, in the kitchen, at the grocery store, at the park, etc.)
- When does the behaviour happen? (Before bed, when waking up, before mealtime, during mealtime, after school, on rainy days, etc.)
- What happens right before the behaviour begins? (Child is told "no" or "wait"; they are playing with a favourite item or doing a favourite activity; the child is asked or told to do something, etc.)

# SENSORY PROCESSING

Since children living with neurological/cognitive differences often experience their world differently than other children, it is important to understand how different sensations in the world affect them. Once you understand more about how the world affects them, you can make changes to their surroundings to better meet their needs.

## Visual (Sights)

**Over-responsive:** Your child may be distracted by moving objects, turn away from you when you are talking close to them, squint or avoid bright lights, or have trouble finding a specific toy in a group of toys.

**How to help:** Provide sunglasses or a hat for indoor and outdoor use. Use soft lamps rather than bright overhead lighting. Limit the amount of details and moving objects on ceiling, walls, and shelves.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may sit very close to the T.V. or bright lights, or hold toys very close to their eyes when playing. Your child may not notice small details.

**How to help:** Rule out vision problems. Allow your child to play with safe toys with moving parts. Use sound or gentle touch to get your child's attention.



## Auditory (Sounds)

**Over-responsive:** In loud environments your child may cover their ears often, scream, run away or hide. Your child may be distracted by music or sounds.

**How to help:** Try noise cancelling headphones. Keep verbal instructions short and simple or use visuals instead. Create social stories that discuss what might happen or noises that might be heard. Create a quiet environment for when your child needs to concentrate.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may seem like they are ignoring you, or like they cannot hear you when others can. Your child may hold loud music to their ears or turn up the volume too loud.

**How to help:** Use headphones so your child can listen to music without disturbing others. Use visuals such as waving to gain attention instead of saying their name.



## Touch

**Over-responsive:** Your child may prefer to only touch certain fabrics, refuse to wear

some clothes, or dislike their hands being messy.

**How to help:** Be creative with clothing: cut out tags or try different types of material until you find one your child likes.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may touch everything, or they may pinch or harm

themselves. They might enjoy getting messy during play.

**How to help:** Give your child something to hold onto and explore with their hands during other activities (soft, squishy, textured). Provide opportunities for messy play in a structured setting, like playing with a mixture of cornstarch and water. Provide activities to keep hands busy or to provide different sensations on the skin.



## Smell

**Over-responsive:** Your child may smell scents that others do not. Avoid places with strong smells (restaurants, public bathrooms), or teach them to breathe through their mouth instead of their nose.



**How to help:** Avoid strong scents when with your child. Use products with a scent that you know your child likes to give them control over their environment.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may smell everything they touch, or they might not notice their own smelly diaper or odours.

**How to help:** Provide safe, non-toxic items to smell like: food, scented toys, or fresh laundry. Supervise your child when they smell items like bath products, flowers, air fresheners, or perfume.

## Oral

**Over-responsive:** Your child may refuse to brush their teeth or might gag when eating certain foods.

**How to help:** Introduce new foods slowly, don't force a certain food if a child is refusing. A child may gag because of the food's temperature, texture, size, or taste. Consider all of these. Try to buy consistent brands. Ask for help from a nutrition counsellor to make sure your child is getting all the nutrients they need to grow.



**Under-responsive:** Your child may put everything in their mouth (toys, clothes, fingers), or bite themselves or others.

**How to help:** Try jewellery made for chewing (chewellery) or a loose bandana around your child's neck for them to chew on to prevent them from putting dangerous objects into their mouth.

## Proprioception (Movement)

Proprioception is the sense that gives our bodies information about the position of our limbs in relation to one another and in relation to our environment. It allows us to move our body without having to use other senses like vision.

Your child may break toys or hurt others by accident, they may jump or crash into things often, pull or stretch their clothing, or use too much pressure with toys and people.

**How to help:** Encourage your child to do heavy work activities that use their muscles in different ways like jumping, bouncing, swinging, carrying heavy items, or eating chewy or crunchy foods. Provide your child with "helper" tasks such as carrying a grocery bag, opening a heavy door, or picking up toys.

## Vestibular (Balance)

Vestibular is the sense that gives our body information about changes in head position and movement. It allows a child to coordinate movements with confidence and control during daily activities while staying balanced.

**Over-responsive:** Your child may seem overly cautious when moving, gets seasick from cars, escalators, and elevators, or easily lose their balance.

**How to help:** Introduce new movements or body positions (going upside down) slowly and be sure your child knows they are safe. Give safe opportunities to practice balance, like sitting or lying on an exercise ball. Never force your child to go upside down if they don't like it.

**Under-responsive:** Your child may be a thrill seeker (jumps off high places). They may lean their head to one side regularly or prefer to be upside down.

**How to help:** Provide safe activities that put your child's head in different positions or make them balance, like gymnastics, tumbling, swinging, dancing, or yoga.



# Tips to Prevent Behaviours

These are some strategies which can be used with all children but can be especially helpful for children with neurological/cognitive differences. As you begin to understand more about your child's behaviour, you can use these strategies to help reduce the frequency of challenging behaviours.

## 1. Follow a Routine



Having a routine helps all children, but routines are especially important for children living with neurological/cognitive differences. Routines help children know what to expect and when activities are going to happen. It's hard for children with neurological/cognitive differences to understand changes or unexpected events, so try to stick to routine as much as possible.

**Visuals:** Children living with neurological/cognitive differences can have difficulty understanding language, so using pictures can help them understand their schedule. Make a schedule with simple pictures that represent each part of their day. Put these up where the child can see them and bring them with you on outings.

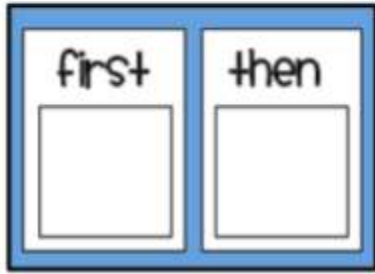
Social stories are used to teach behaviours you would like to see in your child. You can create a social story about any situation, such as going to the dentist.

Create a social story that talks about what to expect when you are going to a new place (what will it look like and sound like, what should the child do in this situation). Repeat these social stories as often as possible.

## 2. Social Stories

## 3. Warning Before Changing Activities

Children living with neurological/cognitive differences often find transitioning to a new place or activity hard. They need lots of



warning before they can become comfortable in a new situation or environment. Even if it is a familiar environment, it is important to be consistent.

**Visual Timer:** Try using visual timers so that your child knows exactly how much time they have before they need to change activities.

**First/Then:** Try to use first, then language as much as possible. For example, first we do our homework, then we play on the computer. This tells your child what they are expected to be doing now and what to expect next.

Instead of telling your child what you don't want them to do, tell them what you do want them to do.

For example, instead of saying no hitting say, soft hands. You can also try and redirect your child to an activity that they enjoy

## 4. Use Positive Language

## 5. Learn How to React



How you react to your child can help to decrease or increase their challenging behaviour. It is important to promote calmness in your child.

Challenging behaviours often occur after a child is told to do something. By decreasing the amount of demands or requests on your child, challenging behaviours will be less likely to occur.

- Try to stay calm. Avoid tense muscles, keep your breath slow and regular.
- Try to give your child personal space and keep your hands off them as much as possible, unless it is to prevent injury.
- Try to avoid intense eye-contact.
- Be aware of your tone of voice. Speak in a slow, calm, soft voice.
- Try to distract or redirect them.

## 6. Other Helpful Things You Can Do When Your Child's Behaviour is Challenging

- Talk about things they like or things they find calming.

# Taking Care of Yourself

**For you to understand your child's behaviour, you have to understand your own! Just like your child's behaviour is affected by the world around them, your behaviour is too. Everyone experiences stress, but parents of children living with neurological/cognitive differences are at greater risk for experiencing stress than other parents.**

**It is important to take care of yourself and not compare yourself to other parents. Focus on learning to notice when you are becoming stressed and using calming strategies to give yourself a break.**

## Calming Strategies

Deep breathing for 1-5 minutes  
(breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth)

**Take a shower or bath**

Go for a walk

**Take time to do something you love in your day  
(even if it's only for 5-10 minutes)**

Focus on the here and now  
(don't think any further than the next 5 minutes)

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