

UNDERSTANDING (ALL) THE REASONS CHILDREN ACT IN CHALLENGING WAYS

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Imagine you have been unwell for several months - intermittent, low level but unpleasant symptoms – stomach pain, headaches and dizziness. A GP can't find anything wrong with you and so you try diet changes, vitamins and getting more sleep – none of which makes a difference. You start to worry about whether you have a serious illness, - and feel frustrated about having to take time off work/social activities.

Eventually a specialist diagnoses you with a particular medical condition. Unfortunately, it can't be "cured" – but you now know how to manage it, what triggers it and how to make symptoms less severe. Almost immediately, even though you still don't feel well, your overall suffering eases.

Knowing *causes of problems* often makes us feel significantly better and helps us manage them more effectively - even if the problems themselves don't disappear.

The same principle is true when parenting children with particularly difficult or challenging behaviours.

When we have an accurate and thorough understanding of the factors which cause children to act in "difficult" ways, we almost always feel less frustrated, more able to respond effectively and more capable of supporting children to act differently in the long term.

Unfortunately, this is not easy. It often feels completely baffling when children act in challenging ways ("it comes entirely out of nowhere").

Even if we do think we know why our kids have done something difficult - it is often just a very broad level of understanding (because he has X or Y diagnosis), or feels like something we can't do anything about (she was just born that way – or he watches the older kids at school and copies them).

Although these explanations for challenging behaviours may very well be 100% accurate, they are not a) detailed enough, or b) include enough relevant, current and controllable factors for them to be useful in helping us know what to do next.

Let's take an example.

Imagine you have a 7-year-old child (let's call her Sophie) living with ASD. You are at the park with Sophie and her friend, tell her you have to leave soon and almost out of nowhere, she gets extremely angry and upset, starts yelling/crying and hitting you.

You might have some understanding about why she has acted this way ("she doesn't want to go"/ "her ASD makes transitions difficult" or "she has a strong-willed temperament") but this type of explanation doesn't help you know what to do to help Sophie to (in the long term) manage her emotions better.

In contrast, here is a list of more detailed, and potentially helpful reasons for Sophie's behaviour.

- Sophie doesn't fully understand that she will be able to come back to the park again soon (she doesn't know your plan to take her back next week)
- Sophie feels overwhelmed by frustration, because it was nearly her turn to be "the queen" in the game she was playing and she hasn't had a turn of that role all day

- Sophie isn't very good or quick enough at using words to express why she is disappointed and what she wants. So she reverts to the only language she has to express her pain - loud wailing, kicking and screaming.
- Sophie doesn't have any understanding that her yelling/hitting behaviour is embarrassing or particularly difficult for you to manage in public (and so has no reason to try to stifle these instincts).
- In the past, when Sophie has hit you and yelled, you have often (understandably) felt it was easier to just let her have what she wants, which has unfortunately "taught" (often just at a subconscious level) Sophie that this behaviour often makes things better.
- Sophie was actually in the early stages of getting mild cold that afternoon and was likely feeling extra fragile and tired.
- Once Sophie started crying, her emotional system quickly went into "overload" and she was even less capable of calming herself down.

Having this kind of understanding for Sophie's behaviours usually means we would be able to better support her to act in different ways in the future.

Improving our understanding of children's difficult behaviour

Child mental health professionals who are working with children use multiple models and evidence-based theories about why children act in challenging ways. Understanding these models and theories usually takes many years of study/training and experience.

In this article I am going to try to simplify all of these concepts and schools of thought into a more simple model. We will lose some of the details and nuances – but hopefully it will still help you have a good overview of what might be going on in any given situation.

First, it's important for me to say that when we are thinking about why kids act in challenging ways, there are a number of *background factors* which make it more difficult for some children to act in positive ways, to manage their emotions, feel co-operative and to follow instructions.

By background factors, I mean the brains/bodies kids are born with, **or** the big life situations they have experienced which make it tougher for them to act in positive ways. These might include mental health conditions, disabilities, genetic factors, challenging life experiences and others. In your child's case, we could point to the xxxx (include relevant causes) as reasons why it is sometimes tough for (child) to act in positive ways.

However, as well as these *background* causes, there are also some more *immediate* causes or reasons which can lead to children acting in difficult ways.

Specifically, we can think about *three categories* of causes of and reasons for children's difficult behaviour behaviours. They are as follows:

1. **K**nowledge and skills gaps.
2. **I**mbalance in the incentives for acting in certain ways
3. **D**istress.

You will see the initials of these categories are K.I.D – which hopefully helps you remember them. Let's go through each of them in more detail.

1. Knowledge and skill gaps

Children have less knowledge about themselves, other people, language and the way the world works than adults do. They also don't have as many skills in moving their bodies, expressing themselves, communicating with others and coping with difficult situations as adults do.

Many examples of challenging behaviour in children happen because their smaller brains and younger bodies simply don't know as much, or aren't good at something as they need to be yet.

There are thousands of examples we could use, but just a few are as follows:

A child who is loudly crying from a (relatively) minor disappointment *may not be very skilled just yet at using language* to communicate how they feel and want they want.

A child who hits another child *may not fully understand* the impact of their hitting on that child.

A child who doesn't follow an instruction to pack up may not be skilled at *switching their attention* from what they are doing to a new activity.

It is often very useful – when a child acts in a challenging way – to ask – *what skills and knowledge might be missing here which is contributing to this behaviour?*

2. Incentive imbalance

A second category of causes and reasons for difficult behaviour in children happens when there are *more incentives for the child to do something challenging* than there is for them to *do something positive* – we might call this an incentive imbalance.

An incentive imbalance can happen when a child consistently (usually accidentally) *experiences good things after acting in a challenging way*. This of course means the child is more likely to keep acting in this same way, to get the same good things.

For example, if a child *always gets to go first* if they “push in” when in a line waiting for the slippery dip, and there seems no reason for them to stop doing this - they are more likely to keep doing this.

If a child *feels much better and less tense* after hitting another child and they don't see anything unhelpful about this, they are more likely to do it again.

A different kind of incentive imbalance might happen if a child has *not* experienced (or know of) any or many *benefits* from acting in a particular *positive* way. If this is true, they are less likely to do this – or if they do it once – to do it again.

For example, if a child has never been thanked or had anything positive happen after they are kind to someone – they are less likely to act in kind ways.

A child who doesn't know why it is important for them to get ready in time for school – and hasn't experienced any benefits from doing this in the past – is not likely to start getting ready early.

It is often very useful – when a child acts in a challenging way – to ask – are there any accidental rewards this child is experiencing for acting in this way? And also – does this child really know the benefits for them of acting in a positive way in this situation?

3. Distress

A third group of causes for challenging behaviour can be called *distress*. In other words, children act in tricky ways when they are overwhelmed by what is happening, feel insecure in the world they are in and/or are trying to express their feelings in the only way they know how.

For example, if a child is refusing to get dressed when asked, it may be that child is trying to help themselves cope with feeling anxious about going out. It might be they are trying to cope with their frustration when having to stop a particular activity.

If a child says rude or mean things to a friend, it may be that child is trying to express their jealousy, frustration or sadness about something in the only way they know how.

It is often very useful – when a child acts in a challenging way – to ask – is my child feeling insecure, distressed, unsafe or having any other negative emotion which is contributing to them acting in this way?

These three groups of causes or reasons for children's behaviour – knowledge and skill gaps, incentive imbalance and distress – often happen together. In other words, children's difficult behaviour is partly caused by all three of these factors happening together.

It might be helpful for you to write down four or five challenging behaviours this week and try to analyse them for skill/knowledge gaps, incentive imbalance (accidental rewards for negative behaviours, missing benefits of the opposite positive behaviour) and distress.

Please don't think you need to analyse every challenging behaviour in your child, every time it happens. No-one has the time and space to do this! I find once parents have done this once, they are more likely to then have a better level understanding of the kinds of factors which can lead to children acting in challenging ways in the future.

And this understanding, as discussed at the beginning of the article, helps us feel better and have more ideas about what to do to support our children in the future.