

There are no behaviour problems unique to children with Down's syndrome. However, much of their behaviour will be related to their level of development and not to their chronological age. So, when problems occur, they are generally similar to those seen in typically developing children of a younger age.

In addition, many children with Down's syndrome have to cope with more difficulties than many of their peers. Much of what they are expected to do in their everyday lives will be much harder to accomplish due to problems with their speech and language, auditory short-term memory, motor co-ordination, shorter concentration span, and learning difficulties. Children with Down's syndrome can also take longer to "learn the rules" and understand change in their environment. As a result, they may feel more insecure and anxious and need additional, specific help.

Their thresholds for problem behaviours may therefore be lower than in typically developing children, i.e. they are likely to become frustrated or anxious more easily. So, having Down's syndrome does not lead inevitably to behavioural problems; but the nature of their learning difficulties makes such children more vulnerable to the development of such problems.

Often at the root of inappropriate behaviour are the increasing cognitive demands facing the child with Down's syndrome. The child may well be finding it difficult to cope with current activities and goals. Children with Down's syndrome are often sensitive to failure. Recognition of this and a corresponding look at the child's curriculum to ensure that it is suitably differentiated are therefore critical in responding to behaviour problems.

A particular aspect of problem behaviour is the use of avoidance strategies. Many children with Down's syndrome tend to adopt these, thus undermining their progress. Some children tend to use social skills and attention seeking behaviours to avoid tasks - refusing, pretending to be less capable than they really are, distracting the adult etc.

CAUSES

Investigate any inappropriate behaviour. WHY is the child acting so?

Is the work suitably differentiated? I.e. is the task too hard to be achievable? too long to be completed? Or too easy to sustain interest?

Alternatively - is the task too different? Children with Down's syndrome often dislike being "singled out" or given totally different work to their peers.

Does the child understand what is expected?

ADDRESSING PROBLEM BEHAVIOUR

For all involved with the child:

- Ensure that the children's developmental, not chronological, age is taken into account, together with their level of oral understanding.
- Distinguish "can't do" from "won't do".
- Separate immature behaviour from deliberately bad behaviour.
- Teach rules explicitly. Ensure they are clearly understood and reinforce them visually.
- Use short, clear instructions and clear body language for reinforcement: overlong explanations and excessively complex reasoning are not appropriate.
- Encourage positive behaviour by using visual reinforcement. E.g. for a younger children refusing to help tidy up, showing a photo or prompt card of children tidying up can be enough to encourage them to do the same.
- Ensure the child is working with peers who are acting as good role models.
- Give plenty of praise and encouragement and be clear and specific when praising the child.
- Reinforce the desired behaviour immediately with visual, oral or tangible rewards. For older children where rewards are not given immediately ensure the child is able to understand and cope with this situation.

- Take account of these factors in any reward offered.

For staff (teaching and non-teaching) involved with the child:

- Ensure that all staff are aware that the child must be disciplined along with their peers at all times, and are aware of the strategies to be employed.
- Ensure that all staff are firm and consistent at all times.
- Ensure that the LSA is not the only adult having to deal with the behaviour. The class teacher has ultimate responsibility.
- For older children agree the name of a key person who will act as first point of contact in cases of difficulty.
- Ensure that the child, staff and peers know the contact person, what procedure to follow and where to go if there is a problem.
- Establish good liaison with parents and discuss behavioural strategies jointly. Remember, parents can provide expert knowledge of their child.
- Avoidance and attention-seeking behaviour:
 - Develop a range of strategies to deal with problems: some will work better than others.
 - Be flexible: some strategies will work one day and not the next!
 - Try distraction rather than confrontation.
 - Look for ways of reinforcing good behaviour: star charts, extra time on computer etc.
 - Ignore attention-seeking behaviour within reasonable limits: it is aimed to distract.
 - Do not respond to attention seeking behaviour by giving attention: this will only reinforce it. Deal with the behaviour in as swift and impersonal manner as possible with minimal speech and eye contact.
 - Try a "time out" chair; an egg timer placed in front of the child can be useful for keeping the child focused and more likely to remain seated.
 - Do not attempt to target too many aspects of behaviour at one time. Decide on behaviour(s) and make clear what is not acceptable and what is desired. Decide on ways to reinforce the desired behaviour and record and chart progress if need be.

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