



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

ASSESSMENT, CONSULTATION AND THERAPY SERVICE (ACTS)

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR GUIDANCE

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30th March 2020

In trying to respond to the unusual circumstances of social distancing, increased hand hygiene and cough etiquette because of the COVID 19 virus, it can be difficult to know how to manage some challenging behaviours which have been reported from some residential units.

Understanding Behaviour

It will be important to try to understand why these behaviours, such as coughing and spitting and not adhering to frequent hand washing advice, occur. It will be important to remember that many of the young people we work with have significant histories of neglect and trauma and it may be that they have learned that the best way to get attention from a parent or carer is to do something that cannot be ignored. Often the children we work with have experienced a lack of praise, attention and positive regard, in the context of neglect, and as a result have developed challenging and difficult to ignore behaviours, and understandably many will have attachment difficulties which may mean that they test and challenge the adults who are caring for them to check if they can be trusted or not.

When these challenging behaviours occur it is the natural response to experience anxiety and fear, for ourselves and our families and to experience a stress response. In such situations it can be helpful to remember that Social Care Professionals have a great many skills needed to manage these behaviours and to de-escalate challenging situations. The main skill is the ability to build relationships with the young person and to provide safe and consistent care. When this relationship is threatened it might be difficult to know how to respond.

Why is the Young Person doing this?

It can be helpful to try to understand why the young person is behaving in this way (understanding the function of the behaviour). Is the young person anxious, angry, frustrated, bored or sad because of the restrictions on their ability to do the usual things they like to do? Is there some other reason? At this time with restricted contact a young person may be worried about a family member or about when they might see their family members again.

Often it can take time for the function of the behaviour to become clear and it rarely does when the young person is upset, angry or heightened in the middle of an argument. It is usually only when the young person has returned to a calmer state that it can be explored and understood and the reason, why they reacted as they did, to become clearer. Sometimes it doesn't seem there was any reason.

How to Respond

So how is it best to respond when challenging behaviour occurs? We know from the research that Positive Behaviour Support approaches work best at reducing the frequency and intensity of challenging behaviour. In the moment it can be difficult to ignore undesirable behaviour, that may be the young person's way of getting your attention, but if the goal is to stop the behaviour then if possible it is the preferred response. Ignoring the behaviour might look like

- Turning away
- Changing the subject
- Suggesting a change of activity
- Distraction
- Going into another room to get something or make a cup of tea
- Staying calm

It is prudent to always be conscious to ignore the behaviour and not the child, so as soon as you are able, try to notice something more pro-social the child is doing and praise that. It might seem that you are "letting the child away with it" and you are, but it is planned ignoring, with a goal in mind, to see less and less of the behaviour and eventually if the young person can get the attention he or she is looking for, in a better way, the challenging behaviour is no longer necessary.

Responding positively doesn't always need to be praise. Other positive consequences include

- A smile
- A reward such as a treat
- Money
- A choice of reward

It is good to know what the young person is motivated by; for example, a young person wearing a pair of pyjamas which might say something like "will work for chocolate" on the front.

Behaviours which cannot be ignored

Clearly there are some behaviours which cannot be ignored, such as when a young person is at risk of injury to him or herself or someone else, or property damage, but it may be possible to reduce the incidence and intensity of other challenging behaviours in these ways.

It is recommended that you refer to the good behaviour management resources can be found on the following websites:

Carolyn Webster-Stratton; <http://www.incredibleyears.com/team-view/carolyn-webster-stratton/>

Gary LaVigna; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjdSHhkM7sE>

Other ways to Support Young People at this Time

Giving the young people as much reassurance, care, chances to ask questions, regular routine, familiar faces and a daily plan as much as possible will help at this time.

Hopefully this guide may help respond to difficult situations, which if resolved can assist with a repair of the relationships, which are the most important interventions for the children with whom we work.

**Approved by Tusla Crisis Management Team on 30th March
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