

## **Challenging behaviour, challenging ideas**

Meeting challenging behaviour through promoting wellbeing

For a year I worked as a class teacher with five children with severe and profound learning disabilities. Looking back on it, all the children had some form of 'challenging behaviour', though at the time, I tended only to regard a 'challenge' as attempted or actual aggression, non-compliance or the dreaded 'attention seeking behaviour'. I was part of a class team that included two very experienced teaching assistants, and we were desperate to find ways of reducing the children's hitting, screaming, and throwing. We were lucky to have training in ways of dealing with and avoiding aggression, but the team felt that we needed to do more than avoid or react. We made two key observations: that incidents of aggression were reduced if children could choose their own activities, and if they felt physically well.

A few years on from this experience, it was a great pleasure to meet with Dave Hewett. Dave is widely known throughout the UK as an educational consultant, trainer and writer who provides courses and consultations to services and professionals involved in the education and care of people of all ages, with severe learning difficulties and/or autism. He has worked to establish an approach that has become known as Intensive Interaction, where adults are encouraged to *respond* to people with communication difficulties, rather than lead them in directive, task-oriented activities. Dave also provides advice for adults working with people with challenging behaviour, and had I been aware of his ideas when I was a class teacher, I feel sure that the children in my class would have been happier and more relaxed. They would also have been able to partake of the learning experiences that we so diligently planned, yet so often failed to 'deliver' because of disruptive behaviour.

'Disruptive', 'challenging', 'non-compliance', 'attention seeking behaviour'. We use these terms a lot to describe children in special schools, but Dave's first task in our meeting was to challenge me! What do I mean by challenging behaviour? Where does it spring from? My observations that the children in my class were rarely 'challenging' if left to decide what they wanted to do, and that their 'difficult' behaviour dramatically increased if they were feeling unwell, or tired, or hungry, immediately led us to the heart of Dave's observations of challenging behaviour, and how to help.

Dave's first remark was the opening sentence of his course on managing incidents of challenging behaviour and working towards having fewer of them: "We are going to think about working with people whose feelings, psychological makeup and difficulties with interacting with the world then produce behaviours that can be difficult for the rest of us." So we need to think about three key things; how children feel *within themselves* at any given time, how they are able to communicate-not just with other human beings but with the world-and how we adults respond to them.

This was a lot to absorb in one go, so Dave explained further. We need to define what we mean by challenging behaviour. It's not just thinking about

aggression and 'non-compliance'. People who sit in a corner and rock and moan for much of the day are presenting with behaviour that is a challenge. By doing this they are not participating, and we will be challenged to find ways to work with them in a constructive way. This person may have retreated inwards to a place where he feels safe, by taking part in behaviours that provide comfort and meaning, and shut out stressful activities, including communicating with other people.

So are children who have difficult behaviour responding to stress, and are we causing it? Dave gives the example of children with autism and additional learning needs: "Many children with autism have a very limited ability to relate to other people and communicate. Many also have environmental sensitivities, including many that we haven't yet identified. From as young as four years old they may have constructed their own internal world that they exist in. Most obvious manifestations of this are sitting in the corner, rocking and flapping their hands, or gazing into space and leaping up and down.

"Part of the problem is that we adults care so much, and want to achieve so much with the child with severe learning difficulties, and have such high expectations of what we are going to achieve. Unfortunately the net result is that from an early age the child has demanded of him that he takes part in activities that are very 'task-orientated'; i.e. that the activity has an end point that must be achieved. The adults have set an objective, and the child is only rewarded if he has reached that objective.

"The day-to-day experience of many children with autism is that they are taking part in activities that they don't want to do, because they don't understand them. They are expected to endure the activity in the presence of an adult who has entered their personal space for longer than the child can endure at this point in time. This is extremely stressful. The adults often assume that giving the child a reward will be enough for him to continue. External rewards, such as raisins, crisps or chocolate buttons, may be used, or in many cases adults demand simple compliance. They get this frequently every day, from when they first come into contact with our services. This causes stress."

But surely we adults need to engage children in a broad and balanced curriculum, to which they are all entitled, and we cannot do this if children are not challenged, and encouraged to comply and join in with planned activities? Dave responded with what has been called his 'Philosophy 101'. "A child who is highly stressed and unable to participate in adult-led activities doesn't need a broad and balanced curriculum at this time. He needs a narrow and focussed curriculum that works on the essentials: communication, being with people and the world, learning how to cooperate and participate. This is not denying his access to a broad and balanced curriculum, but enabling him to access it."

Dave then asked me to consider what are the most difficult things that we learn in the world. I immediately thought of maths and how to understand a car's inner workings, but Dave expertly guided me to something much more

important and, I'm relieved to say, something that I know about: knowing how to be with people. "All of the following: learning the routines of interaction, taking turns and exchanges of behaviour, eye contact, understanding facial expression, psychological and emotional contact with another person, using and understanding physical contact- these are parts of the most complicated activity that a human being learns: the fundamentals of communication and speech. Enjoyment, or to be more specific, mutual enjoyment, is the primary motivator for this learning.

"When we take this on board as a teacher, then we will be making efforts to ensure that all learning is mutually enjoyable for everyone at all times: If a child is distressed all day long then an important target is to make him happy. A happy child is more likely to get a Level 5 or progress through the P Scales, because he will feel safe, relaxed, composed, unstressed, content and intellectually and emotionally invigorated."

But how can we meet the diverse needs of five children in a small room when we have planned to deliver the National Curriculum? "By being flexible, imaginative and respectful, and above all, optimistic. Do a little bit less and a little more slowly. Make more time, space and air in the classroom routine so we can cope with the issues of stress reduction and promoting wellbeing, and by making the tempo of the day slower. Providing a routine so that adults can be sensitive, perceptive, reflective and flexible and adjust continually."

Making the day slower? Surely not? How will we get through the curriculum? This type of advice will make many *teachers* feel stressed! Dave reminded me of his earlier comments: we will get nowhere unless children are feeling good about themselves, about the environment they are in (including my classroom) and are feeling comfortable with the people around them (including me, with my anxiety about the curriculum and completing tasks!). This theme pervaded our conversation: "The first part of the mission is the wellbeing of the students." "What we need to do, as a school staff and with parents, is to find a way of being with youngsters that induces a state of wellbeing or avoids stress, or helps us cope with stress, and in this way will help us all deal with challenging behaviour." "Everything that we want to achieve will follow if we help the child to experience and maintain wellbeing." "If we are going to help children reduce their challenging behaviour then we need an action plan for each child: for when we are with, around or near that child, that addresses the factors that produce that challenging behaviour." "We need to identify these factors. This includes environmental factors like how we physically deport ourselves with or near the child, how we communicate, and looking closely at what our regime demands of the child. In other words we need to look at adult behaviour!"

Towards the end of our discussion, Dave left me with two very important points to consider. The first is that children who have very restricted movement may be overlooked. We may not regard them as having behaviour that is challenging, but in actual fact they may be totally unwilling to be involved in communication, let alone participate in activities. Dave illustrated

this point by describing a young person he worked with who had very restricted movement but seemed to be in “an almost constant state of rage.”

His final point was about what he describes as “The Healthy Team”. Dave describes a healthy team, which in a special school is typically a class teacher and support staff, as having good flexibility and being able to change activities and behaviour rapidly according to circumstances. They talk to each other and feel comfortable with each other. They believe in teamwork, and develop a positive approach to ‘incident management’ and are flexible about routines. Lastly, but no less importantly, they should look after themselves: physically, psychologically and emotionally

The next day I visited Oaklands School, in the London Borough of Hounslow, very close to Heathrow Airport. It is a secondary school catering for pupils and students from 11 to 19 years, with severe learning difficulties (SLD), and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). This includes pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Dave sent me here because he feels it is one of the schools that embodies the principles that he feels lead to developing wellbeing and thus reducing stress and challenging behaviour.

I met Assistant Head Phil Harris, Head Teacher Elizabeth Felstead, and Mary Kelly, Advanced Skills Teacher with responsibility for English and Communication. They explained that Dave has had a long association with the school, providing training, consultation work, and “just coming to the school because he likes what we do.” Three interconnected strands of Dave’s work are very much in evidence in the school: Intensive Interaction, supporting pupils and students with challenging behaviour, and ‘Empathetic Handling’. Dave and I had not talked about Empathetic Handling, but it became clear that this method fits in perfectly with the overall ethos of the school, which is that pupils and students should be treated with respect, and that their wellbeing is paramount in order for them to learn.

I asked Phil and Mary to describe Empathetic Handling. “As many of the pupils and students have severe physical disabilities, we often need to help them to move. We need to ensure that whenever they are moved or touched, we have their permission, and it is done respectfully, with understanding of their needs and responding to what they are trying to tell us. This is how we would want to be treated ourselves, if we were ever in a similar position. This is part of the communicative process, and all staff are expected to show this level of respect.” An example might be saying, “We are going to have to move you (with a tactile cue and gentle touch). Is that OK with you?” (wait for a response before proceeding with the movement).

Inevitably there are occasions when adults will need to consider using physical interventions when behaviour becomes extremely challenging. “99% of all incidents do *not* involve physical contact, but we have strategies in place. However our overriding philosophy is ‘HANDS OFF!’ We look at triggers for these behaviours, and these include environmental factors. We also help pupils by giving them tactics to manage their own behaviours.” Staff will also talk with parents, and involve them in individual care and behaviour

plans. At Oaklands challenging behaviour is seen as the pupil trying to communicate a message. It would certainly not be regarded as being 'naughty' or 'acting out.' As Mary puts it, "We try and analyse what message is being conveyed by this behaviour, but I have to say that lack of language is probably the biggest factor in producing challenging behaviour."

Phil and Mary were quick to praise Dave Hewett's influence on the school. "His ideas were very much in tune with what we were already thinking. Though we felt that our approach, which is broadly similar to how it is now, was the right approach, we must admit that we were concerned at how OfSTED would perceive us. Dave provided our practice with a framework, which impressed OfSTED because we now had an academic rationale for our work, and this gave us a kind of 'respectability' that we could convey to the inspectors."

Both Mary and Phil agree that pupils who seem 'locked in', or 'switched off' and who seem to be communicating that they are unwilling to join in, are just as challenging as those who have overtly aggressive or hostile behaviour. We discussed how medication, lack of sleep and difficulties with eating can all contribute to a student lacking in wellbeing. What does the school do about this? Fitness is a very big feature of the school day. Phil described a trip to visit schools in China, and how struck he was by the emphasis on physical fitness. "In the schools I visited children would start the day with guided fitness routines, and these would take place at intervals during the day. The rationale is to reduce stress and help pupils to become more alert and agile. This is seen as giving a big boost to cognitive performance."

Each class has a physical routine each morning, and I returned to the school to see some of the pupils and staff in action at the beginning of the school day. Barry New, is a PE Specialist, Newly Qualified Teacher, and former fitness instructor. As he was setting up an 'Indiana Jones-style' obstacle course, he told me "I'm passionate about exercise, but most of my class aren't!" The class had been watching the Indiana Jones trilogy, and this sparked the obstacle course, complete with rope ladders on the floor, a tunnel to jump over and a heavy bag to pull with a rope. The class clearly relished the challenge of going round the course, with the music from the film blaring in the background. I have to admit that it left me feeling a bit puffed out (but just a little more agile and cognitively alert than before the session.)

The sixth form, led by Lesley Markham, had an equally elaborate routine. This incorporates aspects of 'Brain Gym', including intertwining fingers and relaxation, followed by very vigorous dancing to music, provided courtesy of YouTube on the interactive whiteboard. All staff and students joined in and everyone seemed to be smiling. Meanwhile in David Clew's class staff and pupils are making the link between communication and movement, in an improvised session accompanied by music as loud as in the sixth form, and also from YouTube. Here I observed a member of staff involved in a spontaneous session of 'Row your boat' with a pupil where physical contact was clearly appropriate, and very much enjoyed as a way of communication. David meanwhile was trying valiantly to involve a pupil in a dance routine. He

seemed to be doing all the work, while his partner got a lot of pleasure out of his efforts, without expending too much of her own energy. He at least was acting as a role model. The point is that these sessions are great fun, and hugely popular with all class members. They provide a positive start to the day, where everyone is involved in a group activity and are encouraged to participate at their own level.

And what of the need to look at the environment and how this affects behaviour? Listening to the tape of our interviews at Oaklands it is very noticeable how much background noise there is from planes landing at the airport, but staff do their best to make the environment inside the school as positive and relaxing as possible. Vibrant art displays in the corridors contrast with classrooms that are tastefully decorated, with comfortable furniture. All of the staff are friendly and welcoming, and Dave Hewett would be proud of their optimism and flexibility. Reminders to staff about policies on empathetic handling, including MAKATON signs to reinforce instructions, are to be seen on walls throughout the school.

My own perception of challenging behaviour has changed significantly. I remember all too clearly the stress that we all felt when things were not going well; including at times having to regularly resort to physical interventions. However it is heartening to know that there is a body of evidence to show that by adults looking closely at their own behaviour, the school environment, and working throughout the school to promote wellbeing, much can be done to increase enjoyment and participation and promote positive behaviour.

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