

# Positive Behavior Support

## Training Topic

### Ten Ways to Support a Person with Challenging Behavior

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In *The Community Journal* (Summer 1997), David Pitonyak wrote that supporting a person with challenging behavior starts with knowing the person, not just looking at the person as someone needing "fixing." Imagine living the person's life, Pitonyak wrote, and view the following list as first steps to building a more effective behavioral plan.

#### **1. Get to know the person.**

Seems obvious, doesn't it? However, often people trying to eliminate unwanted behavior don't know the person behind the behavior. To learn more about the person with challenging behavior, spend time with that person in comfortable places at times the person prefers.

#### **2. Remember that all behavior is meaningful.**

Challenging behavior sends the message of needs not being met. The behavior could mean, "I'm lonely," "I'm bored," "I have no power," "I don't feel safe," "I don't feel valued," "I have physical pain," or indicate other needs. A single behavior, too, can reflect several needs. Question other people in the person's life about what it takes to make that person happy and what makes that person unhappy. Ask other questions about the person's life. Then try to figure out what times the person does and does not exhibit the problem behavior. Keep in mind that the behavior often has something to do with what the person is asked to do and who is doing the asking. After a while, you should see a pattern to the behavior.

#### **3. Help the person develop a support plan.**

Frequently an agency hires a specialist to spend a couple of hours observing a person. The specialist then devises a plan to stop the behavior. It's hard enough to stop behaviors we choose to stop (for instance, smoking, overeating), let alone behaviors someone else thinks we should stop-without even asking our opinion. A better way is to include the person with the challenging behavior in the planning and to look at also improving the person's whole life-relationships, community participation, increased choices, skill development, and contributions to others.

#### **4. Develop a support plan for the supporters.**

Create a supportive environment for everyone concerned. Care givers need care and support, too. A supportive environment also minimizes punitive practices. Service providers who work in environments geared toward compliance and obedience with power controlled by few concentrate on maintaining obedience rather than support.

#### **5. Don't assume.**

Diagnostic labels and past performance often cause people to underestimate another's potential. Concentrate on the person's strengths and providing adequate support rather than concentrating on deficiencies associated with the diagnostic label. Speak to the person even if you're not sure whether the person understands. Never speak about the person with a disability as if that person wasn't present. It isn't polite, nor is it supportive.

#### **6. Relationships make all the difference.**

Many people with disabilities live in extraordinary isolation. Some depend entirely on their family or paid staff for their social relationships. To overcome this isolation, brainstorm ideas for including the person with a disability in the community and setting up a social support network.

**7. Help the person to develop a positive identity.**

A person with challenging behavior commonly gets identified as a "problem," which carries a negative message for the person and those around him or her. Build a positive identity by helping the person find a way to make a contribution and better support those in his or her life. Make sure that the person's strengths and capabilities don't get forgotten when reducing or eliminating challenging behavior.

**8. Instead of ultimatums, give choices.**

If the person uses challenging behavior to express needs, give the person choices and allow the person to make choices throughout the day. Say "I know you are upset. What will help you calm down? A walk? A different activity?" rather than "Do it my way, or else." Choice does not mean free rein. Set limits with the input of the person with a disability. Every relationship has limits.

**9. Help the person to have more fun.**

Fun is a powerful cure for problem behaviors. Is the person with a disability having the same amount of fun as other people you know? If not, look for things the person enjoys doing. Add to that list. Make fun a goal.

**10. Establish a good working relationship with the person's primary health care physician.**

Many people exhibiting challenging behavior might not feel well. Being healthy is more than being free of disease or illness. It also means a balanced diet, good sleep habits, and other good health factors. Sudden behavior problems especially might be related to ill health. By knowing the person's general health, talking to those who know him or her, and having good contact with a primary health care physician, you can better figure out the reason or solution for the challenging behavior