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MODULE 23: Creating a positive support plan

Parents, educators and other professionals involved in the care and education of a child on the autism spectrum may decide to implement a Positive Behaviour Support Plan. These plans are introduced in an aim to decrease undesirable actions and habits through the use of various strategies which draw upon the causes of behaviour and the introduction of effective consequences.

In this module, you'll learn the various features of a Positive Behaviour Support Plan, including event and antecedent strategies, behaviour teaching strategies, and consequence strategies including prevention, redirection, extinction, reinforcement and punishment. We will conclude the module by discussing safety concerns and the strategies employed to ensure the safety of ASD children and their parents and carers when using a Positive Behaviour Support Plan.

23.1 Event strategies

23.2 Antecedent strategies

23.3 Behaviour teaching strategies

23.4 Consequence strategies

23.5 Prevention

23.6 Redirection

23.7 Reinforcement and punishment

23.8 Extinction

23.9 Safety

23.1 Event strategies

'Events' or 'setting events' in the language of a Positive Behaviour Support Plan refers to events that occur before a child exhibits a particular undesirable behaviour. These events are slow activating, meaning that they do not produce the behaviour immediately but rather create the conditions in which this behaviour is likely to occur.



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For example, Hasna sometimes tips over the water jug at snack time. She is more likely to do this if she has been assigned an alphabet task at her desk earlier in the morning. Thus being set the alphabet task is the setting event which results in Hasna tipping the water jug over, even though the events are hours apart.

The most drastic event strategy in this case would be to stop presenting Hasna with any alphabet tasks. This is the method with the greatest chance of success in eliminating the unwanted behaviour. Once the causality between the alphabet task and the jug tipping behaviour has been identified, it seems logical to remove the setting event altogether to avoid the problem behaviour.

However, this approach will affect Hasna's academic success. Removing the setting event will have a different effect in each case, but if it impacts negatively on other areas of development it might not be considered a viable choice. If Hasna does not learn her alphabet, she will be hindered in all areas of her education which require reading, potentially having a severe impact on her school life and later prospects.

If the setting event cannot be removed, other strategies in this instance could include:

- Making the alphabet task shorter
- Presenting the task in a different colour
- Including a picture of her favourite interest with the task
- Presenting an easy task before and after the alphabet task



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23.2 Antecedent strategies



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An antecedent is a trigger which occurs immediately before the unwanted behaviour. For example, every time George is required to take a second try on work he has not managed to complete correctly, he runs out of the classroom.

Again, the simplest strategy to remove this unwanted behaviour would be to remove the antecedent. In this case, it would mean that George would not be asked to work on his mistakes.

However this approach will hinder George's success. Not only will he be denied the opportunity to master the concepts that help him complete his work correctly, he may also react the same way to other mistakes made in other areas of his life. Giving up the requirement for George to correct his work might not serve George's long term developmental and educational development.

Other strategies in this instance could include:



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- Pairing the work to be corrected with a desired reward, activity or event. Playing George's favourite music, offering a snack or his favourite story on completion or even putting a picture of his preferred interest on his desk may be enough to prevent the unwanted behaviour
- Presenting the corrections at a different time, perhaps interspersed throughout the day. Altering the format of the antecedent and the time it is presented may prove effective in stopping the unwanted behaviour, especially if it is interspersed with activities the student feels confident in
- Offering a choice to the student. Letting George order three activities – say taking a run, reading a book and making his corrections – however he chooses, can give him a feeling of control and allow him to approach the correction activity more willingly. Adding corrections in to the timetable can improve predictability and decrease undesirable behaviours

23.3 Behaviour teaching strategies

Behaviour teaching strategies aim to equip the child with functional skills that will take the place of the unwanted behaviour. Which skills are taught depends on the motivation behind the problem behaviour. Motivation falls in 5 categories:

1. Seeking attention from other people
2. Showing medical discomfort or illness
3. Seeking sensory input
4. Seeking a particular item or activity
5. Avoiding a task, person, item or experience

The replacement skill should be as effective as the unwanted behaviour in achieving the relevant motivation from those set out above.

For example, George's avoidance of corrections (as explained in section 7.2) is most likely to fall into motivation type 5, avoiding a task or experience, and/or type 4 as his wish to run could be seen as seeking a particularly activity. This could also potentially be seen as seeking sensory input as running could be seen as a self-stimulating behaviour. Replacement skills for George could be asking for a break, or asking for a short period of exercise before he does his corrections. These replacement skills might be taught through



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verbal or pictorial communication. Another example could be a child who hits other children for attention. They might be taught to say or sign, 'Play with me, please.'

The main method of teaching new behaviours is modelling the desired behaviour when the child is about to respond or is responding with an unwanted behaviour. Catching the child between the stimulus and the response and modelling the new way to respond for the child to copy is the most effective way of making a positive change in the child's behaviour.

23.4 Consequence strategies

The main criteria for a consequence strategy or intervention is that it renders the problem behaviour ineffective. The new behaviours taught must be as effective as, if not more effective than, the original behaviours in achieving what the student aims to achieve. If this is not the case, the student will choose to use the undesirable behaviour as it is more effective in getting them the responses they are looking for.

Whichever consequence strategies are used, they should be designed to maximise reinforcement for desirable behaviours and minimise reinforcement for problem behaviours. In the past, the main tools used were reward for desirable behaviours and punishment for undesirable behaviours, but approaches have since evolved into a wider set of consequence strategy tools.

These include:

- Prevention
- Redirection
- Extinction
- Reinforcement
- Crisis prevention strategies



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23.5 Prevention

The process of prevention brings together knowledge of the child's behavioural patterns, effective event and antecedent strategies, and redirection. These are used to take proactive steps to prevent the occurrence of problem behaviours. Event and antecedent strategies were explained in sections 7.1 and 7.2 respectively. Redirection will be explored in more depth in section 7.6.

Prevention is a recommended approach because it is thought to be easier to prevent problematic behaviour before its onset than to stop it once it has started.

In a preventative approach, teachers will use their knowledge of a child's behavioural patterns to decide which interventions are appropriate. They will seek to identify patterns between factors in the child's environment and any undesirable behaviours they may engage in. By identifying events and antecedent triggers, the teacher will choose to remove or



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mitigate these in order that they cannot create the conditions for the child's problematic behaviour. They will also keep a close eye on the child to pick up subtle behavioural cues that may allow them to infer the child's inner state, thereby allowing them to take preventative action before the unwanted behaviour occurs.

23.5.1 An example of a preventative approach

Jayden pinches other children during the time the class sits together on the carpet in front of the whiteboard. Through careful observation and keeping his behaviour diary up to date, his teacher has identified potential event and antecedent triggers for his pinching behaviour. The event trigger is being spoken to firmly by one of the teachers in the morning, usually in response to his forgetting his coat when going out to the playground. The antecedent trigger is when other children get a correct answer and are rewarded with praise by one of the teachers.

Jayden's teacher concludes that his pinching behaviour is used to draw attention to himself.

She devises the following preventative strategies:





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- To set up clearer expectations that a coat is required before playtime with a pictorial representation
- To find out if there are any sensory reasons why Jayden does not put his coat on
- To remind the class to put their coats on before they go to the playground
- To reward Jayden with praise when he puts his coat on
- To ensure that all reminders given to Jayden individually are delivered in a positive and friendly tone, and that he is always praised for putting his coat on
- To ask Jayden an easy question or ask him to perform an easy task at carpet time and offer praise for successful completion
- To redirect Jayden from the carpet to an individual activity with or without an adult if he shows signs of agitation

23.6 Redirection

Redirection aims to guide students towards positive reactions. The teacher, carer or parent provides opportunities for the ASD child to stop exhibiting a problem behaviour and produce a desirable behaviour instead, for which they are rewarded. This might be achieved by handing a student a book, singing a song with a student or otherwise guiding them away from the activity they are currently engaged in and into a new one. This method attempts to avoid unnecessary conflict, but is often used ineffectively and can produce unwanted responses in the child.

Here we explore the differences between ineffective and effective redirection through examples.



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23.6.1 Ineffective redirection

James has followed a long string of demands and instructions from his teacher throughout the morning. He is tasked with some mathematics exercises at the end of the morning and has expended so much energy in trying to follow the instructions that he feels overloaded. When he is struggling to solve a problem, his teacher comes over to give him assistance, but he feels like more demands are being made on him. He screams out in frustration and won't stop. His teacher tries to redirect him by offering him a book to read. To him, this feels like another demand and makes his distress and screaming worse.

Abigail has been thirsty all morning but is non-verbal and cannot express her needs. Normally she uses a PECS book to communicate with pictures, but it isn't in its normal place and she cannot find it. During a lesson, she keeps jumping up from her seat and making repetitive noises, trying to communicate that she wants something to drink. The teacher tries to involve her in a puzzle activity as a form of redirection. Abigail's need for a drink is still not met and she becomes increasingly frustrated.



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Devonte is anxious. When he is anxious, he tends to scratch his eczema which breaks his skin and causes him to bleed, often throughout the day. His teacher and parents are keen for this behaviour to stop. When Devonte scratches his skin in a lesson, the teacher sings an action song with him to keep his hands busy and away from his eczema, as a diversion technique. Devonte scratches frequently and becomes called upon to engage in the action song whenever he does so, which is a disruption to his routine. This disruption makes him increasingly anxious and he scratches more.



Yohannes is feeling hypersensitive and hearing sounds more loudly than usual. This is causing him to have problems in his social interactions. The child sitting next to him, Jordan, is shouting and it feels unbearable to Yohannes. He punches Jordan. The teacher redirects Yohannes to a sensory toy he normally likes. He feels overstimulated and throws the toy across the room, breaking it.

23.6.2 Effective Redirection

Teachers who use redirection effectively are those who are conscious of their student's motives, needs, wants and levels of stimulation. These teachers would only use redirection



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if, in their judgment, it will produce a positive effect. Some children might respond well to redirection if they are becoming frustrated with a task, or if they're engaged in a power struggle with an adult or another child. Other children may not. The more time and effort a teacher expends in trying to understand and getting to know the causes of undesirable behaviours those in his class exhibit, the more effective he will be in implementing effective redirection.

They might also use redirection to try and work out what the nature of a student's disengagement or distress is. Once they provide the redirection, they can watch the student's response to try and work out the source of the problem. If the child does not respond well, they will conclude that the undesirable behaviour has a deeper cause than simply being off-task.

23.6.3 Two examples of effective redirection

Lila comes in from playtime extremely excited and energised. She dances around the room and finds it hard to settle down during the register. The teacher signals that it is the beginning of reading time and the children sit down quietly to read. Lila repeatedly flicks the pages, jumps up from her chair and laughs for no discernible reason. The teacher takes her to the side and engages her in stretching and breathing exercises which gradually calm her down. Soon she is able to return to her table and begin reading.

Callum is involved in a shape matching task, where he locates 3D shapes and puts them in a box through their corresponding slots. His teacher is watching him. Callum picks up the star shape and tries to put it in the triangle slot. When he finds that it will not fit, he becomes increasingly frustrated and bangs the star shape against the triangle slot, then against his head. As a form of redirection, the teacher puts her hand over his and drops the star shape back on the floor. She helps him to pick up the triangle shape and put it in the triangle slot, then praises his effort. She then hands him the cube, which he successfully matches with the square slot. She continues to assist him in his success until the end of the task.

23.7 Reinforcement and Punishment

General strategies for positive reinforcement for 'good behaviour' are not usually specific enough to dramatically improve the behaviour of those on the autism spectrum. Though it might encourage new positive behaviours, particularly if these are modelled clearly and the children are reminded of them frequently, a general sticker or star chart is not likely to be effective in stopping specific problem behaviours. There are many reasons for this, some of them being that a sticker is not likely to be sufficient motivation in giving up an ingrained



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habit, that the child's feelings or sensory issues might be so strong that they have little control over the behaviour, or that adults, teachers and even students around them may unwittingly reinforce the problem behaviours.



The use of punishment as a consequence of unwanted behaviours has also decreased. There has been a shift within the care and educational approaches of autism and other special educational needs, away from punishment and toward understanding. Rather than punishing unwanted behaviours, practitioners are encouraged to find the root causes of these behaviours in order that any interventions made encourage positive, understanding relationships as well as more desirable behaviours.

Reinforcement interventions are based on the idea that problem behaviour continues because it is reinforced on some level. Teachers and parents aim to remove the reinforcing value of the unwanted behaviour and to increase the reinforcement applied to the new behaviour they are trying to implement. The outcome of the old behaviour and the new behaviour have to be the same in the child's perception for this to be effective. The new behaviour is taught to the child and ample practice opportunities are given. The child is likely to still exhibit the problem behaviour for a while, particularly if it has been going on for a long time. When the child exhibits the old behaviour, it is used as a teaching opportunity to promote the new behaviour.



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23.7.1 An Example of Reinforcement in Action

Joshua, a mostly non-verbal child in an autism unit, is often asked by his teacher to select a story book to be read to the class. Sometimes he enjoys this activity and rushes to the book corner, but other times he covers his ears and screams when the request is made of him. This is his way of saying no.



His teacher decides that she would like him to express his 'no' in a more socially acceptable manner, because his screams affect other members of the class and cause problems for those who are hypersensitive. She decides that she will rephrase her request. Instead of saying, 'Joshua, please pick our book,' she will say, 'Joshua, would you like to pick our book?' Since Joshua is an able reader, she will then present him with two cards, one reading 'yes' and the other 'no', and he can pick which one he wants to indicate his choice. She will then give him



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praise, regardless of which card he selects. This means he does not have to engage in screaming behaviour to avoid the task.

If Joshua continues to scream, even after the teacher has taught him how to respond and has presented the cards, she will repeat the question in a monotone voice and hold out the cards. There will be no other reaction until he picks the relevant card, at which point he is praised.

23.8 Extinction

Extinction refers to the process of getting rid of an unwanted behaviour by completely withdrawing all reinforcement it previously received. This technique is usually implemented in conjunction with other methods such as reinforcement, redirection or teaching behaviours, to ensure the extinct behaviour is replaced with a more desirable behaviour.

One common extinction method is to ignore the unwanted behaviour. This means that the teacher stops making corrective statements or giving punishments in relation to the behaviour. As far as possible, the teacher tries to show no reaction to the behaviour whatsoever, especially making sure to curtail any emotional responses they may have to the behaviour. This technique is effective because disciplinary action previously implemented may have acted as a reinforcement if the child in question enjoyed the attention. The only response the teacher might give during the extinction phase is to remind the child of the new behaviour required.

An 'extinction burst' is a common phenomenon in behaviour training that can be expected during the extinction process. It is when a child's problem behaviour increases in intensity and frequency, perhaps in a last attempt to gain a response, just before the behaviour begins to wane.

23.9 Safety

A technique known as 'crisis management intervention' can help educators and parents keep the ASD child, the child's peers and themselves safe during the positive behaviour support plan implementation. This is particularly relevant if the child exhibits aggressive behaviours towards themselves or others.

An example of a crisis management intervention model



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Step 1 – ignore lower level problematic behaviours

Step 2 – use redirection to engage the student in appropriate behaviour

Step 3 – remove other students and staff from harm

Step 4 – protect the student and others from physical injury

Step 5 – restrain the student

Crisis management intervention models are used in conjunction with all the other strategies set out in this module. Steps 1 and 2 of the above model are carried out as soon as signs of distress are picked up. The earlier the intervention is made, the more successful it is likely to be. Once the student has a higher level of physiological and emotional arousal, it is harder to slow them down and reduce aggression. If a child becomes aggressive or a danger to himself or others, interventions are focused solely on safety until the child is calm enough to respond to redirection.

[EXAM LINK](#)