A Family Services Guide

Understanding Behaviours of Distress

Sometimes called "challenging behaviour" – and why we don't use that term

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

Understanding Behaviours of Distress

You may have heard the term "challenging behaviour" used to describe actions such as hitting, shouting, self-injury, or property damage. Language in this area has moved on, and for good reason: "challenging behaviour" can sound like it is describing something wrong with the person, when in fact the behaviour is usually a response to something genuinely difficult happening for them.

We use the term behaviours of distress instead, because it keeps the focus on what the behaviour is really telling us.

A note on language

Why the term matters

"Challenging behaviour" puts the challenge inside the person. Behaviours of distress (also called "behaviours that challenge") puts the focus on what is causing the distress.

- **This is not just semantics –** language shapes how we respond. A behaviour framed as "naughty" invites punishment; a behaviour framed as distress invites curiosity and support.
- **Different people and organisations prefer different terms –** behaviours that challenge, behaviours of concern, or behaviours of distress are all in current use. Where possible, ask the individual or family what language they prefer.

Behaviour is communication

The behaviour is the message

Behaviours of distress are best understood as a response to an unmet need, overwhelming environment, or genuine difficulty – not as wilful defiance.

This is especially true for autistic children and young people, and those with a learning disability, who may not have another way to communicate pain, fear, sensory overload, confusion, or frustration in the moment. Our job is to understand what it is saying.

Common underlying functions

Escape or avoid

To escape or avoid something difficult, overwhelming, or unwanted (a task, a sensory environment, a social demand).

Attention or connection

To gain attention or connection from someone significant.

A sensory need

To meet a sensory need – seeking or avoiding particular sensory input.

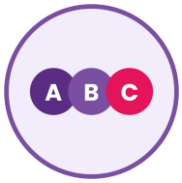
Access something wanted

To access something wanted – an item, activity, or outcome.

One behaviour, many possible meanings

The same behaviour can serve different functions for different people, or even for the same person at different times. Understanding the function – not just the behaviour itself – is the key to providing the right support.

Understanding behaviour: the ABC approach



Antecedent – Behaviour – Consequence

A simple, structured way to build understanding over time.

Breaking it down

- Antecedent: what happened just before the behaviour – the trigger, environment, demand, or event.
- Behaviour: what the person actually did.
- Consequence: what happened afterwards – including what the person gained or avoided as a result.

Tracking the ABC pattern over time, ideally in writing, often reveals triggers and functions that are not obvious in the moment.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

A person-centred framework

Positive Behaviour Support is a widely recommended, evidence-informed framework for understanding and responding to behaviours of distress.

Rather than focusing on stopping or punishing behaviour, PBS focuses on understanding its function, adapting the environment and support around the person, teaching alternative ways to get needs met, and improving overall quality of life.

What the evidence says

Smaller studies have shown promising results, though larger trials have found more mixed outcomes, and research in this area is ongoing – PBS is best understood as the current recommended, person-centred approach, rather than a guaranteed fix.

How to respond in the moment

Safety first

Prioritise safety – for the person and everyone around them.

Stay calm, reduce demands

Stay calm and reduce demands, sensory input, and language.

Reflect afterwards

Use the ABC approach to build understanding for next time.

- **Avoid punitive responses –** punishment does not address the underlying cause and can increase distress over time
- Look for what the behaviour might be communicating, rather than only how to stop it

Remember

Behind every behaviour of distress is a genuine reason – even when it is not immediately obvious. Responding with curiosity, safety, and support, rather than blame, gives the best chance of understanding and reducing distress over time.