

# BEHAVIOUR

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers



All children sometimes behave in ways that their parents can find a bit of a challenge. For some children with special educational needs or disability (SEND) this can be more serious because of the impact it has on them and the people around them. Trying to understand why a child is behaving in a certain way and finding good ways to respond is not always easy, and parents can feel isolated or under pressure. This factsheet offers a starting place.

A word about language: people sometimes say someone “has challenging behaviour” but it is more helpful to talk about a child showing distressed behaviour or behaviours that challenge the people around them. Thinking about behaviour and SEND, it may be that a child’s social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) is their main issue, but other additional needs can be linked to behaviour, for example learning disability, speech and language difficulties, ADHD or autism.

## Behaviour as communication

Behaviour is a way that children communicate. This is true for children who don’t use speech, but also for those who do. As parents we need to think what the child’s message is when they behave a certain way. Some of the possibilities are:

- Physical discomfort, hunger, pain or tiredness
- Fear or anxiety
- Sensory issues, reactions to sounds, smells, touch, etc.
- Frustration or boredom
- Anger or upset
- Being confused, not understanding
- A wish for something to stop or change
- A wish for attention or something they like

Often it will be about something immediate, but some children will hold things together at the time and let it out later, for example a child that masks in school but melts down when they get home. The behaviour children use to communicate can take different forms. A child who is feeling anxious may act out or they may close down. If we can work out what a child is trying to communicate it can help us to prevent behaviour being a problem or at least reduce this.

## Tips that can help you

**Don’t blame yourself or your child.** Other people may be quick to judge or may call your child bad or spoilt, but try to ignore this. Carry on responding calmly and helpfully for your child. Sometimes other people such as school staff may be seeing the behaviour but not the underlying needs that are behind it. You may need to persist in helping people understand and getting the right support for your child from others.

**Consider having a phrase ready to use in public (or even a card to show),** something like ‘I know his behaviour is unusual. It is part of his additional needs’. This is particularly useful if your child has an invisible disability.





**Connect with other parents in a similar situation.** They can be the best people for support and ideas. And it helps to know that you are not alone. Amaze's Face 2 Face groups are a good place to start.

**Get a break if you can.** It is exhausting if you are constantly having to predict things that are triggers for your child or pick up the pieces after a tricky episode. Find something that helps you relax or recharge your batteries and prioritise time for it.

**Ask for help for you and your child or young person if you need it.** See the suggestions in "Ask about" section below. You may have to persist before you get the right help and support.

**Courses, books and online parenting advice sites can be useful** but bear in mind that some things that work well for many children may not work for yours. Be prepared to try things and see. For example, most children will respond to clear instructions and rewards. If your child doesn't, it could be that their behaviour is driven by sensory issues, so rewards make no difference. Or they might be demand avoidant and need other approaches like indirect suggestions, humour and distraction.

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## Things that can help your child

**Be a detective.** Work out what is a trigger for your child and what approaches help with their behaviour. If their behaviour changes, can you work out why? It could be anything from constipation to bullying at school. Keep a diary of when and where behaviours that are a worry happen. Is there a pattern? Can you spot any triggers or what your child might have been communicating? Make a note of what you or others did and whether that helped or not. Use this detective work to see what you can change.

**Remember the basics** like exercise, food, sleep and fun.

**Have a routine so things feel safe and predictable.** Give plenty of warning of changes. Plan ahead for bigger changes and prepare with pictures or social stories.

**Use visuals.** Even if your child is a verbal communicator, using things like checklists, visual timetables, a Now-Next-Later board or an egg timer can help. So can visual cues like putting their coat and shoes out when it's nearly time to leave the house.

**Use clear instructions.** Move closer to your child, get their attention and keep the words simple. Break things down into chunks. Aim to tell them what to do, rather than what not to do. "Stay next to me" is clearer than "Don't run off".

**Offer a choice when you can.** Try indirect language if your child reacts badly to commands. Instead of "put your pyjamas on" you could say "your pyjamas are on the bed. I wonder if you want help to put them on."

**Allow time;** time for your child to process what is happening or what you say to them, time to break things down into doable steps, time so you can be flexible or try a different approach.

**Help your child use other ways to communicate what they want or how they are feeling.** This could be words, signs, pictures. Avoid letting "bad" behaviour be the most effective way to get heard.

**Reward the behaviour you want to see but adjust this to suit your child.** Some children are highly motivated by praise and attention, some need more concrete rewards (stickers, small treats, a favourite toy or activity), others prefer discreet signs of approval like a thumbs up or a nod, and there are some who are only made more anxious by a reward system.

**Consequences and sanctions can work,** especially if you use ones that are immediate, brief and easy for your child to understand. But if your child's behaviour is rooted in anxiety or discomfort, punishment won't help.





**Avoid or reduce the situations and things in the child's environment that make them uncomfortable or anxious.** If things can't be avoided, what makes them more bearable? Reassurance, distraction, a comforting item, a break.

**If your child has sensory issues, find practical things that help** whether that's ear defenders, fidget toys, movement breaks, clothes with the right texture, softer lighting etc.

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### Dealing with meltdowns

It can help to think of these as a bit like a panic attack. Once your child is in a meltdown they are in "fight or flight" mode. They won't hear much and won't be able to stop themselves or snap out of it. Stay calm (on the outside at least) and use a quiet calm voice to let them know you are there. Remove any sensory triggers if you can. Give your child time and space. Some children will find it helpful if you stay close or use gentle touch. With others it's better to step back. Avoid restraining your child unless it is essential for their safety. Move other people and things away so they don't get hurt, including yourself if necessary.

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### When your child is a risk to themselves or others

Sometimes children and young people behave in ways that are scary or dangerous, despite you trying to help or prevent this. Do what you can in the moment to keep them and those around them safe and seek advice and help. Talk to others involved with your child e.g. school and health professionals. There is some help out there, but it isn't always available quickly or as early on as it should be. Some services are only for children with particular needs such as autism or learning disabilities or if they have more severe mental health problems. See the "Ask about" and "Further info" sections below.

If your child is physically harming you or other family members try to put some space or a barrier between you and them. If this is happening regularly or a child has been hurt, contact Front Door for Families in Brighton & Hove or SPOA in East Sussex to refer yourself and your family for help and support. See their contact details below.

In an emergency situation, you can and should call the police via 999.

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### Ask about

- **Amaze SENDIASS** – the Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service offers impartial, confidential advice on anything to do with special educational needs and disabilities for 0 to 25 year olds. Parents, carers, children and young people under 25 with SEND living in Brighton & Hove or East Sussex can use the service. Email [sendiass@amazesussex.org.uk](mailto:sendiass@amazesussex.org.uk), call 01273 772289.
- **Amaze - ND Family Support Service** supports families with the challenges they may face when their child or young person is on the neurodevelopmental pathway for conditions like autism, ADHD, tics/Tourette syndrome and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Your child does not need a diagnosis to get support and life does not have to be difficult. Email [NDP@amazesussex.org.uk](mailto:NDP@amazesussex.org.uk) or refer yourself to the service here <https://amazesussex.org.uk/nd-family-support>
- **Amaze - Parent groups & befriending** – one to one befriending and regular support groups for parent carers across Brighton & Hove and East Sussex, including groups with a focus on neurodevelopmental differences like autism and ADHD. For details of all our groups, visit <https://amazesussex.org.uk/parent-groups-and-befriending>, or for more information call: 07484 051755 or email: [marie@amazesussex.org.uk](mailto:marie@amazesussex.org.uk)





- **Care, Education and Treatment Reviews (CETRs) and the Dynamic Support Register (DSR)** - NHS initiative to identify and improve support for children and young people with learning disabilities, autism (or both), if they also have “behaviour that challenges”, including behaviour arising from a mental health condition. The idea is to prevent that person from entering the criminal justice system or hospital. Speak to a mental health professional who works with your child.
- **Challenging Behaviour Foundation (CBF)** - this national charity provides information, advice and support for families with a child or young person with severe learning disabilities and behaviour that challenges. They have a family support service and advice line, workshops and peer support groups. You can call the Family Support Service on 0300 666 0126 or email [support@theCBF.org.uk](mailto:support@theCBF.org.uk). Visit: <https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk>
- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)** provides children and young people’s mental health services across Sussex. CAMHS Learning Disability Services in Brighton & Hove and East Sussex give specialist support to families of 0-18s with a learning disability, where there is concern about their emotional wellbeing, mental health, or behaviour that challenges, or there is a risk to themselves or others. Contact:  
**Brighton & Hove CAMHS Learning Disability Team** - parent carer and professional referrals are via <https://www.brightonandhovewellbeing.org>  
**East Sussex CAMHS Learning Disability and Family Intensive Support Service** - parents and professionals call 01323 446061, 9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday. Or visit <https://www.sussexcamhs.nhs.uk/our-services>
- **Parenting Teams and Family Hubs** - offer parenting advice and training to help you and your child including regular Triple P positive parenting courses and groups for parents of children with SEND. For East Sussex, visit <https://www.openforparents.org.uk> or <https://familyhubs.eastsussex.gov.uk>. In Brighton & Hove, you can access parenting workshops and courses, including Triple P, via the Family Hub. Email [familyhubs@brighton-hove.gov.uk](mailto:familyhubs@brighton-hove.gov.uk) or call 01273 293 545.

## Further reading and useful links

- **Amaze’s Sensory Processing and Mental Health** fact sheets - Download from our website at <https://amazesussex.org.uk/resources/fact-sheets>
- **Amaze’s web page on CETRs and the Dynamic Support register** – visit <https://amazesussex.org.uk/health/cetr-and-dsr/>
- **Contact** - downloadable guide to understanding your child’s behaviour [https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/understanding\\_your\\_childs\\_behaviour.pdf](https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/understanding_your_childs_behaviour.pdf)
- **Family Lives** – parenting advice videos and courses, advice line and online chat. See ParentChannelTV on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpGvO-Wj0EcEZpM5luobs1g> Or visit the Family Lives website on <https://www.familylives.org.uk>
- **PDA Society** – information and advice for families with children with pathological demand avoidance, part of the autism spectrum. <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/life-with-pda-menu/family-life-intro>
- **Yvonne Newbold**, author of the Special Parents Handbook, publishes lots of strategies for parenting children with special educational needs and disabilities. <https://yvonnenebold.com/>
- **Scope** – advice on managing behaviour that challenges. <https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/managing-challenging-behaviour>

