STAR Approach to the Management of
Severely Challenging Behaviour

Sometimes pupils can present very difficult behaviour which may be regarded as severely challenging. For instance, it may be a serious block to learning new skills, or it may be disruptive of the education of other pupils, or it may be positively harmful to the pupil or others.

We should always take the attitude that pupils behave in these ways for reasons which are important to them even if they are difficult for us to understand. It is essential that we find out what those reasons are if ever we are going to encourage a pupil to behave in more appropriate ways.

If challenging behaviour occurs, it is essential to identify in consultation with parents and key workers a package of intervention procedures designed to meet the individual pupil's needs. This intervention must have very clear targets and carefully planned strategies.

The 'STAR Approach' to the management of challenging behaviours is a sophisticated approach akin to an ABC analysis but so much more. It is described in the book *Problem Behaviour and People with Severe Learning Disabilities: The STAR Approach* by Ewa Zarkowska and John Clements (1994). The STAR Approach involves several interrelated strategies.

1. 'Unlearning' inappropriate behaviour, that is:

- preventing the challenging behaviour from achieving positive results for the pupil;
- finding a way of communicating to the pupil that the behaviour is unacceptable.

2. Often, challenging behaviours are unacceptable ways of achieving quite acceptable ends (e.g. the pupil screams because he wants a toy another pupil has taken, the pupil hits others to get attention). Often, the pupil does not have the right skills for achieving these ends. Therefore, it may be necessary to teach acceptable alternative behaviour which achieves the same results for the pupil as the challenging behaviour by:

- finding ways of encouraging any existing appropriate behaviours which he or she does not use much;
- teaching new skills.

3. It may be necessary to find ways of helping a pupil with a personal problem (e.g. ear ache, illness, side-effects of medication, emotional upset).

4. Often, it helps if we can change any aspects of the environment and routines which may be contributing to the occurrence of challenging behaviour (e.g. room is too crowded, too much noise, too many distractions).

The S.T.A.R. approach offers an eclectic mix of principles and strategies derived from a variety of approaches. Zarkowska and Clements (1994) adopt the view that challenging behaviour is highly complex behaviour which can have many causes. They recognise that

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much behaviour is learned but argue that a person's learning history is only one of the factors involved. Their *STAR* approach requires analysis and intervention at the following levels:

S   Settings
T   Triggers
A   Actions
R   Results

Settings are defined as the general contexts in which behaviour occurs. They determine the individual's motivation to achieve, and work for, results which might be available to him at any time. Every attempt is made to find out why the behaviour arose initially. Settings can be internal or external to the individual.

The external influences might be:

- life events (e.g. loss, change, trauma, abuse);
- current social climate (e.g. deprivation of relationships, conflict and hostility, lack of control, unnecessarily strict control);
- current activities (e.g. level and type of stimulation, access to desired activities);
- current physical climate (e.g. noise level, temperature, levels of lighting).

Internal and personal influences may include, a lack of self esteem; anxiety states; sadness and depression; boredom; communication problems; pain; tiredness and poor physical health; disordered thinking; a lack of social understanding; an inability to occupy self; an so on.

Triggers are defined as the particular signals which *set off* specific actions. They occur just before the behaviour and either increase a personal want, suggest a likely threat, or signal the availability of a desired reward. Examples include a change in activity, a new instruction, a high noise level, a memory of an event, the presence of a person who always responds in the desired way. The emphasis on triggers in the *STAR* approach reflects the increasing emphasis upon stimulus control in behaviour modification.

Actions are the *challenging behaviours* themselves. The *STAR* approach emphasises that the challenging behaviour must be defined in term of observable behaviours.

Results are the consequences which immediately follow the challenging behaviour. Results may be positive, negative or neutral.

The first crucial step is to clearly define in terms of observable behaviour the behaviour which causes concern. Some behaviours may occur as a cluster, e.g. a temper tantrum may include spitting, screaming, self-injury. Therefore, a decision has to be made whether to describe the behaviours as separate behaviours or as a group. Several behaviours may form a progressive sequence escalating in intensity and, therefore, a description of the sequence will be necessary.

The function which a behaviour serves for a pupil is inferred from an analysis of the results it achieves and the triggers which seem to set it off. Observations and structured discussions with parents and key workers are used to gather information. Zarkowska and Clements (1994, p.39) suggest a form for recording observations. This has four columns headed Settings, Triggers, Actions and Results. There are also columns for Date and Time. Each time the target behaviour occurs you should note the situation at the time and the context (Setting), what occurred just before the behaviour (Trigger) and what happened just after (Results) as well as the behaviour itself (Action).

BEHAVIOUR OBSERVATION CHART			Name:	Behaviour to be observed:	
Date	Time	Setting	Trigger	Action	Result

Historical information may be gleaned from records. Direct assessment of the individual may identify physical, emotional or cognitive states. Information needs to be gathered about the level of development of the pupil's language and communication, social, cognitive and personal autonomy skills. It is important to note whether the pupil can behave in particular ways independently or whether prompts or cues are necessary. The presence of skills which may be taught as desirable alternatives to challenging behaviour should be especially noted. There must be identification of important motivators.

Zarkowska and Clements (1994) advocate using all of this information to draw up a *strengths* list. A list of strengths should show:

- the pupil's skills, ie a summary of significant attainments in the key areas of development;
- the pupil's preferences, ie a summary of strong motivators;
- the conditions which evoke positive behaviour from the pupil;
- the conditions under which the pupil learns best.

The next step is to arrive at a *formulation* about the factors implicated in the development and maintenance of the challenging behaviour. The formulation will contain details about:

- the challenging behaviour(s);
- the results the challenging behaviour appears to achieve;
- apparent triggers for the challenging behaviour;
- environmental setting conditions

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- personal setting conditions;
- related skills deficits, e.g. lack of specific communication, social, occupational or cognitive skills.

STAR ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOUR: THE FORMULATION
Name:
Definition of problem behaviour:
Appears to achieve the following results:
Appears to be set off by the following triggers:
Seems to occur in the context of the following environmental setting conditions Physical: Occupational:
Appears to be related to the following personal setting conditions Physical: Psychological:

Appears to be associated with a deficit in the following skill area(s)

The final step is to make a general statement of *needs*. The 'needs' statement should be used to prioritise teaching objectives and establish management plans. A list of needs should not be a catalogue of all the things an individual cannot do. Instead, it should include statements about skills which should be learned or extended. In this sense it may be regarded as identifying long-term objectives and short-term targets. Zarkowska and Clements (1994) recommend that long-term objectives are set for a 6-12 month period; short-term targets should be achievable in 1-6 weeks. Targets and objectives are described as observable behaviours and may be likened to SMART targets (i.e. they are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related).

Zarkowska and Clements (1994) recognise that the management of challenging behaviour is a long term task and argue that it involves work at various levels. The main thrust involves altering the results of behaviours in order that challenging behaviours are discouraged and alternative behaviours are encouraged. They give much emphasis to teaching more appropriate behaviour. Finally, *risk factors* are reduced by altering the settings (present in the external environment) or internal states and moods associated with challenging behaviour. These changes serve to make opportunities available to practice alternatives, and to help to trigger more appropriate, skills, thus reducing the challenging behaviours. A comprehensive account of dealing with behaviours that cause concern in people with autism is given by John Clements and Ewa Zarkowska (2000).

References

Clements, J. and Zarkowska, E. (2000) *Behavioural Concerns and Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Explanations and Strategies for Change* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

Zarkowska, E. and Clements, J. (1994) *Problem Behaviour and People with Severe Learning Disabilities: the S.T.A.R. Approach.* London: Chapman and Hall. 2nd Edition.