Welcome to the sixth issue of the Down Syndrome Bulletin.

Theme 6: ‘Social strengths offer advantages, but not always’

Introduction

Children with Down syndrome are often identified as having strengths in early social development. Researchers have been looking at why children with Down syndrome may use this strength to avoid tasks that they perceive to be difficult.

“One of the first children I supported had a wonderful technique for avoiding an adult-led preschool activity- he would put his hand into the long curly hair of the little girl, hold on gently but tightly, make clear eye contact with adult and grin – as a member of preschool staff tried to gently remove his fingers, he put his other hand into her hair so having the undivided attention of not one but two adults. He never hurt the other child but the time taken to extract his fingers meant the undesirable adult-led activity was invariably avoided!”

Research

Educational researchers have identified that children with Down syndrome have a strength in early social development, especially interacting with and relating to other people. This can be a positive early strength as it enables a great deal of learning about the world, language and social communication.

Researchers have observed that these good interactive skills can be used by children with Down syndrome to distract adults away from a learning task.

Avoidance techniques vary but have two common features:

- Firstly, they are usually maintained until successful (ie until a given task has been abandoned).
- Secondly, they frequently involve the misuse of social skills.

A common strategy is to look up during an adult-led activity and make deliberate eye contact with the adult. They then sustain a routine whereby they sit back, maintain eye contact, smile and
refuse to continue with adult-led task until the adult moves onto something new.

Extra diversionary ploys can also be added, including hand-clapping, waving, slipping down under the table, making silly faces. These sorts of behaviours, while often charming, are context-inappropriate.

This research is concerning as it shows that children with Down syndrome will actively avoid rather than giving even incomplete attention to developing their learning, and subsequently their consolidation of newly acquired skills is poorly maintained.

**How this research is helping**

Four areas have been identified where support may be required to try and prevent challenging behaviours becoming habits:

1. **Provide strategies to intervene with potentially challenging behaviours**
   All behaviours serve a function, therefore if all those supporting the child observe the child’s behaviour and consider the reason for it, then behaviours such as throwing objects can be addressed quickly. Such behaviours can potentially evolve into ones that may have a negative impact on learning.

2. **Develop strategies to address early escape behaviours**
   Using strategies such as errorless learning, and tasks which start at a level the child feels secure with and new aspects introduced so gradually the need to use ‘escape behaviours’ is removed. Token systems have also been found highly successful by researchers – where a number of success tokens are exchanged for a reinforcing activity such as singing a favourite song, accessing a preferred toy.

3. **Teach requesting behaviours**
   Requesting is a key skill and so, if children with Down syndrome can be encouraged to imitate actions and related sounds, this can help them ‘request’ in future rather than using negative behaviours to communicate.

4. **Decrease the extent to which children engage in self-stimulating behaviours**
   These behaviours either feel good or help escape internal stimuli, for example: rocking, teeth grinding or head banging when child has an ear infection. It is necessary to consider supporting the child to reduce these behaviours while they are young as this will ensure a child does not miss out on valuable learning opportunities. A very simple interruption procedure is one where a child’s behaviour is moved gently towards an appropriate social behaviour. For example, clapping hands can be moved towards catching a ball which then involves positive reinforcement from another person rather than persistence with a solo activity.
Next steps

The pressures of real life mean that all parents sometimes have to help their child to do something even though they feel that he or she could probably manage on their own given enough time. Although it can be an uphill struggle to convince a child with Down syndrome that ‘making an effort’ is worthwhile, at the very least the recent research shows that families and education settings need to be aware of the fact that from an early age, children with Down syndrome may sometimes put as much effort into avoiding learning as into taking part in it and can therefore be putting themselves unnecessarily at future cognitive disadvantage.

Future research is needed in the following areas:

- Investigate the ways in which the social strengths can lead to challenging behaviours at home and school.
- Evaluate and develop consistent approaches with parents and preschool staff to successfully avoid or change challenging behaviours.

Update on Numicon materials

For those using Numicon materials, the Youtube clip below is useful in that it explains the design of Numicon material

Youtube: Making Numbers Real – Introduction to Numicon

Some families may be using the Numicon At Home set (see video below)

Numicon at home

Feedback

The Specialist Teaching & Preschool Service is developing a series of case studies to share good practice on supporting young children with Down Syndrome. If you have examples from your experience of working with children who use avoidance techniques (as highlighted in this bulletin), which you would happy to share with others, please contact us at EssexDownSyndrome.EarlyInterventionProgramme@essex.gov.uk

Material/research

Sources:
- Feeley KM, Jones EA - Preventing challenging behaviours in children with Down syndrome (2008)
- DSEI #7 - Social strengths offer advantages, but not always
- Wishart JG - Learning the hard way: Avoidance strategies in young children with Down syndrome