



Behaviour As Communication

Speech Matters SLP Services Inc. offers pan-disability, accessible, client- and family-centered speech & language therapy services. Their mission is to equip learners with the tools to communicate and thrive while also empowering them to live authentically.

In this presentation, Speech-Language Pathologist Holly Smith, Fright Moore and colleagues explore communication through behaviour, including discussions about potential triggers and accommodations. This presentation includes case studies that provide insights from both occupational and speech-language therapy perspectives.





Agenda



1

Definitions

2

Potential Triggers

3

Special Considerations

4

Case Studies

What is "communication"?



Communication is the sharing of information, verbally and non-verbally using spoken language, written language, gestures, facial expression, behaviour, signs, visual aids, etc.

Communication is a process where people exchange information, ideas, and feelings to create and share meaning.



What do we mean by "behaviours"? + 21

While "behaviours" can encompass any action, this term is often used to describe unpleasant or non-preferred actions observed in students or children.

The term "behaviour" often has a negative connotation in this context. SLPs strive to neutralize this term, and we emphasize the importance of validating and honouring all communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

In most cases, "behaviour" is a sign that your student may not have the skills or awareness to express their needs.





Some examples of "behaviours" may include...

Pushing to the front of
the line

Hitting or biting

Using inappropriate
language at school

Crying easily and/or
frequently

Ramming or crashing
into others

Putting their head
down on their desk

Holding their hands up
to their face or ears

Using a very loud voice
volume

Being very "silly" and
erratic

Can you think of any other "behaviours"?

TWO IMPORTANT NOTES!



HELP




BEHAVIOURS COME FROM UNMET NEEDS

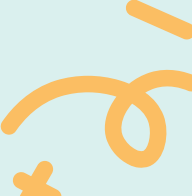
"Behaviours" are reduced (or completely eliminated) when students are taught necessary skills and afforded the necessary accommodations.



THERE IS NO "ROADMAP"

Every person is different. There is no formula that will teach you $X = Y$ in all cases. You will need to learn about your students, their individual needs, and their methods of communicating non-verbally.





That being said, what are some things that can set off "behaviours"?

A task being above their ability level

Intense anxiety about an activity or interaction

Being forced not to stim or fidget

Not having the words to describe their feelings

When things are unpredictable

Feelings of confusion or incompetence

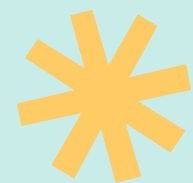
Being overstimulated by light, noise, body, etc.

Sitting for long periods of time

Exhaustion or understimulation



Can you think of any other things that may set off "behaviours"?



You must consider the student's individual needs when it comes to mitigating "behaviours" and supporting them where they are at.

**READING
DIFFICULTIES**

**LANGUAGE
DELAYS**

ADHD

TRAUMA

AUTISM

**SPEECH
DISORDERS**

What are some warning signs, or "tells"?

Increased
restlessness

Increasing
voice volume

Decreased
participation

Increased
speaking rate

Sudden
changes in
behaviour

Reduced
focus

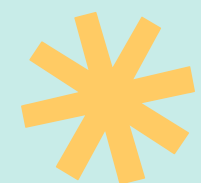


**Respond to
students,
not their
behaviours**

**"Behaviour" is most often not
personal, and the student often has
little control over it (without
accommodations).**

**Considering the life experiences that
student brings to the classroom.**

**Acknowledge and validate the
student's feelings and assist them
with co-regulation.**



What are "behaviours" telling you?

ESCAPE

Some students use behaviour to avoid a task, demand, situation, or person they find difficult. Escape behaviour can be quiet, like students who ask to use the bathroom every time it's their turn to read, or obvious, like students running out of the room.

ATTENTION

Students may behave in ways that are designed to gain attention. They may feel unsure about when or whether they'll get your attention otherwise. Attention-seeking can manifest as positive behaviours, such as when students work hard on a task to get your approval, or more interruptive behaviours, such as when students talk during class.

GETTING WHAT THEY WANT

Some behaviour is aimed at getting what they want, when they want it. This type of behaviour is very common for students who struggle with executive functioning (e.g., students with ADHD, students with CPTSD or trauma), as it impacts impulsivity and flexible thinking. Some examples include a student becoming agitated when they're told to stop or when they have to wait for their turn to speak with the teacher.

SENSORY NEEDS

For some students, processing the constant stream of sensory input is a struggle. "Sensory seekers" underreact to sensory input or need more of it to function. "Sensory avoiders" overreact to sensory input. They may become overwhelmed and/or "hyperactive". While it is necessary for these students to seek out the sensory input they need to function, some of the resulting behaviours may interfere with classroom activities. For example, a student may feel crowded in line and push others out of the way.





Some examples of accommodations may include...

Visual schedules and supports

Previewing any changes to the schedule

Pre-teaching vocabulary and expectations

Extra time for tasks and processing

Reduced demands and flexible timing

Having non-verbal communication options available

Breaks before/after challenging tasks

Reducing sensory input in learning spaces

Having spaces for regulation and co-regulation

Can you think of any other accommodations?

Case Studies

CASE STUDY #1

Dana is a Grade 5 student. She is usually cooperative in the classroom and is well-liked by her peers. Dana is reading at grade level. She is slow to get ready for recess and always asks for help to open her lunch containers. Dana will become visually upset during pencil and paper tasks and it will often lead to meltdowns, screaming, and aggression when prompted to complete the classroom task. She will attempt to leave the classroom during pencil and paper tasks.



CASE STUDY #1

Dana is a Grade 5 student. She is usually cooperative in the classroom and is well-liked by her peers. Dana is reading at grade level. She is slow to get ready for recess and always asks for help to open her lunch containers. Dana will become visually upset during pencil and paper tasks and it will often lead to meltdowns, screaming, and aggression when prompted to complete the classroom task. She will attempt to leave the classroom during pencil and paper tasks.

Fine-motor delays are impacting her participation. Dana's behaviour is telling us that she is having difficulties with this task and requires accommodations to reduce writing demands and/or find alternative forms for written expression.

Dana may require an OT referral to address motor delays and develop goals with Dana to support her ability to participate in written classroom activities.

Dana may benefit from engaging in calming activities before writing activities to help ground her for a more challenging task.

CASE STUDY #2

Imani is a Grade 3 student. She is usually very quiet and cooperative in the classroom. Imani has difficulties initiating play with other children and is often seen playing alone at recess. During class, Imani picks at her skin and her clothing. Imani cries and becomes overwhelmed easily, especially during group work and during gym. She is sent home often due to an upset stomach. When asked what she needs, Imani often says, "I don't know."



CASE STUDY #2

Imani is a Grade 3 student. She is usually very quiet and cooperative in the classroom. Imani has difficulties initiating play with other children and is often seen playing alone at recess. During class, Imani picks at her skin and her clothing. Imani cries and becomes overwhelmed easily, especially during group work and during gym. She is sent home often due to an upset stomach. When asked what she needs, Imani often says, "I don't know."

Imani's behaviour may be telling us that she has sensory processing challenges and/or anxieties that are impacting her participation at school. Imani may have anxiety, causing her picking habits and her upset stomachs. Group work and gym class can be very overstimulating, which can cause meltdowns.

Imani may have social communication delays and/or expressive language delays, resulting in her not having the words to communicate her wants and needs. Imani may benefit from an SLP and OT referral, sensory accommodations, and visual and written communication supports.

CASE STUDY #3

Jordan is a Grade 2 student. He has a hard time remaining seated in the classroom and is often seen wandering around or trying to leave the class. He is easily distractible and is often seen trying to engage others in conversation or play during class-time. With redirection he will sit for a few minutes but then attempts to wander around or leave the class. He will try to escape to the sensory room, where he will jump on the trampoline, climb the rock wall and use the slide. He can become aggressive when attempting to transition him from the sensory room to the classroom and often will say: “I hate the class!”



CASE STUDY #3

Jordan is a Grade 2 student. He has a hard time remaining seated in the classroom and is often seen wandering around or trying to leave the class. He is easily distractible and is often seen trying to engage others in conversation or play during class-time. With redirection he will sit for a few minutes but then attempts to wander around or leave the class. He will try to escape to the sensory room, where he will jump on the trampoline, climb the rock wall and use the slide. He can become aggressive when attempting to transition him from the sensory room to the classroom and often will say: "I hate the class!"

Jordan's behaviour is telling us that he has sensory needs for movement-based activities/breaks during class-time.

It would be ideal to implement in the classroom to minimize transitions. Jordan may benefit from a visual schedule-using first/then for additional structure and routine and assist with transitions. He would benefit from structured use of the sensory room-check in before/after, having a set visual schedule of which activities, how long and indications of when it is time to go back to class, i.e., after completion of the activities on the schedule or using a visual timer. It would be ideal to have a portable visual schedule that is used both in and outside of the classroom. Determine his interests and incorporate them into classroom activities. Use social stories to help him understand the routine of using the sensory room.

CASE STUDY #4

Ricky is a Grade 6 student. Ricky struggles significantly with participating appropriately at school. He is disruptive in class, talking out of turn, straying off topic, joking around, and not following class rules. At times, Ricky becomes aggressive with staff and other students. Ricky can be defensive or use language that is inappropriate for school. During recess, Ricky plays a lot of hands-on, physical games, and struggles with role-playing games. Ricky's grades are poor, especially for written assignments.



CASE STUDY #4

Ricky is a Grade 6 student. Ricky struggles significantly with participating appropriately at school. He is disruptive in class, talking out of turn, straying off topic, joking around, and not following class rules. At times, Ricky becomes aggressive with staff and other students. Ricky can be defensive or use language that is inappropriate for school. During recess, Ricky plays a lot of hands-on, physical games, and struggles with role-playing games. Ricky's grades are poor, especially for written assignments.

Ricky's behaviour may be telling us that he is struggling with receptive and expressive language. Ricky may not be able to follow the content presented to him in class and in games, causing him to feel confused, frustrated, and even angry. Ricky may struggle to express his wants and needs verbally, so he relies on non-verbal communication or simple communication, likes yes/no, swearing, or scripts (e.g., "I don't know"). His struggles with his coursework may also suggest that he has difficulties with language.

Ricky would benefit from an SLP referral and supports to build up his language skills.



Thank you!

Any questions?



References

1. www.understood.org/articles/en/understanding-behavior-as-communication-a-teachers-guide
2. Hollo A. and Chow J. (2015) Communicative Functions of Problem Behavior for Students with High-Incidence Disabilities. *Beyond Behavior*, 24(3), 23-30.
3. Hollo, A, Wehby, J.H. and Oliver, R.M. (2014). Unidentified Language Deficits in Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A MetaAnalysis. *Exceptional Children*; 80(2), 169-186.
4. Benner, G. J., Nelson, J. R., and Epstein, M. H. (2002). Language skills of children with EBD: A literature review. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 10 (1), 43-59;
5. Menting B., van Lier P.A., Koot H.M. (2011) Language skills, peer rejection, and the development of externalizing behavior from kindergarten to fourth grade. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*. 52(1), 72-79.
6. Snow, P. (2018). The Snow Report: Behaviour as a form of communication: What's the issue? Available at: <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2018/06/behaviour-as-form-of-communication.html>
7. www.theexpertally.com