Behaviour is Communication

A student with complex needs uses a variety of ways to communicate including vocalizations, gestures, body language, facial expressions, and in some cases, speech. However, sometimes a student communicates in a way that isn't accepted at school such as being loud, grabbing, or hitting. These forms of communicating are more likely to be labeled **behaviours** and bring about responses such as stopping the student or removing them from the setting. The first response from those supporting the student is to understand that **behaviour is communication.**

Dr. Ross Greene, a child psychologist, states that children only exhibit these behaviours when the expectations placed on them outstrip their ability to respond adaptively.

Communicating Needs

All behaviour can be understood as having 1 of 4 functions:

1.   To obtain a preferred item or activity (I want that)
2.   To get attention from others (I want your attention)
3.   To escape or avoid (I don't want that)
4.   Self-stimulation—when the behaviour itself is reinforcing (I like how that feels)

Behaviours can start off subtly such as rubbing a hand down the face, but it can quickly escalate toward others (hitting or yelling). Subtle beginnings and rapid escalation of behaviours can mean that those who support the student miss the first attempts to communicate. Behaviour escalates when the student does not feel heard in their first attempt to communicate.

Having limited oral language skills means other methods (behaviours) are used to communicate needs. For example, the student can't just say "my pants are itchy," but instead they rely on other ways of telling us what is wrong or what they need. To do this, they might grab your arm, or pull at their pants, or in some cases take their pants off. These other ways of communication require us to pay attention and interpret what is happening. The key point is that the student is trying to communicate.

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Causes of Behaviours

The reason a student exhibits a particular behaviour is sometimes difficult to determine. To understand why the student communicates the way they do, we can consider three possible factors:

1. The Student's Internal States

The student might be trying to express something:

- **Biological**—physical discomfort (for example, the need to go to the bathroom)
- **Cognitive**—confusion (for example, the instructions were confusing, and they don't know what to do)
- **Emotional**—feelings (for example, they are excited, sad, happy)
- **Social**—to make someone laugh or attend to them
- **Prosocial**—the ability to cope with other people's stress

2. Environmental factors
- Knowing how a student is impacted by the environment is the first step in organizing a student's day and building the environment to be supportive of their sensory, cognitive, and physical needs.

3. Effective support
- Gather background information to identify strategies that will best support the student in developing their communication skills; involved staff can read the student's records, talk to the family and others who know the student well, and observe the student carefully.
- Requires time to assess and interpret all the ways the student communicates.
- Identify and teach the skills the student needs and to modify expectations to make them attainable.
- Provide accommodations and modifications for success.

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Supportive Strategies to Be Successfully Included

1. Involve the student when figuring out what a student is communicating; "what's up" approach
2. Check the Student's Understanding; check facial expressions and body language
3. Adjust the way you speak; short simple sentences, wait time to respond
4. Provide Visual Supports; individualized for student
5. Develop a Personal Communication Dictionary; made by recording what a student does (their **behaviour**), what the team believes that behaviour means (**intent**), and **how team members should respond**
6. Design for Intrinsic Reinforcement; the positive reward is embedded in activity
7. The Student's "Zone of Proximal Development"; sweet spot to stretch learning
8. Teach 1 New Thing at a Time
9. Be Flexible; adjust expectations due to fatigue, pain etc.

*Provide hyper link to course 3 module 3 once established for further details and learning

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