

Flower power

When traditional methods don't work for your special children, it's time to get to the root of the problem, says **Adele Devine**...

There's a dandelion growing in your garden. What will your response to it be? A) The quick fix - remove the flower head, B) The long-term solution - get a spade and dig up its roots, C) Acceptance - learn to love dandelions.

Dandelions will not stick to neat flowerbeds. They spring up in the middle of the grass. To green-fingered neighbours they stand out, making us look like we are not caring for our gardens properly. Our SEN children often stand out too. They may present unusual or disruptive behaviours. They might not be motivated by the usual rewards or bothered by reprimands.

Let us take the example of a child with autism 'playing' at the sand tray. You observe the child repeatedly lifting sand and watching it pour through his fingers. He does this again and again; he does not play or move on as other children do. When the other children transition to the carpet for story-time this child stays put as if his feet are glued to the floor.

This sand tray play is an opportunity to develop communication by using techniques based on 'Intensive Interaction' (visit intensiveinteraction.co.uk for more information). Get alongside the child and mirror how he plays. Become a fellow investigator. In time, the child may start to interact, which is the start of communication and cooperative play. We accept and learn with the child on his terms.

Maybe the child shows disruptive behaviour at the sandpit such as throwing sand in other children's eyes. Provide visuals showing the right way to play with sand. Praise children getting it right. We work with the child to teach him an alternative, acceptable way to interact with other



children and get good 'reactions'. Remember that children who seek reactions may not distinguish between positive and negative reactions. A "Johnny, stop!" could seem as rewarding to them as a "Well done, Johnny!"

Perhaps the child tries to control the sandpit, showing distress when others join him. Set another sand tray, nearby allowing other children to play and providing opportunities to praise those behaviours you want to see.

CASE STUDY

'Bessie the tipper' (Diagnosis: Autism)

If there was a basket of toys, a box of puzzles or a tray of pencils in view, Bessie would launch herself towards it and tip it up. The classroom was set up to avoid temptation. No pencil pots were left out, no boxes of scrap paper... Everything was up high or locked away. But this was not fair on the other children. The tipping caused them

distress, and not being able to go and get things was removing opportunities for them to develop their independence.

A pattern had developed: Bessie would tip and staff would insist she tidy up. She would tidy up with the staff and when done, they would tell her she was a "good girl". What was she getting out of this? Was she enjoying the cooperative tidy up time or the "good girl" praise?

I asked staff to give Bessie lots of over the top "good girl" comments for the other things she did well, but then, when she tipped, to show no reaction. We gently moved Bessie away and tidied up, without commenting. I spoke to Bessie's mum so she could get on board with the new strategy too.

At first the tipping continued, but over time, we found that we were getting more relaxed about leaving things out. The tipping became more occasional, and by the time I came to write the end of year reports, it had stopped altogether.



FINDING THE ROOT

TO FIND OUT WHAT CHILDREN ACHIEVE THROUGH THEIR BEHAVIOUR, WE NEED TO OBSERVE THEIR ACTIONS. ASK YOURSELF, ARE THEY:

- Attention seeking;
- Wanting a reaction;
- Investigating;
- Copying;
- Trying to play;
- Opting out;
- Showing fear;
- Experiencing sensory discomfort;
- Making an association;
- Trying to communicate?

By understanding this, we can work out how to respond appropriately.

CASE STUDY

'Shoeless Sam' (Diagnosis: Autism)

Sam always arrived at school without his shoes on. With visual symbols and patience, we would get him to wear shoes, but it took a long time. I knew there must be a root cause and that the best place to start helping Sam with this shoe issue was to ask his mum.

She said that the 'shoe issue' had only started since Sam had started coming to school on transport. So what was their morning routine?

Once Sam was dressed he would sit snuggled up with Mum watching kids' TV until transport arrived. When Mum saw the school bus, she would give Sam his shoes and turn off the TV. Sam would refuse to put them on and, after a battle, he would end up getting onto his transport without them. Mum would hand the shoes over to the escort.

I wondered if Sam was associating putting his shoes on with the TV being turned off and him getting on the school bus. Seeing the shoes signified an end to his lovely snugly TV time with Mum. We had noticed at school that Sam needed time to process. If we showed him a symbol, he would take about four minutes to process and act on it. Once we knew this about Sam it had helped, in so many ways. We'd show him the toothbrush symbol five minutes before brushing teeth and he would brush teeth, but if he was shown it and then immediately expected to do it, he would not.

I suggested that Mum change the morning routine and add some visuals. We created a visual schedule, allowing five minutes warning with a 'Now and Next' schedule showing 'TV' then 'Shoes on' before the TV went off. The TV would go off and then Mum would show Sam the 'shoes on' symbol again. Sam's shoes were by the door.

The morning after we put this all in place, Sam arrived with his shoes on. All he'd needed was a change to his routine, removing the association, a visual schedule and time to process.

Final thoughts

I once told our son that the flowers I loved most were dandelions. He could pick me as many of them as he liked, but only them. He happily picked the dandelions and I knew no one would mind. The funny thing is that over time, as he proudly presented me with fistfuls of dandelions and I put them in vases on the windowsill, I came to see them as lovely, sunny flowers.

Take time to get to know that special child in your care, see through their eyes, love what they love and learn together. Set the child up to succeed, raise his self-esteem and see how he can flower. And remember, as somebody unrecorded by history once said, "The difference between a flower and a weed is a judgement."



about the author

Adele Devine is a teacher at Portesbery School for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties and director of the award-winning SEN Assist Ltd. Visit senassist.com. Her new book, *Colour Coding for Learners with Autism* is available now from Jessica Kingsley Publishers, priced £24.98. TN readers will receive a 15% discount on RRP by entering code T15 at checkout. Visit jkp.com

Our **SEN** children often stand out; they might not be motivated by the usual **rewards** or bothered by reprimands