

Solution Focused Approaches to Difficult Behaviour: an In-service Training Pack

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Introductory Paper

What is Difficult Behaviour?

Defining difficult behaviour poses something of a challenge. It can mean different things to different people in different situations. The definition is therefore socially constructed, being dependent upon the perceptions of those involved in any given context. However, within any school setting, there would seem to be some agreement on the effects of difficult behaviour. It threatens control, affects learning and teaching and has a negative impact on those involved.

It would be fair to assume that all schools have at some time to deal with difficult behaviour, whether isolated incidents or frequent and persistent episodes. Successful schools have long recognised the impact of a positive ethos and consistent, positive approaches to managing behaviour. However, despite the implementation of various approaches such as *Assertive Discipline* (Cantor and Cantor, 1992), schools, teachers and psychologists still find themselves having to deal with and make sense of difficult behaviour. Confrontation, anger, aggression, fighting and refusing to conform are all behaviours experienced to some degree in all schools, often leading to exclusion. With recent government initiatives such as *Social Inclusion*, *Raising Attainment* and *Alternatives to Exclusion*, the pressure has never been greater to be dealing effectively with the difficult behaviour of some children and young people.

There is no doubt that difficult behaviour does cause extreme tension within classrooms and schools (DES 1989) and the impact on staff of having to deal with difficult behaviour cannot be underestimated. The very experience can challenge feelings of professional and personal competence and effectiveness (Fogell & Long 1997). Whilst others may sympathise with the extent of the difficult behaviour experienced, there would seem to be somewhat of a taboo in schools about sharing success achieved with children who exhibit difficult behaviour (Miller 1996). As a result, teachers are often left feeling demoralised, deskilled and devoid of further ideas or strategies. In the face of having to deal with such difficult behaviour and in the absence of alternative strategies, people can

end up just doing 'more of the same' (Selekman 1993). How can we break this negative cycle and *do something different* when difficult behaviour persists or escalates?

Gaining co-operation and the willingness to try an alternative approach in such challenging situations is no easy task. Once schools have described behaviour as too difficult for them to cope with there can develop a need to show how deep rooted, complex and unchangeable the problems are. Evidence for this is easily gathered from the negative, problem-focused accounts of the situation permeating the school. What else can be done when situations involving difficult behaviour are presented only in terms of failure (Rhodes & Ajmal 1995)?

It is at this point that one might challenge Selekman's assertion, and ask the question, "Do severe and chronic behavioural difficulties really require big and complex solutions?". As a proponent of solution focused approaches one would have to say no, and pursue the exploration of *exceptions* to the difficult behaviour, recognising these as the first small steps towards change. By exploring any exceptions to the difficult behaviour, a glimmer of hope can be restored for the future.

The alternative sought in such situations may be found in solution focused approaches.

Why use a Solution Focused Approach?

Given the nature of difficult behaviour experienced in schools and the negative effects this can have on pupils, teachers and the school community as a whole, what is it that a solution focused approach can offer that is different from other approaches employed?

A solution focused approach offers an alternative route when we feel stuck with difficult behaviour and with people who seem resistant to change. It offers a way of 'doing something different' (de Shazer 1985).

It also provides an alternative to the pathological viewpoints that develop about children who exhibit difficult behaviour. As Durrant (1995) points out, "Problems do not indicate pathology, but occur in the context of human interaction and just happen". Therefore, exploring or trying to understand the causation of problems is neither helpful nor even necessary. If time is spent, and a great deal of it is, trying to find the cause of the problem, the likelihood is that this will be found in within-child explanations. By considering the difficult behaviour from a social interactionist perspective, responsibility

for change, in both perception *and* action, has to be placed with others and not just with the pupil involved.

A solution focused approach supports pupils, teachers and parents in their wish to make these changes. Indeed, as Rhodes & Ajmal purport, “No model of approaching behaviour difficulties is more useful and flexible than solution focused thinking. It enables a different story to be told, one which emphasises the skills, strengths and resources of the people involved” (1995).

Some cynics may suggest that a solution focused approach does nothing more than emphasise positives. However, the approach also allows for the very real experience and feelings of individuals involved with difficult behaviour to be listened to and validated. To ignore the feelings of failure and negative affect associated with instances of such behaviour, may be perceived as minimising the seriousness of the problem (Durrant 1995) and in so doing, jeopardising the further co-operation of those involved. We must recognise the pressures which both staff and pupils are under if we are to gain co-operation in promoting a different approach to these very challenging situations.

Durrant describes this as ‘walking a tightrope’. As psychologists, we must acknowledge the experience of the pupil or teacher to whom we are talking and validate their feelings. However, we do not want to focus on the problem to the extent that we help it seem insurmountable. A solution focused approach still allows you to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, but emphasises the coping strategies demonstrated by the teacher and highlights the exceptions identified in the difficult behaviour pattern. Focusing on times when teachers act differently in response to difficult behaviour allows them to feel that they had some influence over the behaviour and incorporates within the strategy whatever the teacher does that is in some way useful or effective.

The main aim therefore is to enhance the teacher’s ability to cope with difficult behaviour and, as a result, to effect positive change in pupil behaviour. What can the teacher do more of to facilitate further change? Rather than ask about what caused the problem, we can ask what gets in the way of noticing or finding solutions?

It is also important to build on what is already successful in schools and help staff to recognise elements of support strategies that are working well with difficult pupils. A solution focused approach encourages staff and pupils to look in detail at times when there has been success and to develop further ways of ensuring that this success is

repeated. For pupils who present with difficult behaviour, it can provide a new view of themselves which may lead to different behaviour. For teachers faced with difficult behaviour, it reinforces their strengths, skills and coping strategies and in so doing, restores their feelings of competence and confidence in their ability to effect positive change.

The purpose of this in-service training pack is to highlight the application of a solution focused approach in providing for schools an alternative for dealing more effectively with behavioural difficulties.

The value of any in-service training course will be seen where there is a thirst to know more and a motivation to go and put solutions into practice.

However, if a solution focused approach is to be promoted in schools as an effective way of dealing with difficult behaviour, then teachers need to share an understanding of the fundamental assumptions underlying the approach and of the principles that should guide their practice. How will they know? What will they be doing differently when they are using a solution focused approach?

The following section outlines the fundamental assumptions of this approach.

Fundamental Assumptions of a Solution Focused Approach

An emphasis on the past and on details of the problem are not necessary for the development of solutions.

De Shazer (1985) believes that it is possible to work towards solutions without having had much discussion about the problem situation and its causation. When we consider the amount of time spent in schools *finding out the truth* or *getting to the bottom* of problem situations involving difficult pupil behaviour, we can quickly recognise the merits of an approach where this would not only be deemed unnecessary but at times counter-productive.

There are always exceptions, i.e. times when the problem is less or even absent.

If times when the problem happens less or not at all are explored in great detail, then many ideas or suggestions can be found to a possible solution. The skill in solution focused working is to listen carefully for the clues (Rhodes & Ajmal 1995). People generally want things to get better and have a vested interest in exploring in detail those times when the situation is at least a little better.

People have the resources to resolve their difficulties.

Working in a solution focused way opens up possibilities of a different view by emphasising people's skills, strengths and coping strategies. Even in the bleakest of scenarios, asking a coping question can be extremely empowering. It helps people to recognise the skills they have used to cope in the past and that they will use again to solve their current problems. By using solution focused questions, teachers, pupils and parents can be enabled to recognise their own skills, strengths and resources and how these can be harnessed in the direction of change.

A small change can lead to widespread changes.

In solution focused thinking it is widely believed that 'big problems do not always need big solutions'. In fact, if one very small but positive change can be made, then the likelihood is that many other positive changes will be triggered. De Shazer (1985) calls this the 'ripple effect'.

Attention to language is crucial.

The language used in solution focused approaches is crucial. Whether talking to a teacher, parent or pupil, an attempt should be made to use similar words and phrases and to match the speed and intonation of the language used (O'Hanlon 1997). Language matching is a powerful way of showing others that we are on the same wavelength. The language used should also suggest that change is inevitable i.e. *when* the problem is solved, not *if* the problem is solved. Such choice of words conveys the expectation that their preferred goal is achievable.

The individual's own goal is central.

If the use of a solution focused approach is to be successful then the goal of the individual we are working with has to be central. We must work with the individual's view of the solution pattern. If their goal is too big or unrealistic, then the aim will be to prioritise which part of the goal can be worked towards first.

By adhering to the above principles of a solution focused approach, teachers and psychologists should be confident that they are, indeed, 'doing something different' in trying to effect change in the area of difficult behaviour.

Materials in the Training Pack

The training pack has been prepared for psychologists wishing to present solution focused ideas to colleagues, schools or groups of others working with children.

On the CD-ROM are the following materials:

- ◆ ***Introductory Paper***
+ Appendix of Additional Quotes

- ◆ ***Presentation Text***
9 Sections + Appendix of Additional Materials

- ◆ ***Powerpoint Presentation***
(Slide show version and a file for editing, if required)

- ◆ ***Activity Sheets (Powerpoint File)***
(For printing in colour, greyscale or black and white, and distributing as handouts)

All are included in the published booklet also, the overhead slides being embedded in the text (though without the animated effects!).

The materials could be presented over several sessions: what is provided here can be tailored to the time available and to the specific objectives of the group.

The *Appendix of Additional Materials* could form the basis of a follow-up session, looking in more detail at specific applications of this approach to difficult behaviour. An order of presentation is suggested. Alternatively, individual overheads or activities could be selected and transferred into the main presentation.

References

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Appendix Additional Quotes

Problem patterns include both behaviour and perceptions. Both behaving differently and thinking differently are part of the process of change. It is more helpful to consider *What gets in the way of finding or noticing solutions?* than *What caused the problem?*

“Pathology, dysfunction or diagnostic labels suggest that problems are part of people, which leaves them unable to experience themselves as having any personal agency in the solution” (Durrant, 1995, p.13).

As Durrant (1995) points out, “If what you are doing with pupils and teachers is working then keep doing it. If there are times when it is not working, then perhaps this approach allows you to consider something different.”

“In solution focused work it is impossible to separate assessment from intervention. The major intervention is the interview itself with the emphasis on negotiating shared goals between the school and the pupil and exploring exceptions to the difficult behaviour” (Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995, p. 54).

“Furthermore, it is not an exclusive model and combines successfully with other techniques“ (Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995, p. 54).

Using a solution focused approach in meetings by clearly identifying goals at the beginning provides the opportunity to draw out similarities between the aims of the parties present.

“People often come to meetings with the notion of a solution residing in external support. Better not to get into a discussion or battle about resources, but rather to explore the effects or results of this help. In the course of extending people’s thinking to what would actually be done with the extra resource, it can highlight things which are already happening and the fact that they too can be part of the solution” (Rhodes & Ajmal, 1995).