

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CHILDREN: A SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Working with difficult children—a term broadly used to describe children who exhibit externalizing (e.g., aggression, defiance) or internalizing (e.g., withdrawal, anxiety) disruptive behaviours—is a central challenge in educational, clinical, and family contexts. Such behaviours can negatively affect learning, social interaction, and long-term development. This article critically reviews current theoretical frameworks, evidence-based interventions, and practical strategies to support these children effectively. Drawing on psychological research, educational studies, and clinical intervention literature, we highlight foundational principles in understanding behaviour, the role of caregiver-child relationships, behaviour management techniques, and intervention frameworks such as cognitive-behavioural approaches, positive reinforcement models, and systemic practices. Finally, gaps in research and future directions for practice are discussed.

Keywords: challenging behaviour, disruptive behaviour, behaviour management, child development, intervention strategies

Introduction

Children who exhibit difficult or challenging behaviours are encountered across multiple contexts: homes, schools, clinics, and community settings. “Difficult behaviour” is an umbrella term that encompasses actions that interfere with learning, peer relations, and adaptive functioning, such as aggression, defiance, impulsivity, non-compliance, emotional dysregulation, and withdrawal.

Scholars have long recognised that behaviour is not an isolated trait of the child but is deeply embedded in interactions with adults, peers, environments, and systems (e.g., family, school). Behavioural difficulties may be associated with neurodevelopmental disorders, traumatic experiences, unmet needs, or environmental stressors. As a result, effective work with challenging children must integrate developmental understanding with evidence-based practices.

This article synthesises relevant research and offers a comprehensive overview of strategies that are supported by current scientific evidence.

From a behavioural perspective, difficult actions are often forms of communication. A child may use aggression, defiance, or withdrawal to express unmet needs, stress, sensory overload, or lack of skill in emotion regulation. In this view, behaviour is functional: it serves to obtain desired outcomes (attention, control) or to avoid undesired situations (tasks, social demands).

This functional view is foundational in behaviour analysis and intervention planning, where assessment aims to identify antecedents and consequences that maintain behaviour.

Developmental psychology emphasises that children's behaviour is shaped by their cognitive, emotional, and social maturation. Children with immature self-regulation skills may struggle with frustration tolerance and impulse control, leading to disruptive behaviour.

Additionally, relational theories assert that the quality of the caregiver–child relationship greatly influences behaviour. Secure, responsive relationships provide emotional safety, support self-regulation development, and reduce behavioural dysregulation.

Behaviour is influenced by broader environmental and systemic factors. Family dynamics, classroom climates, cultural expectations, and school policies can either alleviate or exacerbate behavioural challenges. Systemic approaches (e.g., systemic hypothesising) help practitioners reflect on relational dynamics and interpersonal patterns that may contribute to persistent challenging behaviours.

Parent Management Training (PMT) is one of the most well-studied approaches for addressing externalising behaviours in children. It focuses on teaching parents to use positive reinforcement, consistent consequences, and structured routines to shape behaviour. Trials show that PMT reduces disruptive behaviours and improves caregiver confidence and competence. [Vikipediya](#)

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and related frameworks aim to develop children's skills in recognising emotions, regulating impulses, and solving problems. School-based CBT interventions have shown positive effects in reducing conduct symptoms and improving self-control.

Research supports structured behaviour management strategies in classrooms, such as the **Good Behaviour Game (GBG)**—a team-based reinforcement model that increases prosocial behaviour and reduces disruption. Long-term studies indicate that early use of GBG can reduce problematic behaviour into adolescence and adulthood.

Mentalization-based interventions focus on enhancing the capacity of teachers and caregivers to understand children's internal states and intentions. A recent mixed-methods study showed that strengthening mentalizing responses reduces disruptive incidents and improves emotional resolution in classroom interactions.

Therapeutic approaches such as Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) strengthen caregiver–child relationships by coaching parents in real-time interaction skills, leading to improved behaviour and emotional regulation.

Play therapy and social skills training provide safe, developmentally appropriate environments for children to express emotions, build social competence, and practise adaptive behaviours. These methods are particularly effective for younger children and those with limited verbal skills.

Positive reinforcement involves acknowledging and rewarding desirable behaviour rather than only punishing undesirable actions. For example, praising a child for waiting their turn increases the likelihood of that behaviour recurring. Positive reinforcement is a cornerstone of effective behaviour support plans.

Children benefit from environments with clear expectations and predictable routines. Consistency helps reduce anxiety and uncertainty, which can trigger challenging behaviour. Effective behaviour plans communicate rules visually and reinforce them routinely.

When applied correctly (as part of an overall positive strategy), time-out can reduce unwanted behaviour by removing reinforcing attention and providing a calm break. Research suggests that short, structured time-outs—in combination with positive strategies—can be effective in increasing compliance and reducing aggression in children.

For children prone to intense emotional outbursts, training in de-escalation techniques is critical. These approaches prioritise safety, reduce escalation triggers, and focus on calming strategies. Teaching staff to use non-violent de-escalation preserves relationships and reduces harm.

Professional development for teachers and staff is essential. Interventions, such as video-feedback training, help staff reflect on interaction patterns, shift focus from behaviour problems to relational processes, and improve engagement strategies with difficult children. Evidence shows that such training can change staff perceptions and improve child relationships.

Despite evidence supporting many strategies, challenges remain:

1. **Resource Constraints:** Many evidence-based programs require trained professionals and multiple sessions, which can hinder large-scale implementation.

2. **Individual Differences:** Children vary widely in their developmental profiles, emotional needs, and responsiveness to intervention. Tailoring approaches is necessary.

3. **Family and Systemic Barriers:** Caregiver stress, limited access to services, and inconsistent follow-through reduce program effectiveness.

Effective behaviour support often requires a **multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)**:

- **Tier 1:** Universal positive behaviour supports for all children, such as classroom management and reinforcement strategies.

- **Tier 2:** Targeted interventions for children with moderate needs, including small-group social skills training or parent coaching.

- **Tier 3:** Intensive, individualized interventions for children with severe behavioural disorders or trauma histories.

This tiered approach aligns supports with the level of need and ensures early identification and response.

Conclusion

Working with difficult children is a complex but critical endeavour that combines developmental understanding, structured behavioural strategies, and relational competence. Research consistently highlights the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions such as parent training, cognitive-behavioural approaches, classroom behaviour management, and mentalization-based practices. However, successful application requires skills, consistency, and collaboration among caregivers, educators, clinicians, and wider systems. Future research should continue to explore scalable interventions, cultural adaptations, and long-term outcomes.

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