Parenting on Behavioural Issues

It looks like misbehaviour. It sounds like misbehaviour. And it certainly feels like misbehaviour. But for many children with special needs, lying, acting up, disrespectfulness and other signs of apparent disobedience may have more to do with a lack of communication skills, motor planning ability, sensory integration and cause-and-effect thinking than with deliberate malicious intent.

Does this mean you have to allow out-of-control behaviour as just another fact of a special-needs parent's life? No – your child still needs to learn acceptable behaviour to be safe and successful. It just means you're going to have to look at things from a different angle.

Start by following these 5 W's:

Understand **WHO** is responsible for change. You can stubbornly insist that your child is responsible for his or her own behaviour and wait for him or her to get in line, but you're liable to be waiting for a long time. While you may find the behaviour annoying, disruptive or inappropriate, it may be filling a need for your child. And even if your child is genuinely unhappy about the negative consequences of his or her behaviour, he or she may not understand it enough to control it. In the end, it is far easier for you to change – your expectations, actions, reactions, responses – than for your child to change. You will need to do some detective work to determine the support your child needs to improve his or her behaviour, and provide it. Ultimately, you can teach your child to do this for him or herself. But you have to lead the way.

Decide **WHAT** behaviour you most want to target. To start with, you'll want to narrow your focus to one particular behaviour to analyze and change. Although it's tempting, don't just choose the thing that most annoys you. A better choice will be something that particularly puzzles you: Why is your child sweet and compliant sometimes, then resists to the point of tantrum over something inconsequential? Why can your child do math just fine some days, and balks on other days? Why does he insist on punishment even when it upsets him? Why does she get so wound up and wild? While you're stalking one behaviour, you may need to let others slide, unless it's a matter of safety. Don't try to change everything all at once.

Keep track of **WHEN** the behaviours occur. Keep a journal – or, if it is a frequently occurring behaviour, a chart – for noting every incidence of the targeted behaviour. Include the time of day the behaviour occurred, and what happened before, during and after. Think of what might have happened directly before the behaviour, and also earlier in the day. Think too, of what happened directly after the behaviour, and whether it offered the child any reward (even negative attention can be rewarding if the alternative is no attention at all). Ask yourself: Does the behaviour tend to be more frequent during a certain time of day?

After a certain event? When something happens or doesn't happen? In anticipation of something happening? Around transitions? When routine is disrupted? When things are very noisy or very busy? Keep track over the course of a few weeks and look for patterns.

Keep track of **WHERE** the behaviours occurs. It may seem as though your child saves his or her worst behaviour for public places, where it causes you the most embarrassment. But there may be a reason for that. Is there something about those places that might be distressing? Does he have trouble in places where he needs to stay still and quiet, like church? Does she panic in places that are busy and noisy, like the mall? Does he resist places where kids may be cruel, like the bus or the playground? Does she shy away from places with strong smells or bright lights? Does he have a hard time resisting touching and banging thinks like buttons or doors? Notice reactions to different environments and add these insights to your journal or chart.

Make some guesses as to **WHY** the behaviour occurs. Take the data from your journal or chart, the patterns you've turned up there, the observations on environments, and see if you can figure out what's behind the behaviour. Maybe she blows up over something inconsequential because she's used up all her patience weathering frustrations earlier in the day. Maybe he balks at math when he sees too many problems on the page. Maybe she gets wound up because being good gets her no attention. Maybe he begs for punishment because going to his room feels safer than dealing with a challenging situation. Once you have a working theory, make some changes in your child's environment to make it easier for him or her to behave. Instead of being happy that your daughter seems to be handling frustrating situations, provide support earlier in the day so that her patience will hold out longer. If your son's worksheet has too many problems, fold it to expose only a row at a time or cut a hole in a piece of paper and use it as a window to show only one or two problems at once. Give your daughter lots of attention when she's being good and none at all for bad behaviour, just a quick and emotionless timeout. Recognise situations your son feels challenged by and offer an alternative between compliance and disobedience.
You may not always guess right the first time, and not every change you try will work.

Effective parents will have a big bag of tricks they can keep digging into until they find the one that works that day, that hour, that minute. But investigating and analyzing behaviour and strategizing solutions will help you feel more in control of your family, and your child feel safer and more secure. And that alone often cuts down on a lot of misbehaviour.

http://specialchildren.about.com/od/behaviorissues/a/analysis.htm