Atypical Behaviors in Children with Down Syndrome

Mary Pipan, MD

Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician
Clinical Director of the Trisomy 21 Program of the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia
Atypical Behaviors

• Define ‘atypical’
  – (We all have ‘atypical’ behaviors)
  – All kids have some ‘atypical’ behaviors

• Define why children have atypical behaviors

• Figure out what to do about these behaviors
What are these behaviors?

- The ‘flop’
- Throwing/flinging
- Dangling
- Pacing
- Eloping
- Rocking
- Head Banging
- Hitting (self or others)
- Biting (self or others)
- Teeth Grinding
- Mouthing objects
- Eating non food items
- Mouthing off
- Self-talk
- Masturbating
- Picking
- Stool Smearing/Eating
- Staring
- Disrobing
- Compulsive Routines
Why do we consider these behaviors atypical?

- Make the child look different
- Unsafe to self/others
- Unusual intensity/duration/frequency
- Interfere with other activities
- Occur in public places (OK in private)
- Cause social isolation
- Unconventional, inexplicable
Why do these behaviors occur?

• Sensory
• Cognitive Rigidity/Poor adaptability
• Social Skills Deficits
• Emotional Skills Deficits
• Communication Deficits
• Rewarded with what the child wants
• Inadequate discipline
Sensory

- Sensory seeking
  - Feels good
  - Cool!
  - Calms
  - Nothing better to do
Sensory: What to do?

• Sensory seeking
  – Confine to a place/time
  – Sensory diet
  – Use as a reward for other behaviors
  – Distract or Redirect
  – Take away the stimming object
Sensory: What to do?

• Nothing better to do
  – Activity schedules

• Get your work done: IT’S OK to have some self stim some of the time
Sensory

• Reaction to adverse sensory input
  – Hypersensitivity
  – Overstimulation
  – Pain/discomfort
Sensory: What to do?

- Reaction to adverse sensory input
  - Avoid triggers
  - Mask triggers
  - Gradual exposure (densensitization)
  - Find source of pain/discomfort
Cognitive Rigidity
Poor adaptability

- Difficulty shifting attention
- Difficulty seeing alternatives
- Vapor lock
- Need for consistent routines
Cognitive Rigidity
Poor adaptability: what to do?

• Routines
• Visual schedules of current and later events
• Warnings and transition aides
• Alternative solutions
• Work small changes into routine
• “Change is good, or at least OK”
Social skills deficits

- Wanting to be social and not knowing how
  - Difficulty gaining attention, appropriately
  - Difficulty maintaining attention, appropriately
  - Frustration with social rejection
Social skills deficits: What to do?

- Teach appropriate skills
  - Social Stories
  - Pragmatic language skills teaching
- Modeling, coaching, role play
- Behavioral Rehearsal
- Provide opportunity to practice
- Involve siblings/playmates
Social Skills Deficits

• Lacking ‘social radar’
  – Indiscriminate imitation: what and who to imitate
  – Lack of awareness of what is inappropriate behavior
  – Difficulty looking at their behavior from someone else’s perspective
  – Difficulty looking at the effect of their behavior on someone else
Social skills deficits: What to do?

• Be sure child has models of appropriate behavior
• Give explicit expectations of behavior
• Practice
• Notice and (sometimes) reward appropriate behavior
• Rules
• How would that make you feel?
Emotional Skills deficits

• Impaired comprehension of emotions
  – Picking up on subtle or early emotions
  – Interpreting one’s own emotions
  – Handling high emotions either way
Emotional Skills deficits

• Impaired communication of emotions
  – Restricted facial expression
  – Limited body language to express emotions
  – Limited words to express emotions
  – May use one phrase to express a range of emotions
Comprehension and expression of emotion: What to do

- Clearly state emotions
- Avoid emotional extremes that get child upset
- Label emotions/give them the words
- Provide escape routes
- Respect communication for escape
- Learn body language
Emotional skills deficits

• Impaired emotional regulation
  – Difficulty self calming
  – Difficulty responding to the comfort of others
  – Difficulty with modulation
Emotional Regulation: What to do

- Calm structured environments
- Respond calmly to the emotional outbursts
- Leave alone
- Structure to calm down, e.g. counting strategies
- Recognize early signals
- ‘How can I help?’
Communication Deficits/Comprehension

• Need for simple language
  – Number of words in direction should match number of words child puts together
  – (but need to hear language, just talking, not directing)

• One instruction at a time

• Visual supports and Visual Schedules

• Physical prompts and Cues
Communication Deficits/Expression

• Deficits in articulation
  – Poor oromotor coordination
  – Apraxia
  – Lack of attention to precise articulation

• Language delay (cognitive deficit)
Communication Deficits/Expression

• Language regression in face of high emotion
• Behavior used as communication
Communication deficits: What to do?

- Visual supports (pictures, signs, augmentative communication)
- Speech therapy
- Incorporate speech goals into home and school routines
- Demand what they can do, but don’t overestimate
Cognitive Disability

- Attention to one cue (may not be relevant)
- Difficulty sequencing/organizing
- Lack of generalization
- Limited motivation
Behaviors Inadvertently Reinforced

- Attention
- Access to wanted item/activity
- Escape or avoidance from unwanted activity/situation
Inadequate Discipline

• Inconsistent limit setting
• Poorly defined rules
• Inconsistent rules
• Spoiling
• Lack of structure within which child can practice the needed skill
Why?

- Sensory
- Cognitive Rigidity/Poor adaptability
- Social Skills Deficits
- Emotional Skills Deficits
- Communication Deficits
- Cognitive Deficits
- Rewarded with what the child wants
- Inadequate discipline
Resources:

- Why Does Chris Do That? By Tony Attwood
- More Than Words by Fern Sussman (published by the Hanen Center)
- Early Communication Skills in Children with Down Syndrome by Libby Kumin
- The New Social Story Book: Illustrated Edition (Paperback) by Carol Gray
- Severe Behavior Problems: A Functional Communication Training Approach by V. Mark Durand
- The Explosive Child by Ross Greene
- 1-2-3 Magic by Thomas Phelan
Resources on Schedules

- Activity Schedules for Children With Autism: Teaching Independent Behavior (Topics in Autism) (Paperback) by Lynn E., Ph.D. McClannahan, Patricia J., Ph.D. Krantz
- www.incrediblehorizons.com/pecs_software.htm
- www.dotolearn.com (free picture cards)
Thanks!