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[Preparing Ourselves to Work with Students who Display Challenging Behaviours](#)

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“Remember to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.” Most of us have heard this phrase uttered before takeoff in an airplane or, if you are well travelled, you may have gotten used to ignoring it. This phrase can also be useful as a powerful cautionary metaphor for educators, and especially educators working with students who display challenging behaviors.

Taking care of ourselves is just as or more important than taking care of someone else. Educators pride themselves on being passionate, dedicated, enthusiastic, and dedicated to their students... But at what cost? At times, some of us may become overly invested in our jobs, to the detriment of our own physical, emotional, and even spiritual health. This article will outline some simple strategies that can be easily applied to our everyday work life to help maintain a balance between taking care of ourselves and working with students who display challenging behaviour.

One frequent situation that arises is educators routinely investing ourselves too personally in a particular student. The student may pique a particular interest in us due to a variety of factors, including having similar characteristics to other students with whom we have worked, similarities to one of our own children, or circumstances regarding a particular student which may trigger personal history for us. For example, a support person may be on a personal crusade to help a new student they are working with because they feel they were not sufficiently effective with the last student they supported, or because the student displays some of the same challenges as the support person’s own child. While there are many benefits to being particularly dedicated to a specific student, it is important to remove ourselves to some degree and maintain a good perspective.

One indicator of becoming overly involved is when you frequently find yourself working much harder than the student. Although this naturally occurs at times, especially when starting out with a new student, generally our students should be doing the hard work and we should be guiding and assisting them in the endeavor. If we find ourselves overly exhausted and having to work too hard, this could be a sign that we have become overly invested in our work. In these situations, it may be helpful to talk to a colleague or supervisor who can help us take a step back, gain perspective and discover how others view a particular student or the particular strategies we are using with students who display behaviour challenges.

Keeping our emotions in check is another way of taking care of our own well-being in the potentially high stress environments in which we work. Our students often challenge us with disruptive and problematic behaviours. It is natural for us to sometimes feel annoyed, angry, sad, or fed up with a student’s behaviour. However, if we let ourselves get into this state too frequently, we risk affecting our own well-being. Secondly, this also ends up affecting the student’s progress, as well as our own objectivity in regards to his or her progress and potential. For example, if a student displays episodes of physical aggression, it is important to avoid taking this personally and instead focus on the plan you have in place to deal with this behaviour and follow through with the student’s expected routine. If a student’s behaviour is taken personally, an educator may let their frustration get the best of them and unintentionally escalate the student’s behaviour, give in to demands or perhaps avoid exposing the child to any known triggers such as completing expected work tasks. The more we can remain calm with our students, the better we will help both ourselves and our students.

Finally, there are several other more general strategies that help us, as educators, take care of ourselves. These include paying proper attention to our diet, staying hydrated, sleeping enough, exercising, and finding emotional and spiritual sustenance. Additionally, just as we try to do with our students, it is important to point out to each other as colleagues the positive work we are doing and provide each other with positive reinforcement throughout the week. This will encourage us to stay motivated and feel good about the difference we are making with our students. Hopefully, if we take care of our health and notice when we are getting overwhelmed, frustrated, or burned-out, the more likely we will remember to put on our oxygen mask first.

[ASD Team Members:](#)

- Patricia Assouad
ASD Consultant
- Dr. Andrew Bennett
Psychologist-Coordinator
- Jovette Francoeur
Special Needs Consultant-Coordinator
- Sabrina Gabriele (on leave)
ASD Consultant
- Joëlle Hadaya
Occupational Therapist
- Jade Lawsane (on leave)
ASD Consultant
- Cheryl McDonald
ASD Consultant
- Helene Packman
Speech & Language Pathologist
- Dr. Amira Rahman
Psychologist
- Sasha Zalob
ASD Consultant
- Patty Cloran
ASD Consultant

Teacher Tip—Working with students who display challenging behaviour

- Build a trusting relationship with the student while protecting your own boundaries, respect comes from providing consistency and security not from negotiation or by giving in to the student's demands.
- Stay calm when students start insisting on their own way. They will know you mean what you say!!!
- Be aware of your *buttons* and don't let students push them. When you get angry, raise your voice or lose control, you are modeling the very behavior you are trying to eliminate.
- Be patient – look for small changes – small changes tell us that we are working in the right direction and prevent us from getting discouraged.
- Know what the student does well and build on their strengths. Offer them opportunities to succeed.
- Teach students to reward themselves with positive self-talk. It has more meaning when they learn to praise themselves and in the process they will develop independence!
- Call a student by name when trying to redirect inappropriate behavior. This helps relay the message you care about them.
- Tell students what you want them to do, not what they are doing wrong.
- Students need opportunities to choose but remember that we need to know how many choices the student can handle.
- For students who have difficulty processing information, break content and procedures into small segments and teach a step at a time. Make the steps visual by using checklists.

O.T. Corner: Caring for students-caring for ourselves

Every year school teams have to face the challenge of optimizing human resources to address the special needs of a number of students, including some with very challenging behaviours. It is well known that the interventions and dedication of educators and support personnel is central to student success. It is also understood that those working with particular students may experience their role as demanding and overwhelming at times. This OT corner will present some principles to consider when servicing students with challenging behaviours in order to support the well-being of educators and support personnel.

1. **Accept each student with their strengths and challenges:** Each student comes with an individual profile, abilities, and temperament. Take the time to get to know the student and to build a trusting relationship with them. Read recent documentation about him/her, talk to previous educators and to parents, as it might save you time and provide you with useful information and strategies that have been successful in the past. Keep in mind that the student's interactions and performance reflect his/her underlying abilities and motivations, and that this applies to challenging behaviours as well. For example, understanding that sensory seeking behaviours ("stimming") arise from a need and are geared at self-regulation, may increase your tolerance when these behaviors become disruptive.
2. **Work in a team:** Remember that you are not alone. Ask for support from the school team and consultants to try to understand the reasons/deficits underlying more challenging behaviors and develop a concrete plan together to address them. The key to staying motivated when working with students who present challenging behaviors is trying not to focus solely on the disruptive behaviors, but rather build on strengths and try to notice even micro-steps of progress.
3. **Start at the student's level and choose realistic goals:** Identify your student's strengths and challenges in the current day-to-day school environment and identify the next step that you would like the student to achieve to improve his/her functioning as well as their interactions with you. If you decrease expectations of the student in order to allow him/her to experience success, apply this principle to yourself as well, making sure you are not expecting too much of yourself and undermining your own needs because of the challenges your student is experiencing.
4. **Keep in mind that your student's challenges are independent of you.** As much as possible, when challenging situations occur and persist, try not to take things personally, step back to observe situations from a different perspective, focus on the positive and see the humor if possible.
5. **Stay in tune with yourself.** Be aware of the impact of the student's challenging behaviour on your emotions, motivation and functioning. Express feelings of discomfort, frustration, anger, etc. that you may be experiencing, and brainstorm solutions with the school team to alleviate your own stress. Remember to keep in touch and seek positive/constructive feedback from your colleagues in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed and isolated.
6. **Allow time for the student and yourself to regroup following challenging incidents:** The same way your student may benefit from a "calming corner", you could, together with the school team, create a schedule allowing you to have a break to calm down and center yourself for a few minutes when facing challenging situations.
7. **Make sure you are adopting appropriate postures when assisting your student with physical activities:** Organize the student's work area so that it is easily accessible for the student and yourself. Make sure your positioning, when sitting to assist your student at the table, is ergonomic, and maintain adequate back posture when using hand-on-hand technique with different tasks (e.g.: dressing, floor playtime, printing, etc.). If you're not physically comfortable, chances are you will be less patient during challenging situations.

Above all, remember that the education and improvement of students could not take place without your efforts and commitment, and congratulate yourself for all the good work that you do on a daily basis.



Lester B. Pearson School Board
1925 Brookdale Avenue
Dorval, Quebec
Phone: 514-422-3000
Fax: 514-422-3014

Our team is composed of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web! <http://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>

Read all about it!

The Spark! A Mother's Story of Nurturing Genius: Kristine Barnett (2013)

An inspiring story about a boy with Autism who became a science prodigy as a result of an remarkable IQ and an overwhelming interest in physics which was wholeheartedly encouraged by his mother Kristine Barnett. Relying on the insights she developed at the daycare center she runs out of the garage in her home, Kristine resolved to follow Jacob's "spark"—his passionate interests. Why concentrate on what he couldn't do? Why not focus on what he could? This basic philosophy, along with her belief in the power of ordinary childhood experiences (softball, picnics, s'mores around the campfire) and the importance of play, helped Kristine overcome huge odds.

Coming soon

Walk Now for Autism Speaks —May 25, 2014: McGill University Tomlinson Fieldhouse, Walk Distance: 3 km

Registration Opens: 8:30 am Official Start: 9:45 am

The Centre of Excellence for Autism has created a team called "on the Move", To form a team or to support us please go to www.autismspeaks.ca or our [team link](#)

Class speech given by a LBPSB student with autism

I would like to tell you a little about me. I have Aspergers. It is something I have that is a part of me. We are all different in many ways size, shape, what we like and don't like.

Here are a few things I do: Sometimes controlling my body is hard. I love acting silly and making silly noises. I flick my pencil because I like the feel of the wood. I play with my shoelaces to make movies in my mind. I don't know anyone else that can do this. It's what makes me different.

Here are a few things I like to do: I like to read and find out facts about nature. I like to play and write about super heroes. I like to play with my DS. I love spending time with my new baby brother.

Here are a few things I don't like: I don't like getting sick, I don't like bullies bullying me. Bullies make me feel sad, mad, disappointed, annoyed and hurt. I don't like when bullies hurt me either by calling me names or by them hurting my body by hitting me.

I thought that if you knew a little more about me, we could be friends. I would like that very much.

Try This!

The anxiety scale is considered a very effective guide that helps educators create a step-by-step plan to manage the escalation of a student's anxiety. An important element to notice is the smaller curve below the large one; this is the "adult anxiety curve" which reminds us to keep our own anxiety in check when dealing with a behavioural escalation of a student. You can look up the Anxiety Curve at www.5pointscale.com