

Case Study: Reducing Severe Behaviours and Increasing Community Participation in a Preschool-Aged Child With ASD

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder; Functional Behaviour Assessment; Behaviour Support; Severe Behaviours of Concern; Functional Communication; AAC; Early Intervention; Community Inclusion; Capacity Building; Skill Acquisition; Proactive Strategies.

Background and Referral Reason

“Claire” (pseudonym), a 4-year-old girl diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), was referred to Eureka Learning Centre due to significant behaviours of concern impacting her safety, learning, and inclusion.

At intake, Claire presented with:

- Severe self-injurious behaviour (head banging)
- Aggressive behaviours (pinching, scratching)
- Limited play skills, primarily repetitive lining-up of toys
- Difficulty with turn-taking and sharing
- Non-verbal communication
- High distress during transitions or when preferred routines were interrupted

At daycare, the frequency and intensity of her behaviours meant she was often separated from peers for safety, significantly limiting her opportunities for social interaction and community participation.

Assessment Framework

A Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) was completed through direct observation, caregiver interviews, and environmental analysis. The assessment identified that challenging behaviours were most likely to occur when:

- Claire was asked to follow adult instructions
- She attempted to escape or avoid tasks
- She was unable to access preferred activities in her preferred sequence or manner

Understanding the function of her behaviour allowed the team to design an intervention focused on skill development, communication, and proactive environmental supports, rather than reactive behaviour management.

Intervention Goals

The multidisciplinary team established goals to:

1. Reduce the frequency and severity of self-injury and aggression
2. Teach functional communication as a replacement for challenging behaviour
3. Increase tolerance for instructions, transitions, and waiting
4. Build foundational play and social skills
5. Support safe participation in home, school, and community environments

Intervention Approach

1. Differentiating Behaviour Severity and Responding Consistently

Therapists and caregivers were trained to distinguish between mild, moderate, and severe behaviours, ensuring consistent and predictable responses across environments.

2. Teaching Functional Communication (AAC)

Claire was introduced to an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) system to request items, ask for help, and communicate preferences. This reduced frustration and provided a safe, reliable alternative to aggression.

3. Proactive Supports and Visual Structure

Strategies included:

- First–Then language
- Clear choices
- Visual schedules
- Predictable routines
- Transition supports

These tools helped Claire understand expectations and reduced anxiety around change.

4. Maintaining a Happy, Relaxed, and Engaged (HRE) State

Sessions prioritised emotional regulation and engagement. Therapists used child-led play, sensory supports, and reinforcement to keep Claire regulated and ready to learn.

5. Teaching Play, Turn-Taking, and Waiting

Structured play opportunities were used to teach:

- Parallel play
- Cooperative play

- Sharing
- Tolerance for waiting
- Relinquishing preferred items

These skills were essential for safe participation in group settings.

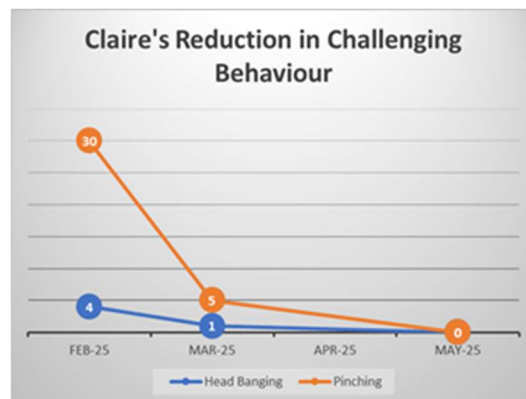
Outcomes

Progress at 1 Month

- Severe challenging behaviours reduced by approximately 80%
- Increased ability to remain in shared spaces with peers
- Reduced need for physical separation at day-care

Progress at 3 Months

- Severe behaviours reduced to zero
- Marked improvement in transitions between activities
- Increased engagement in structured and unstructured play
- Consistent use of AAC to communicate needs
- Head banging episodes performed with a 2- hour period reduced from 4 to zero
- Pinching performed within a 1-hour period reduced from 30 to zero



Current Functioning

Claire now:

- Sits and plays alongside peers and siblings
- Transitions with minimal distress
- Participates safely in preschool activities
- Uses AAC effectively to request, protest, and engage
- Tolerates waiting and relinquishing preferred items
- Has successfully mastered toilet training



These gains have significantly improved her safety, independence, and community inclusion.

Discussion

Claire's progress demonstrates the effectiveness of early, individualised behaviour support grounded in functional assessment and proactive teaching. Key factors contributing to her success included:

- Understanding the function of behaviour
- Prioritising communication as a replacement skill
- Consistent collaboration between therapists, educators, and family
- Emphasis on emotional regulation and engagement
- Structured teaching of social and play skills

This case highlights how severe behaviours of concern can be reduced when intervention focuses on skill building, predictability, and collaborative support.

Conclusion

Claire's journey illustrates that with the right supports, even severe behaviours can change rapidly and meaningfully. Her increased safety, communication, and participation reflect the power of evidence-based early intervention and strong partnerships between families, educators, and clinicians.

Disclaimer:

This case study reflects the experience of one child. Outcomes vary based on individual strengths, needs, and circumstances. No guarantee of similar results is implied.