

Case Study: Improving Communication, Social Skills, Independence, and Behaviour Regulation in a Preschool-Aged Child with Autism Level 2

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 2; Communication; Behaviour Support; Toilet Training; Skill-Based Treatment; Early Childhood Intervention

Background and Referral Reason

“Aaron” (pseudonym), a 5-year-2-month-old boy, was referred to Eureka Learning Centre due to severe behaviours of concern, significant delays in functional communication, and limited engagement in learning environments.

Aaron was diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay (GDD) at age 2 and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Level 2 at age 5.

His behaviours of concern significantly impacted his ability to participate in Speech Therapy and Occupational Therapy, as he was unable to remain regulated long enough to benefit from intervention.

Presenting Concerns

At intake, Aaron displayed:

- Tantrums (yelling, screaming, crying >3 seconds)
- Absconding from designated areas
- Aggression (biting, scratching, kicking)
- Property destruction (breaking household items such as tablets, TV, fridge, microwave, cooker, glasses; kicking doors; ripping books)
- High distress during transitions and adult instructions

These behaviours placed substantial emotional and financial strain on the family.

Family Goals

Aaron’s family hoped to see improvements in:

- Independence
- Communication
- Social connection with peers
- Emotional regulation

Assessment Framework

A comprehensive assessment was completed using:

- Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA)
- Practical Functional Assessment & Skill-Based Treatment (PFA & SBT)
- VB-MAPP
- Direct observation
- Parent interviews

Summary of Findings

Assessment results indicated:

- Severe aggression and property destruction
- Limited functional communication
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- High sensitivity to environmental demands
- Behaviours maintained by escape, access, and emotional dysregulation

These findings informed a structured, individualised intervention plan.

Intervention Goals

Communication

- Manding
- Answering questions
- Labelling objects and actions

Social Development

- Pretend play
- Peer interaction

Independence

- Toileting
- Hand-washing
- Drinking from straw/open cup

Behaviour Regulation

- Waiting
- Tolerance of “no”
- Turn-taking
- Relinquishing preferred items
- Transitions

Intervention Approach

1. Rapport and Engagement

During the first two sessions, Aaron was highly emotional and sensitive to noise. He appeared fearful and overwhelmed.

Therapists prioritised:

- Empathy and reassurance
- Child-led engagement
- Gradual introduction of adult-led tasks
- Building trust before expectations

2. Core Strategies Used

Proactive Strategies

- Presenting choices
- Functional Communication Training (FCT)
- Reinforcing appropriate behaviour
- Visual supports
- First-then language
- Building behavioural momentum
- Providing competing items

Reactive Strategies

- Following through with expectations
- Extinction as part of a treatment package
- Prompting FCT
- Redirection
- Reassessing motivation
- Restating expectations

3. Skill-Building Focus

Emotional Regulation

- Tolerance of denial
- Relinquishing items
- Transitioning from play to learning
- Waiting for short, developmentally appropriate periods

Communication and Language

- Requesting preferred items using words/phrases
- Labelling common objects (e.g., fridge, oven, microwave, teacher)
- Labelling actions (20 mastered)
- Fill-in phrases (20 mastered)
- Personal information (name, age, family members; working on birthday and parents' names)

Social, Play, and Cognitive Skills

- Functional pretend play (feeding doll, cooking, car play, doctor kit)
- Cooperative play: turn-taking, sharing, responding to peers
- Matching identical and non-identical objects/pictures

Daily Living Skills

- Toileting: all 10 steps independently
- Hand-washing: all 10 steps independently
- Drinking from straw: 50% of steps independently (ongoing teaching)

Outcomes

Progress at 2 Months

Aaron mastered foundational skills including:

- Functional communication responses
- Tolerance of denial
- Relinquishing preferred items
- Smooth transitions between activities

Progress at 6 Months

By six months:

- Aaron was happy to attend sessions
- He could sit and learn for extended periods
- He completed more than ten consecutive learning trials
- Parents reported he enjoyed behaviour sessions, despite previously being unable to engage in Speech or OT

Figure 1. VB-MAPP Milestones Assessment Scores- Aaron

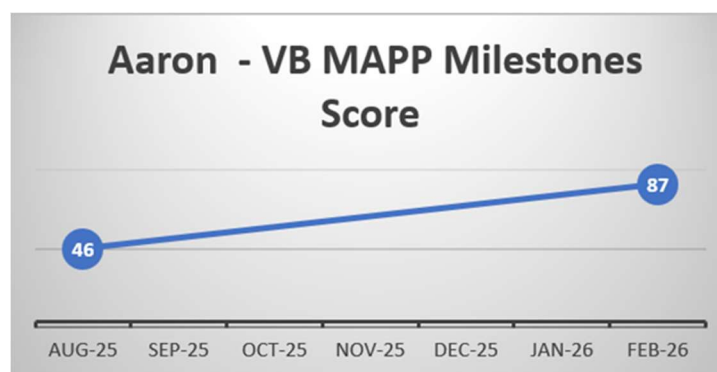
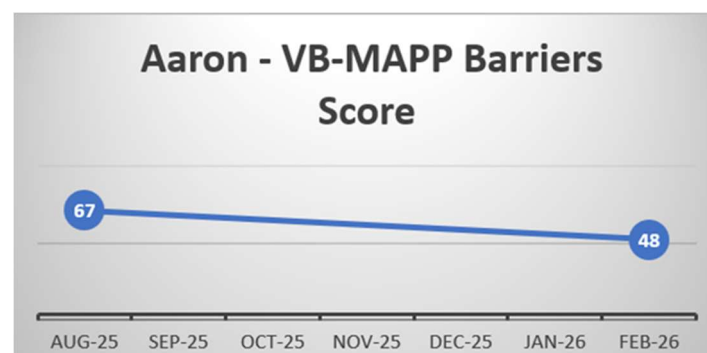


Figure 2. VB-MAPP Reduction in Barriers Scores - Aaron



Discussion

Aaron's progress demonstrates the effectiveness of structured Skill-Based Treatment, functional communication training, and proactive emotional regulation strategies. His gains align with NDIS outcomes related to:

- Participation
- Safety
- Independence
- Communication

Aaron is scheduled to commence a primary school support unit in February 2026. Continued behaviour support will focus on consolidating skills and supporting school transition.

Parent Support

Parent coaching was a core component of intervention. Families were supported to:

- Implement communication strategies
- Use proactive regulation supports
- Respond consistently to behaviours
- Generalise skills across home and community settings

This contributed significantly to Aaron's progress across environments.

Conclusion

Aaron demonstrates substantial improvements in communication, social skills, independence, and emotional regulation through early, individualised, evidence-based intervention. His case highlights the value of structured behaviour support for children with ASD Level 2.

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.