

The STAR Approach to Dysregulated Behaviour

Sometimes a learner's emotionally dysregulated behaviours can be regarded by others as challenging. For example, it may prevent them from learning, prevent others from learning or be potentially harmful to themselves or others.

However, it is important for us to remember that **all behaviour is communication**. Even if the behaviours are difficult for us to understand, we need to remember that it is often **the learner's way of communicating an unmet need**.

If a learner is displaying emotionally dysregulated behaviours, it is important **work with** them, their family, any school-based staff who are supporting them and external professionals, where involved, to develop a plan to support self-regulation and enable them to communicate their feelings and needs more productively.

The STAR approach¹ to analysing behaviour works on these key principles:

1. We need to support the learner to unlearn inappropriate behaviour by ensuring:
 - it does not achieve positive results and thereby reinforce expressing their needs in this way.
 - we have a developmentally appropriate way of communicating to the learner that this behaviour is not acceptable.
2. Unacceptable behaviours can achieve acceptable goals; for example, a learner who hits other children because they want to play with them. In these cases, the learner often does not have the right skills to achieve their goals so we need to explicitly teach them the skills they need.
3. A learner may have a personal challenge that they are struggling to express.
4. They may be struggling to manage aspects of the environment or routines for their day.

The STAR approach supports adults to analyse emotional dysregulation at these levels:

Settings
Triggers
Actions
Results

Settings

These are the contexts in which emotional dysregulation occurs. Settings can be internal or external to the individual.

External influences might include:

- Life events
- Social climate, including relationships
- Specific activities
- Environmental

Examples of internal influences are:

- A lack of self-confidence or low self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Low mood or depression

¹ Zarkowska and Clements (1994) *Problem Behaviour and People with Severe Learning Disabilities: The STAR Approach*

- Boredom
- Challenges with communication
- Pain or poor physical health
- Tiredness
- Hunger

Triggers

These are the signals which set off emotional dysregulation and they usually occur just before the behaviour is displayed.

Actions

This is the way the learner is **observed to behave** in response to the trigger.

Results

This is what happens in response to the behaviours. The results may be positive, negative or have no effect on the individual.

The first step in using the STAR approach is to **define** the observable behaviours that signal a learner’s emotional dysregulation. They may be individual behaviours or a progressive sequence as they escalate in intensity.

The learner should then be observed over a specific time period using the *STAR Observation Tool*, which is available on the BDSIP website.



Behaviour Observation

Name:

Date:

Observer:

Setting	Trigger	Action	Response
<i>What is the context in the behaviour occurred?</i>	<i>What are the particular signals which trigger particular actions?</i>	<i>What behaviours does the individual display?</i>	<i>How do others respond to the behaviour? What happened after the behaviour was displayed?</i>

Adapted from Problem Behaviour and People with Severe Learning Disabilities: The STAR Approach by Ewa Zarkowska and John Clements (1994)

The observations should be considered in the context of everything we know about a learner. This would include (but not be limited to):

- Their strengths such as significant attainments in key areas of development or the curriculum; their motivators and interests; conditions which support positive behaviour; and conditions in which they learn best.
- Their developmental stage across all skills, including language, communication, social skills, emotional development, literacy, numeracy etc.
- Life events
- Family functioning
- Their perception of self
- Their relationships with others and any attachment issues

Using all this information, the **function** of the behaviour is inferred from an analysis of the triggers which set it off and the results it achieves.

The analysis can be summarised using the following tool, *STAR Analysis of Dysregulated Behaviour*, which is available on the BDSIP website.



STAR Analysis of Dysregulated Behaviour

Name			
Date			
STAR observation period	From		To
Observers			
Description of emotionally dysregulated behaviours:			
Appears to achieve the following results:			
Appears to be set off by the following triggers:			
Seems to occur in the following environmental settings:			
Appears to be related to the following personal conditions:			
Appears to be associated with the following skills deficits:			
Appears to be successfully managed when:			
We can capitalise on the following strengths:			

This analysis can be used to create individual plans to support effective self-regulation, as well as informing personal risk assessments where the individual presents a risk of harm to themselves or others.

Please see the BDSIP website for editable *Stress Management or Emotional Regulation Plans* and *Individual Risk Assessments*.