

What if it's not just the behaviour?

Dr. Bob Carey • Excerpt 1 of 4

· Selected introductory passages.

The Question This Book Keeps Asking

When a child behaves in a way that worries or frustrates us, our first question is often, “How do I make this stop?” Sometimes that is exactly the right question in the moment—especially when safety is involved. But it is rarely enough to create lasting change.

The Positive Systems Approach asks a different question: “What is this behaviour telling me?” Then comes the practical question: “What can I change in the child’s environment, relationships, routines, expectations or skills so that a better response becomes possible?”

The original book describes behaviour as part of a larger system and encourages parents to look at what may be contributing to behaviour, how adults respond, and how the family environment can be adjusted to support the child.

This companion takes that philosophy into the moments that matter most at home —the rushed mornings, difficult transitions, homework battles, sibling arguments, worried questions and conversations that seem to go nowhere.

Understanding Behaviour Does Not Mean Accepting Harmful Behaviour

This distinction matters. PSA is not permissive parenting. A child can be overwhelmed and still need to learn not to hit. A teenager can be angry and still need to follow a safety rule. A child can dislike homework and still need to develop the skills necessary to complete it.

Understanding the reason for behaviour helps us decide what to teach and what to change. It does not remove reasonable boundaries. In difficult moments, safety comes first. Teaching comes next.

Your Response Is Part of the System

Parents sometimes read behaviour books as though the child is the only person who has to change. PSA does not take that view. Your response, the timing of your response, the amount of attention you provide, the consistency between caregivers and the emotional climate of the home can all become part of the pattern.

Before responding, ask yourself: “Am I about to make this interaction more predictable and successful—or more intense?”

Homework Becomes a War

Dr. Bob Carey • Excerpt 2 of 4

From Scenario 4 • School age • Complete scenario.

What parents often see

Eleven-year-old Liam spends forty minutes avoiding homework before anyone gets a pencil moving. He says he has no homework, loses papers, complains that the work is stupid and eventually becomes angry when his parents insist.

Before you try to fix it, look for the pattern

This resembles the homework pattern described in the original book's David case: avoidance may communicate that the work feels difficult, overwhelming or associated with fear of failure. Executive-function demands such as planning, organization and task initiation may be contributing.

Try this

Start by observing the situation for several days when it is safe to do so. Record the most important things that happen immediately before and after the behaviour. Treat homework avoidance as a skill and systems problem until the data suggest otherwise. Record assignment type, estimated difficulty, time of day, duration before starting, prompts, breaks, errors, and what happens after refusal. Test smaller work units, a predictable start routine, access to help, and reinforcement for initiation. Teach "help," "break," and "I don't understand." Avoid doing the work for the child, but make the first step small enough that success is likely. Graph latency to start and percentage completed rather than relying only on arguments or grades.

Then make one manageable change rather than changing everything at once. Give the change a fair trial, then let the information guide you. If the pattern does not improve, go back to the beginning and ask whether you have misunderstood what the behaviour is accomplishing or communicating.

Teach what you want your child to do instead

The replacement behaviour needs to be easier, safer and genuinely useful. A child is unlikely to abandon a response that works unless the new response works too. Teach it when your child is calm, practice it repeatedly, prompt it early when the familiar warning signs appear, and reinforce it immediately when it is used. For communication-based problems, teach a short phrase, gesture or signal that can realistically compete with the problem behaviour.

What you could say

“Let’s look at the first question together. If you get stuck, you can say ‘help.’ You don’t have to finish everything before we take the planned break.”

Avoid these common traps

- Doing the assignment for the child.
- Treating avoidance as laziness before checking difficulty and organization.

What to record

If completion improves only when a parent sits beside the child, fade that support gradually rather than removing it abruptly. If the behaviour is changing, record the same measure after the intervention. When possible, also record use of the replacement skill. A strong sign of progress is not only that the problem behaviour decreases, but that the child increasingly uses the new skill.

How you'll know it's working

Look for a measurable change that matters in everyday life: fewer episodes, shorter episodes, quicker recovery, fewer prompts, faster task initiation, more successful communication, more independence, or a greater percentage of opportunities in which the child uses the replacement.

If it isn't working

Resist the temptation to simply add a stronger consequence. First ask three questions: “Did we identify the pattern accurately?” “Is the replacement skill actually effective for the child?” and “Did we change something in the surrounding system that may still be making success difficult?” If safety is a concern, or if the behaviour is severe, persistent or rapidly worsening, seek additional professional guidance.

A PSA thought to take with you

Most importantly, stop turning the parent into the homework police. The parent’s role is to provide structure, coaching and encouragement while the child gradually assumes responsibility.

The Child Who Melts Down After School

Dr. Bob Carey • Excerpt 3 of 4

From Scenario 16 • School age • Complete scenario.

What parents often see

Every afternoon, twelve-year-old Max comes home from school and explodes over small requests.

Before you try to fix it, look for the pattern

Look at the whole day. He may be holding himself together at school and arriving home depleted. Social fatigue, sensory overload, hunger, transitions and academic stress can accumulate.

Try this

Start by observing the situation for several days when it is safe to do so. Record the most important things that happen immediately before and after the behaviour. Track the first 30 minutes after school: arrival time, food, noise, demands, sibling interactions, screen access, and when the meltdown begins. Many children have used substantial regulatory resources at school and have little capacity left at home. Build a decompression routine with predictable food, movement, quiet time, connection, and limited demands. Teach a signal for “I need quiet” or “I need ten minutes.” Reinforce recovery and appropriate requests. Measure intensity and duration, not only frequency. A child who still has occasional episodes but recovers in five minutes instead of thirty may be making meaningful progress.

Then make one manageable change rather than changing everything at once. Give the change a fair trial, then let the information guide you. If the pattern does not improve, go back to the beginning and ask whether you have misunderstood what the behaviour is accomplishing or communicating.

Teach what you want your child to do instead

The replacement behaviour needs to be easier, safer and genuinely useful. A child is unlikely to abandon a response that works unless the new response works too. Teach it when your child is calm, practice it repeatedly, prompt it early when the familiar warning signs appear, and reinforce it immediately when it is used. For communication-based problems, teach a short phrase, gesture or signal that can realistically compete with the problem behaviour.

What you could say

"You've had a big day. Let's have some quiet time first, then we'll decide what needs to happen next."

Avoid these common traps

- Starting a long list of demands the moment the child walks through the door.
- Assuming after-school behaviour represents the child's whole day.

What to record

Use the same measure you used during baseline so you can compare what happened before and after the change. If the behaviour is changing, record the same measure after the intervention. When possible, also record use of the replacement skill. A strong sign of progress is not only that the problem behaviour decreases, but that the child increasingly uses the new skill.

How you'll know it's working

Look for a measurable change that matters in everyday life: fewer episodes, shorter episodes, quicker recovery, fewer prompts, faster task initiation, more successful communication, more independence, or a greater percentage of opportunities in which the child uses the replacement.

If it isn't working

Resist the temptation to simply add a stronger consequence. First ask three questions: "Did we identify the pattern accurately?" "Is the replacement skill actually effective for the child?" and "Did we change something in the surrounding system that may still be making success difficult?" If safety is a concern, or if the behaviour is severe, persistent or rapidly worsening, seek additional professional guidance.

A PSA thought to take with you

Sometimes the best intervention is not a consequence but a better transition. Stimulation, Coping, Relationship/Rapport and Flexibility can work together here.

The Family Has Lost Its Fun

Dr. Bob Carey • Excerpt 4 of 4

From Scenario 45 • Any age • Complete scenario.

What parents often see

After months of conflict around behaviour, parents realize that nearly every interaction is about rules, reminders and problems.

Before you try to fix it, look for the pattern

This is a Family Health and Relationship/Rapport problem. A child who experiences mostly corrective attention may become increasingly disconnected or may seek intense attention through behaviour.

Try this

Start by observing the situation for several days when it is safe to do so. Record the most important things that happen immediately before and after the behaviour. For one week, track the number of positive interactions versus corrective interactions, shared activities, laughter, affection, and family conflict. The data are not meant to turn family life into a scorecard; they help reveal whether the emotional climate has become dominated by correction. Schedule brief, predictable connection that is not contingent on behaviour. Protect it from becoming another reward that can be lost. Continue boundaries, but deliberately notice competence, humour, effort, kindness, and recovery. Review the family's positive-interaction trend alongside behaviour data.

Then make one manageable change rather than changing everything at once. Give the change a fair trial, then let the information guide you. If the pattern does not improve, go back to the beginning and ask whether you have misunderstood what the behaviour is accomplishing or communicating.

Teach what you want your child to do instead

The replacement behaviour needs to be easier, safer and genuinely useful. A child is unlikely to abandon a response that works unless the new response works too. Teach it when your child is calm, practice it repeatedly, prompt it early when the familiar warning signs appear, and reinforce it immediately when it is used. For communication-based problems, teach a short phrase, gesture or signal that can realistically compete with the problem behaviour.

What you could say

“Nothing needs fixing right now. Let’s just spend some time together.”

Avoid these common traps

- Making every positive interaction contingent on behaviour.
- Waiting for the family to be ‘better’ before bringing back fun and connection.

What to record

Sometimes the first meaningful change is not fewer problems but more moments in which everyone feels like a family again. If the behaviour is changing, record the same measure after the intervention. When possible, also record use of the replacement skill. A strong sign of progress is not only that the problem behaviour decreases, but that the child increasingly uses the new skill.

How you'll know it's working

Look for a measurable change that matters in everyday life: fewer episodes, shorter episodes, quicker recovery, fewer prompts, faster task initiation, more successful communication, more independence, or a greater percentage of opportunities in which the child uses the replacement.

If it isn't working

Resist the temptation to simply add a stronger consequence. First ask three questions: “Did we identify the pattern accurately?” “Is the replacement skill actually effective for the child?” and “Did we change something in the surrounding system that may still be making success difficult?” If safety is a concern, or if the behaviour is severe, persistent or rapidly worsening, seek additional professional guidance.

A PSA thought to take with you

PSA is ultimately about more than reducing disruptive behaviour. It is about creating a family system in which children can learn, recover, belong and grow.

Explore the book and the Positive Systems Approach at drbobcarey.com.