



When a Child With Special Needs and Complex Disabilities Surfaces with Behaviour Problems

Some children present with an abundance of challenges involving academic functioning, communication and physical difficulties. Combined these children face a remarkable struggle keeping up with their peers.

Parents of these children are faced with juggling the competing presenting needs of the child and are often entwined with a variety of service providers including psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, special educators, medical specialists and the like. When behaviour issues arise, the parent may be caught cycling through the service providers seeking the most appropriate remedy to the problem. For many, the behavioural issues escalate when the child is between six and eight years of age.

Six to eight year olds are typically in grades one, two and three. At some point through this time, these children are likely enjoying increasing integration with their peers. The theory here is that integration de-stigmatizes their disabilities and normalizes disabilities for the mainstream children. Establishing these children with the mainstream children also provides them with role models in terms of normal development and provides an opportunity to keep up with their peers.

Often missed or poorly appreciated is the amount of energy a child with complex disabilities must expend to keep up mentally and physically with mainstream children. Hence these children, owing to the extra energy required will fatigue sooner than most other children. It is then that some will surface with behavioural difficulties.

In view of the broad array of service providers, the behavioural difficulties will likely be met with behavioural approaches to management. The parents and teachers will be instructed on various reward regimens and then if that fails, punishments may be suggested as deterrence to problematic behaviour. Sadly though, behavioural issues often continue. The next line of intervention usually involves therapy for

the parents to ascertain and treat any issues presumed to arise therein. The thinking may be that parental guilt or marital issues are intruding on the child and their care.

However, it may be advisable to hark back to the amount of energy required for these children to keep up with their peers. It is likely in view of fatigue, many of these children just cannot hold themselves together behaviourally. In other words, their fatigue surfaces as problematic behaviour. It is often the case that these children cannot express themselves well, let alone when they are tired. Further, to admit to fatigue could take them away from their activities.

Parents whose children with special needs and complex disabilities are surfacing with behavioural problems are advised to structure a nap or rest period in the early afternoon each day at school. Many parents will think this an odd strategy having long since dispensed with naps for children of this age. However, now in the school context with an increased expenditure of energy, many of these children need extra rest to recharge themselves. It is likely that after such a rest, the child will return with a renewed vigour and problematic behaviour will simply evaporate.

An early afternoon nap is a benign intervention and a good place to start when working with a young child with special needs and complex disabilities who presents with behavioural issues.

While they're at it, it might just do the parent, teacher or caregiver a world of good to join them!

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