

Applied Development

Become the Expert on You



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Email from a parent concerned about his daughter who had gone missing from home and was found by police in a hotel with an adult male after a distressed call from Shannon.

Shannon had been 'challenging' since she was 2 years old. This was not visible at school until year 6 and appears to have intensified throughout years 7 & 8. Both parents had struggled to manage Shannon's behaviour.

There was diagnosis of ADHD at age 8 and medication prescribed at age 10. No practical help had been provided by previously involved services. She could be aggressive in the home, mainly towards objects, and her behaviours in this respect are best described as 'stroppy'.

There are issues at school but these appear to be in the realm of general low-level disruption and school refusal. Shannon is currently excluded for a limited time.

This is email response 1/3 from Applied Development and outlines a behavioural approach to addressing the situation. Further information in emails 2 & 3 developed a behavioural plan that the parents could use to guide their future actions. A 6-month follow-up showed a significant improvement in both the home environment and engagement with school.

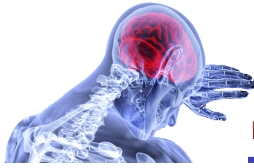
First, lets talk about Shannon's behaviour.

When it comes to the question of who's to blame for the situation, forget about it. Blame will just make you feel bad/guilty/upset as a parent or you will hold your 12-year-old daughter responsible for her behaviour. More importantly, it will do nothing to change the situation in a positive way. This is not anybody's 'fault', it is just how things are at the moment, and things can change.

You are not bad parents, you have stuck with the situation and it has not spiralled out of control. From what you say, your general approach is good, but I may be able to offer a few pointers that I've picked up over the years – not to tell you what to do, more of a refinement on what you're already doing.

I would class Shannon's behaviour being within the 'normal' section of the overall range of behaviour for a child of her age – about 70% of the children I come across. Instead of using the word 'normal', I prefer to use the word 'expected' because it is more realistic to view someone's behaviour as 'expected' rather than 'normal'.

So, Shannon's behaviour is within the section of behaviour you would expect for a child of her age. On either side of this expected section you have sections of unexpected behaviour: around 15% of children who are experiencing no issues whatsoever (yeah right) on one side, typically the right side, and 15% of children who are experiencing severe issues in life (unfortunately true) on the other, left, side.



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The expected section is a large (almost three quarters) for a reason – human behaviour fluctuates greatly according to circumstance, current feelings, hormones, and many other wonderfully human factors. In this sense, on one day Shannon may be a real pain, but on another day Shannon may be super fine – on average her behaviour is normal.

However, because the unexpected sections are a lot smaller (15% compared to 70%) children in these sections appear more consistent because they have less room for manoeuvre. When you say that Shannon's behaviour can be good as well as bad is a great sign that she is within the expected section of the overall range of behaviour.

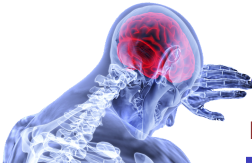
Children in the 'severe issues' section of the range are a pain most of the time and are involved in fairly extreme behaviours such as offending, serious violence, drug use, and going missing. Their average behaviour is firmly within this section and rarely moves into the expected section. Children on the 'no issues' section are those children you come across who are almost like mini-adults in terms of their maturity and are generally at the top of their class, don't do any of the risk taking behaviour normally seen in adolescence, and know exactly what they want to do in life and have been working towards that from an early age. Again, this is fairly consistent so they don't change much on a daily basis.

In a general sense, what this means is that Shannon is likely to change quite considerably from day to day, but she remains in the expected section and is therefore normal by definition because normal = expected. Another way to look at it is that most children (70%) behave in a similar way to Shannon at some point or another.

However, given what you said, she is closer to one side of the expected section (severe issues) and is likely to dip her toe in this side every now and then. This dipping of her toe in this side is going to look like the staircase-kicking, the biting, the door-breaking (not just slamming), and any screaming/shouting really loud that you describe.

Expected, albeit annoying, behaviour for someone of her age will include shouting, being hostile, being stroppy, not listening, disagreeing, slamming doors, stomping off somewhere, coming home later than expected, and being destructive in a low-level way. Although worrying, you need to see this behaviour as a result of the circumstances she is experiencing. It is a response she has learned rather than her – this is incredibly important for dealing with challenging behaviour because you need to make it clear to Shannon that it is the unwanted behaviour you dislike and not her.

As you write she has been challenging since she was 2 years old, meaning her understanding of how she, others and world in general operates is likely to be heavily influenced by her experiences over the last 10 years. She is likely to be familiar with conflict/having her behaviour addressed when you are frustrated/seeing you upset/stressed/getting her own way/challenging authority figures – more so than a child whose position within the expected section is closer to the no issues section of the range.



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In real terms, this means that her tolerance for living a difficult life is probably higher because she has learned how to cope with more hassle in life and feeling bad. For a 12-year-old kid, this is a pretty low place and not particularly filled with happiness. You need to remember this because she is only 12 and deserves to be happy. The good news is that Shannon can and will change when her circumstances change. Unfortunately, for you as parents her high tolerance means that it will take more effort time to get her to listen to you...and you are responsible for changing the circumstances.

As an example, think about a child called Jane who is used to getting detentions at school compared to a child called Sally who has never received a detention. Sally is likely to receive a strong message if she gets just one detention and this will have a bigger effect on her behaviour than it will for Jane who has had lots of detentions. For Sally, it would be classed as a punishment and truly received as a punishment – a punishment being the addition of an aversive stimuli to promote a change to a behaviour that does not attract an aversive stimuli (punishments are always added to a situation and a detention is an addition of time to the school day).

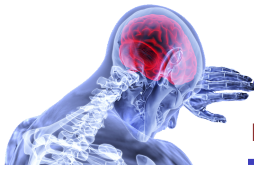
However, Jane is a frequent flier and is getting frequent detentions so the process of desensitisation begins. With each detention Jane gets the anxiety of being punished gradually has less of an impact, and she can take the time to have a good look at the situation. This allows Jane to form a different experience as she begins to find useful or interesting things to do and feel during her time in detention. So, for Jane, detention generally stops being a punishment and instead becomes a confusing situation where there is a little punishment, a little reward and a blank space in between that she will fill with whatever other rewarding stuff she finds. Jane will always find more rewarding stuff. She will never find more punishing stuff – who in their right mind would do that right?

However, for Jane, this doesn't mean that further detentions have to be bigger or more intense for her to get the message again. It just means that she is going to need a few more before any change is seen, and they need to be well planned to avoid any rewards and be consistently applied so the message is always the same.

How does the detention example relate to Shannon? Shannon is used to being in conflictual situations with her parents and teachers, so her initial anxiety has faded – still there, but not as intense. Shannon has had a number of years to observe the behaviour of the adults around her and has found that some of their behaviours can be controlled by some of her behaviours.

Any form of aggression is a great way to quickly control the behaviour of others and is usually a big part of any child's repertoire. Unless the adults around Shannon already had a good plan that they all agreed to follow to deal with her aggression, it is likely that her aggressive behaviour has been partly rewarding. A good plan would ensure that any rewards are limited and everyone following it means it would have been consistently applied so Shannon got the same message from everyone.

The reality is that for a child who is in the expected section of the behavioural range, they will only behave a certain way if it is rewarding. Remember that the feeling of punishment



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decreases with repeated exposure, so even a small amount of reward is enough to make the situation rewarding.

Think of Shannon having a library of evidence regarding how she can behave and what works best for her in different situations. Most children I've worked with in similar situations have eventually got what they wanted because the parent has given in for some peace. This does not mean that the parents are wrong for giving in, it's just reality and understandable sometimes. Parents have other things to do and need to end some situations quickly whereas children have plenty of time to keep doing a certain behaviour until it works. In this respect, behaviours (like shouting) are like tools that children use to get what they want.

In terms of Shannon learning what works for her and what doesn't, think of it like every behaviour she displays having a score. If a behaviour works for her that behaviour gets 1 point. Every time that behaviour doesn't work for her, 1 point is taken off. Overall, after several years, what you are left with is a series of behaviours, scored accordingly to their chances of success. In addition, a behaviour is more likely to be used if it is easy to use, and less likely to be used if it is difficult to use.

Therefore, we have five potential situations on a scale where the behaviour is ranked from likely to less likely:

Behaviours likely to be used

1. If a behaviour has a high score, it is likely to be used
2. if a behaviour has a low score but is easy to do, it is likely to be used

Behaviours less likely to be used

3. if a behaviour has a low score but isn't particularly easy to do, it will only be used every now and then in a 'chancing your arm' kind of way but will easily be given up quickly if it is too hard.
4. if a behaviour has a high score but is difficult to use, it will only be used in extreme circumstances

Behaviours that won't be used at all

5. If a behaviour has no score, it will not be used.

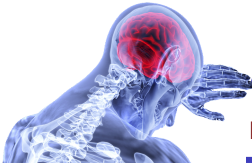
To help you understand this, think about an everyday situation like a person called Jim driving a car. If Jim wants to drive at 75 miles per hour in a 60mph zone, this is the behaviour (speeding) and he will consider the above before making a decision.

Five potential situations scale:

Speeding (the behaviour) is likely to be used

1. If Jim has *never* been caught speeding on the road he is travelling on (high score), Jim will speed.
2. If Jim *has* been caught speeding on a particular road (low score), *but* he can see where the police speed camera usually hides and it isn't there today (easy to do), Jim will speed.

Speeding is less likely to be used



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3. If Jim has been caught speeding on a particular road (low score), but he can see where the police speed camera usually hides and it isn't there but he is also aware that they have started to hide in another place that is more difficult to see (not so easy to do), Jim might chance his arm and speed but will also be on the lookout for the police and will be ready to slam on his brakes if he spots one.
4. If Jim is driving on a road he has never travelled on, Jim may speed if he is really late for an important appointment but not under any other circumstances.
5. If Jim is travelling on a road that has a fixed yellow speed camera and he is guaranteed to get a speeding ticket, Jim will not speed.

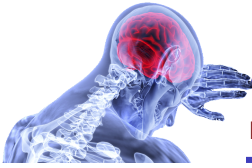
This basic approach of getting away with it/not getting away with it (or in other words, whether a particular behaviour works for you or not) pretty much represents everybody's learning style and helps us to navigate the world around us. Whether we shop in Tesco's or Morrison's depends on our experiences of which shop works better for us (cheaper, easier to use, better parking, has a café, etc). Whether we wear a t-shirt or a jacket depends on the weather. Whether a child kicks a door or not depends on whether it got them what they wanted.

The difficulty with addressing behaviour is finding out what it is that the person is getting from the behaviour. The easiest way of doing this is to look at the behaviours that are used and rank them against the information above to find the behaviours that are likely to be used, less likely to be used, and not used at all. Write them down and once you have ranked all of the behaviours you can think of, try to think of situations when they have been used and think about what the overall outcome was for all involved.

For example, consider a child who regularly kicks the staircase when they are angry (a behaviour that is likely to be used because it is regularly used). On the most recent occasion this was because they were told that they couldn't go out that night because they were excluded from school during the day (situation when kicking the staircase has been used). In terms of overall outcome, the kicking could be for various reasons.

1. It could be used by the child to try and change the parent's mind – ie, if the parent lets the child go out, the kicking will stop.
2. It could be for the child to vent some frustration at not being allowed to go out.
3. It could be the child punishing the parent for preventing the child from going out.

All of the above 3 reasons are potentially rewarding (by getting allowed out/by getting rid of frustration/by hurting the parents). If the behaviour is rewarded, then this is 1 point scored for the behaviour (in the child's mind) and it is more likely to be used again in the future. Therefore, to counter any child's unwanted behaviour, the parent needs to move it further down the five potential situations scale from 1 towards 5. This is easiest done by first ensuring any rewards are limited.



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To prevent the kicking behaviour from being perceived by the child as rewarding, the parent has 2 choices;

1. They can ask the child why they are kicking the staircase. However, the parent is unlikely to get any real truth from the child and will probably be wasting their time in this respect (think about it).
2. They can address the behaviour in a way that offers no reward but does give a consequence. In this respect, the parent has to
 - a. Not be persuaded by the kicking behaviour and give in by letting the child go out
 - b. Not allow the child to vent their frustration in this way, by giving them a consequence for kicking the staircase (an hour taken off any time out the following day would be good – if they kick the staircase again, take another hour off)
 - c. Not let the kicking behaviour upset them (ie, don't accept it as a punishment for them). Lots of parents struggle with this one because they get angry/upset at their child kicking the stairs, but of course, this is just a sign that the kicking behaviour has got to them and shows the child what to do next time to upset their parents.

Throughout all of this, the parent must remain calm and offer alternative behaviours for the child to do and reward these instead. As an example with the stair kicking, the exchange between parent and child could go something like this:

Parent “Ok, for kicking the staircase you’ve got one hour off tomorrow’s playing out time. I know you’re upset about not going out, but you’ve been excluded from school and you know that you don’t go out when you’ve been excluded, so it was your choice I’m afraid. How about we watch a DVD tonight instead”

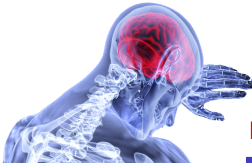
Child “I’m not watching a DVD with you, why would I want to do THAT!”

Parent “Ok, but I don’t want any more kicking”

I know that this is a simplified exchange and that it can go on for much longer, but the basic approach remains the same: no reward for unwanted behaviour, just consequences, but offer another wanted way to behave and reward that instead. This is called counter-conditioning.

The biggest struggle that parents have can be roughly split into 5 key areas

1. Keeping their own emotions under control (making any response less rewarding because they’re not stressed).
2. Addressing the behaviour first and talking about the child’s point of view second (if you don’t address the behaviour first, you reward the behaviour)
3. Talking too much about a particular situation instead of addressing it and moving on quickly (too much talking always leads to either the child trying to negotiate or the argument starting back up again)



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4. Consistently responding in the same way (consistency is important to help the child learn)
5. Moving on asap after the behaviour is addressed and not holding a grudge (holding a grudge is like punishing the child for no reason).

The general idea with managing a child's behaviour is that you guide them regarding what's right and wrong by appropriately using rewards and consequences. When responding to Shannon keep a picture in your mind of her being a small child who doesn't want to be rude, aggressive or naughty and needs your help to change – it should help keep it simple and reduce the chances of you getting annoyed.

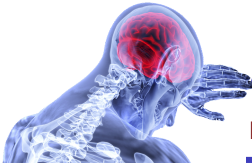
I've included a general behavioural plan that I use – it includes some behaviours that are applicable and some that aren't. However, it will give you a flavour of what I'm talking about and may help in a general sense. However, bear in mind that the situation has been going on for a long time and will not change overnight. You are likely to get periods where life is great and periods where it isn't. I have a general timescale where changing a behaviour takes around 1 month for every year it has been an issue, with a minimum of 6 months – as long as you are consistent for 80% of the time.

However, overall, you are looking for a general consistent improvement so when it does slip back a little it won't go too far back. You also need to bear in mind that as things improve, when it does slip back it may feel worse than it does right now. This is called sensitisation – the less you experience something negative, the worse it feels when you do experience it. It is important to expect this so you don't feel that things are getting worse or not changing – the best way to keep a check on things is to write down what actually happens now and in the future and then compare the two versions. This way, although something may feel worse, you can see in writing that it is actually the same thing.

Think about getting a sleep routine sorted for a baby – it doesn't happen suddenly and instead builds over a period of time. When you first start, as a parent you sleep for 1 hour and are then awake for 1 hour. After a while, you notice that you've slept for 4 hours and you feel like it's really good. This continues, and eventually you are regularly sleeping for 4 hours and then you have your first full night's sleep - bliss.

Then the next two nights you get 2 hours sleep and it feels even worse than it did when you first started because now you're used to more sleep. Then another night sleeping through and then two nights sleeping through and then back to 3 hours sleep, etc. However, after 6 months of hard work you've got the sleep routine sorted and the baby sleeps through the night more often than not.

Dealing with a teenagers behaviour is no different really. They are still a child, and just like a baby, they are trying to find their way in the world. The obvious difference is that, whereas a baby is learning the basics of moving their physical body, a teenager is learning how to be a psychological adult. In addition, they are open to any number of influences willing to take control of their developing brain.



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As I discussed with you, Shannon is on the cusp of adolescence and her job in this stage of life is about becoming independent, standing alone, make her own decisions and taking control of her life – all good lifeskills for adults. The way she will do this is to push away from external control and challenge any sense of authority – and the biggest kind of authority is obviously you. In addition, she will also practice her approach for other authority figures on you and gauge their likely responses by how you respond. Therefore, if she is hostile with you and this works in the ways mentioned above, she will expect that it will work with others too which is bad news for her future.

Her emerging independence should be welcomed and embraced – but also heavily guided and you should also expect her to fail quite a bit to start off with, just like we all do when we're learning something new. Her attempts will be based on her previous experiences, so she is likely to use hostile/angry attempts quite a bit to persuade people, is likely to shout as a way of having the final say, and is likely to dramatise situations. Expect it, see it for what it is, and help her find the best way to be an adult.

In addition, remember that adolescence is a time of experimentation and pain. Whenever we feel that we don't really know what to do or when we're hurt, we resort to previous more basic behaviours to help us cope – under stress we regress. Often, this is why teenagers suddenly seem to be behaving like small children – this is normal, they're relying on previous basic behaviours to help them cope (such as avoidance, lots of emotion-focused coping rather than problem-solving, tantrums, and rage). Certainly, with the recent unwanted event, Shannon experimented with adulthood, got burned by someone she should not have trusted, became scared like a child would and relied on adults to help her. It was a mistake sure enough, but she's probably learned something important from it and thankfully wasn't seriously harmed.

I hope this useful and I hope that you find a way to change the situation. Take a look at the attached plan and get back to me with further, more specific, information regarding her actual behaviours. From here we can develop a behavioural plan to help get things back on track.

Marc