

# Nurturing Strengths and Belonging: Effective Behaviour Support for Learners with Down Syndrome in Schools

Associate Professor Erin Leif  
Monash University



# A Strengths-Based Starting Point

## Students with Down syndrome bring:

- Warmth and relational strengths
- Strong visual learning skills
- Persistence and determination
- Unique perspectives and contributions

**Our role: Design environments where strengths can flourish**

# Session Objectives



RECOGNISE HOW PROACTIVE,  
STRENGTHS-BASED SUPPORT  
REDUCES BARRIERS



EXPLORE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR  
SUPPORT WITHIN MTSS



APPLY PRACTICAL TOOLS TO  
DESIGN CAPABLE ENVIRONMENTS

# Understanding Learners with Down Syndrome

Every learner is unique.

Common learning characteristics may include:

- Strong visual processing
- Strong receptive language
- Social motivation
- Benefits from predictability



# Behaviours of Concern

Disruptive  
Behaviour

Disengaged  
Behaviour

Challenging  
Behaviour



## Remember...

- Behaviours of concern are not “caused” by a student’s disability or neurodevelopmental difference
- All students can learn alternative ways to communicate their needs and manage challenges
- With proactive, individualised support, behaviours of concern can be significantly reduced or eliminated
- Effective supports focus on understanding triggers, building skills, and enhancing participation



# Reframing Behaviours of Concern

**INSTEAD OF ASKING:**

“HOW DO WE STOP THIS  
BEHAVIOUR?”

**ASK:**

“WHAT IS THIS LEARNER  
COMMUNICATING?”

“WHAT SUPPORT WOULD INCREASE  
SUCCESS?”

“WHAT BARRIER MIGHT WE REDUCE?”

# What Is Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)?



PERSON-CENTRED



EVIDENCE-INFORMED



FOCUSED ON QUALITY  
OF LIFE

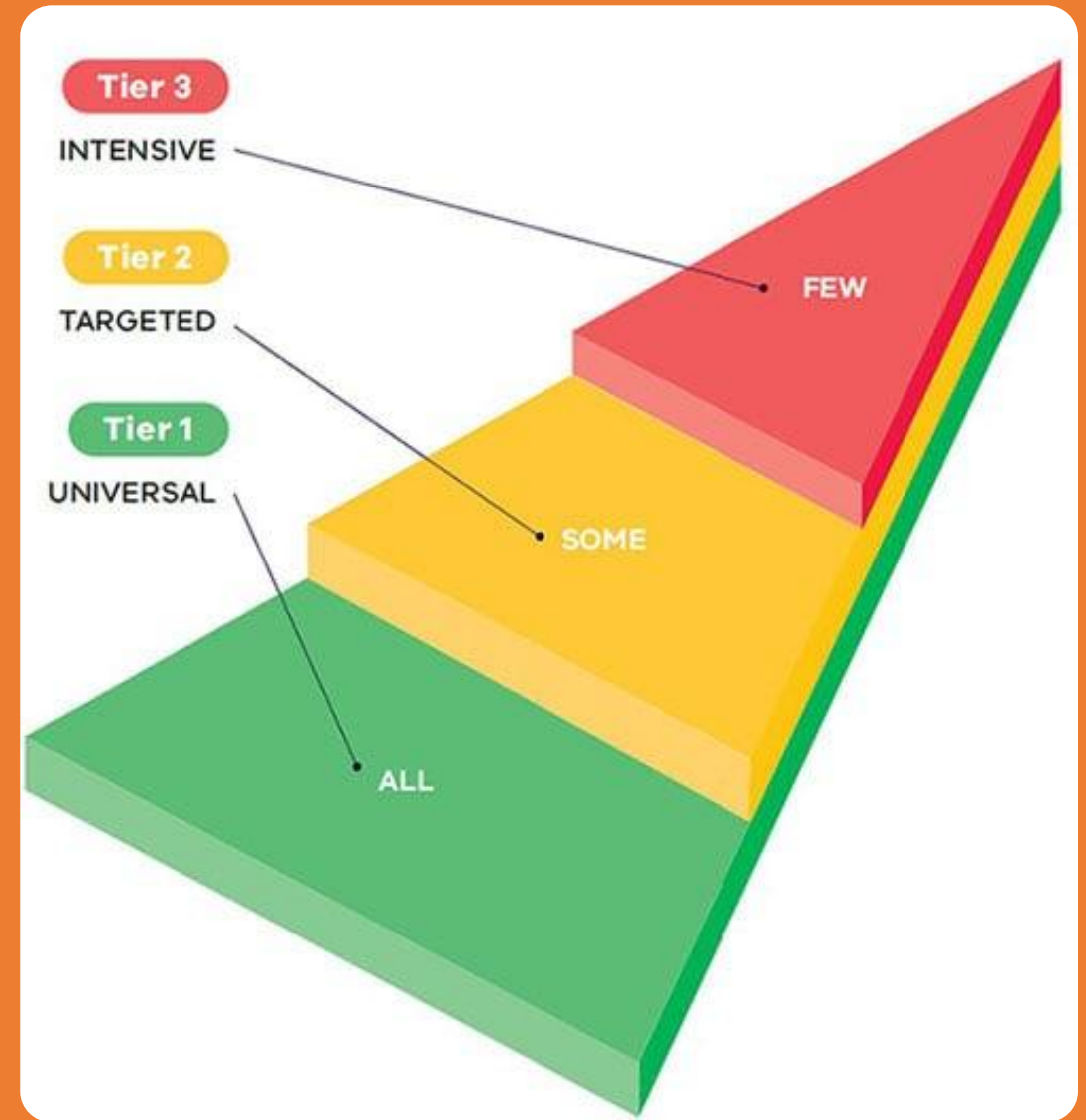


BUILDS SKILLS RATHER  
THAN SUPPRESSING  
BEHAVIOUR



ALIGNS WITH DIGNITY  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# Positive Behaviour Support in an MTSS



# The Interconnection of Behaviour, Engagement, and Wellbeing

- Behaviour, academic engagement, and wellbeing are deeply interconnected
  - Positive behaviour supports enhance learning participation
  - Increased academic engagement can reduce behaviours of concern
  - Strong wellbeing underpins motivation, resilience, and social participation

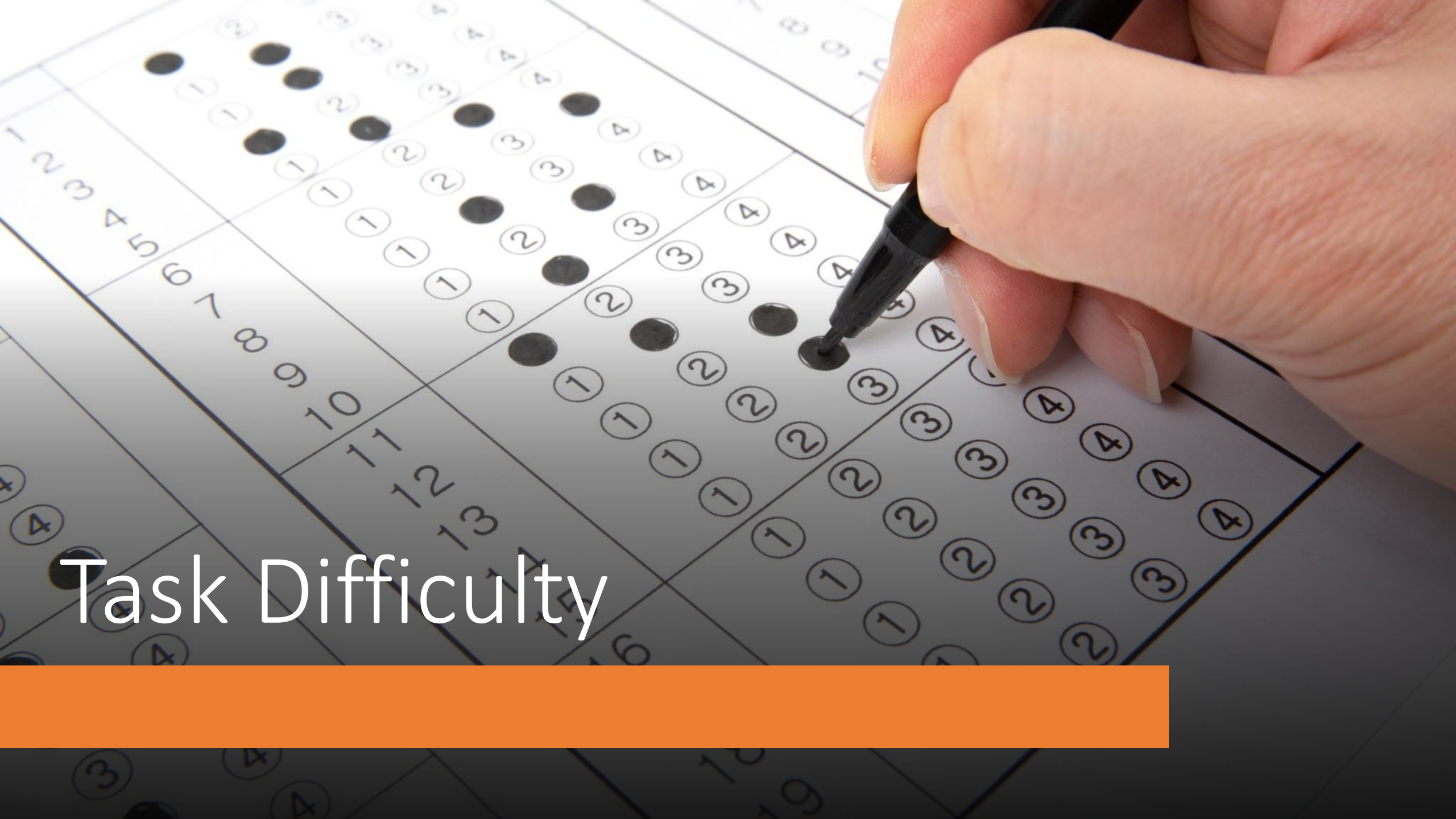




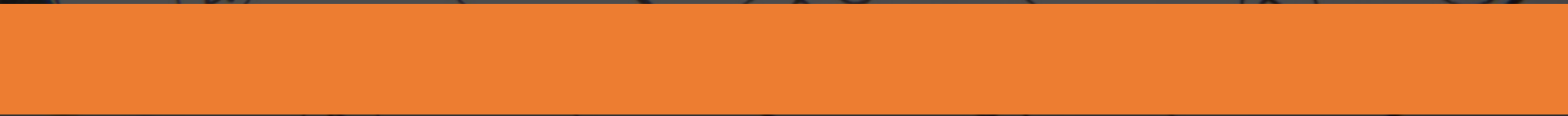
# Tier 1: Prevention


A glowing lightbulb is centered in the image, with the text "Environmental Design" overlaid on it. The background is a dense field of green, trifoliate leaves, likely clover, with some small yellow flowers scattered throughout. The lightbulb is illuminated from within, creating a soft glow and casting a shadow on the leaves below it. The text is in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Environmental Design



# Task Difficulty



A blue ballpoint pen is positioned diagonally across the upper left portion of the image. The background is a document featuring a bar chart with several blue bars of varying heights. The overall image has a soft, slightly blurred aesthetic with a blue color palette.

# Predictable Schedules and Routines



Positive  
Acknowledgement



Table Work



Breakfast



Circle time



Centers



Story

# Visual Supports



# Choice, Strengths, and Interests

The background features two large, overlapping, curved lines. One line is a light blue color and the other is a light green color. They are positioned in the top right and bottom left corners of the slide, framing the central text.

# Functional Thinking

A hand is shown in the background, resting on a computer mouse. In the foreground, a large, three-dimensional '@' symbol is made of cardboard. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark grey filter.

Support for Communication



# Behaviour Error Correction



# Tier 2: Intensification




# Tier 3: Individualisation

# Step 1: Start with Strengths and Context

- Identify the student's interests, capabilities, communication strengths, and relationships
- Clarify what meaningful participation looks like for this learner
- Gather family and student voice



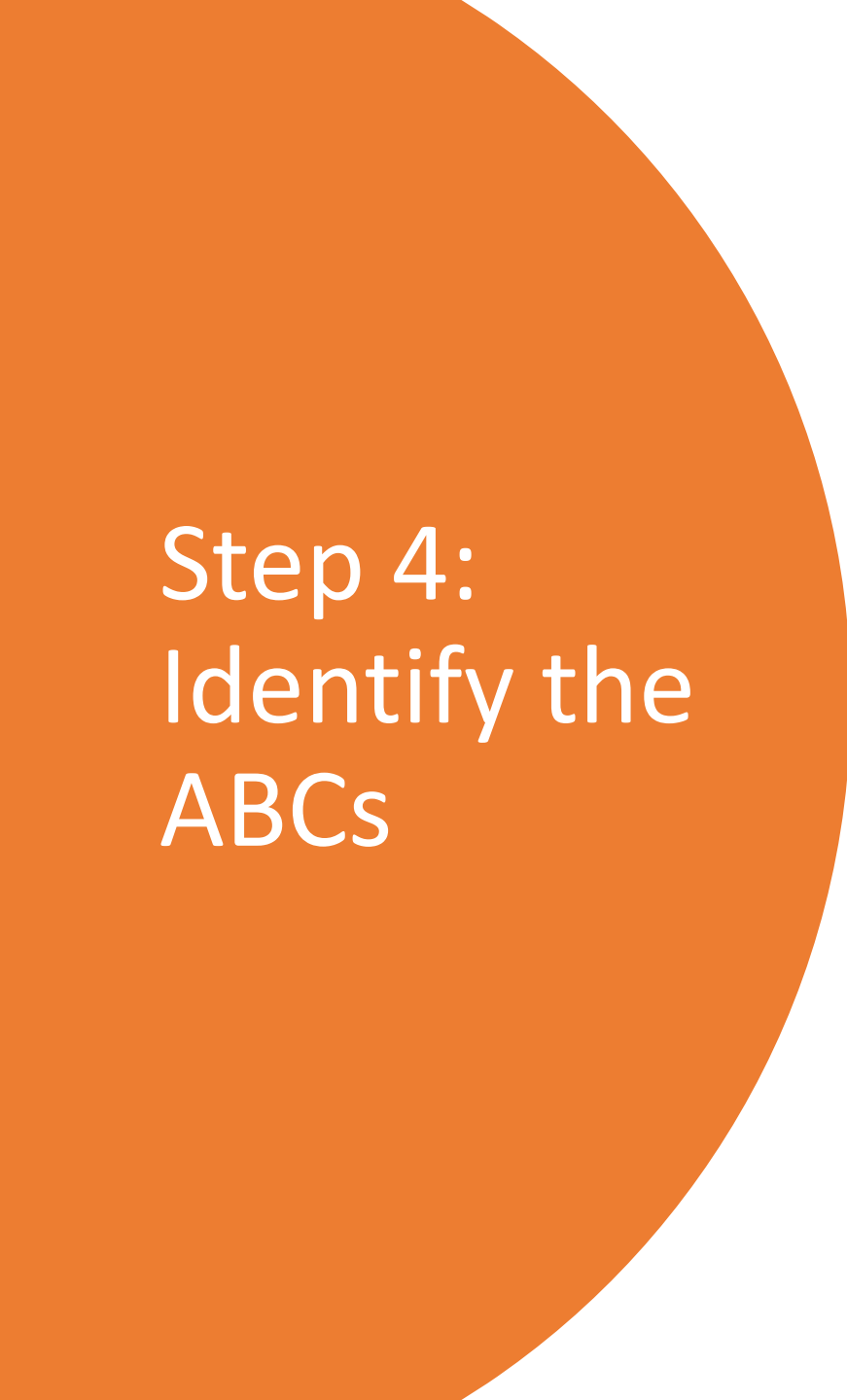
## Step 2: Define the Behaviour Clearly and Respectfully

- Describe what is observable and measurable
  - Avoid judgemental or deficit-based language
  - Focus on impact on learning or participation
- 


## Step 3: Gather Information Across Settings

- Interviews with educators, family, and the student (where appropriate)
- Direct observations
- Review of the physical space
- Review of routines and expectations
- Identify patterns (when, where, with whom)





## Step 4: Identify the ABCs


- What happens before the behaviour?
  - What does the behaviour look like?
  - What happens after?
  - What environmental or communication barriers might be present?
- 

# Step 5: Develop a Hypothesis About Function

- Is the behaviour serving to:
  - Gain connection?
  - Escape overwhelm?
  - Access preferred items/activities?
  - Communicate unmet needs?
- Behaviour is communication – what is the student telling us?



## Step 6: Design a Strengths- Based Support Plan

- Adjust environments proactively
  - Teach replacement skills explicitly
  - Enhance communication supports
  - Reinforce participation and skill use
  - Align strategies across school and home
- 

## Step 7: Teach Replacement Behaviours

- Identify the communication purpose (function) of the behaviour
- Identify a student-centred method of communication
- Start small – teach the replacement behaviour when it's fun, easy, and rewarding
- Gradually present triggers while providing ongoing support for communication
- Begin to teach delays and alternatives
- Teach others to respond to the replacement behaviour!

## Step 8: Monitor, Reflect, and Adjust

- Use simple, meaningful data
- Celebrate progress
- Refine supports collaboratively



Planning tools

# Putting It Into Practice



## Positive Behaviour Support Planning Workbook: A Practical Guide for Educators and Practitioners

Developed by Associate Professor Erin Leif



# Systems Matter Too

Leadership  
commitment

Collaborative  
teams

Coaching and  
professional  
development

Resources

Data-based  
decision  
making

Student and  
families as  
partners

# Key Takeaways

Behaviour support is about teaching and expanding participation

Strong Tier 1 environments prevent many challenges

Communication is foundational

Students with Down syndrome thrive in capable, affirming environments

Inclusion takes a village – it's our collective responsibility



# Questions?

**When a flower  
doesn't bloom, you fix the  
environment in which it  
grows, not the flower.**

-Alexander Den Heijer

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