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Making positive behaviour support work: meet Michael

Michael is 17 years old and for the past 9 months has lived at a supported living placement, with an adult education programme focused on building his life skills. Michael has complex needs including autism, a learning disability and oppositional defiance disorder. Michael displays behaviour that challenges services.

Since moving into this placement, his support team has followed a person-centred PBS plan and his quality of life has improved. This case study explains how PBS has supported Michael and what the plan includes.

Background

Michael was previously placed in a psychiatric intensive care (PICU) and an “autism specialist” inpatient unit. He had a document called a ‘PBS plan’ at the inpatient unit, however his family were concerned when they first saw the plan as it lacked proactive strategies and took a punitive approach to behavior that challenges. Unfortunately their fears about the PBS plan were confirmed as they witnessed Michael’s physical and mental health deteriorate. He was regularly subjected to restrictive practices including restraint by up to 6 people, seclusion and intramuscular injection of PRN medication.

When Michael moved into the supported living placement, they worked with him and his family to develop a new PBS plan – and he is now thriving. He is accessing the community every day and is far less anxious, and instead presents as being happy and excited about life. He used to freeze regularly when spoken to – now this is rare.

Michael’s support

Some of the key features of Michael’s support are:

- an overall focus on improving his quality of life
- a focus on building his skills
- autism specific strategies
- well matched and skilled staff
- working in partnership
- reflective learning.

Quality of life

There is a strong focus on improving Michael's quality of life and giving him new opportunities to learn and develop. He is provided with lots of meaningful and motivating activities. Michael is out and about in the community every day. He has a voluntary job which involves setting up activities for children at his local football club. He plays football himself, is learning how to look after horses and has learnt to paddle board. He has a social life and runs a film night at his house and has recently held a birthday party which he invited friends to. His support is person-centred and proactive.

Building skills

An essential component of Michael's support is identifying what situations he finds difficult to manage and what skills he needs to learn to cope with situations he finds challenging. A detailed plan is then made of how he will be taught each new skill.

Autism specific

Michael has autism and therefore processes information differently to the general population. He is provided with well recognised autism specific support such as a highly structured and predictable routine, visual communication and a low arousal environment. He has sensory sensitivities and his staff team have identified specific smells that trigger challenging behavior, and planned how to support Michael with these difficulties.

They use social stories to help Michael understand social situations and learn new skills. The social stories are tailored to Michael's level of understanding e.g. three pictures each with a simple sentence.

Well matched and skilled staff

Before Michael went to live at the supported living service, the manager and head of service met with Michael and his family several times to share information. They asked his family for information about what he liked and what made him happy. They shared that prior to his deterioration football used to be his big passion in life, particularly Liverpool football club and Steven Gerrard. The service took this into account when planning who would support Michael and selected a keyworker who loves playing and watching football and is nicknamed "football man". There was a very carefully planned transition during which his key worker and other staff worked hard to engage Michael and gain his trust. Staff are highly skilled and well supported.

Working in partnership

Michael's family describe their relationship with the care provider as a partnership. They feel that there is genuine collaboration, with open and respectful communication. The family and provider communicate on a daily basis as well as during regular meetings to plan Michael's support. His family feel like they are learning from the specialist skills and knowledge of the staff.

Reflective learning

The provider is open when something happens that is not optimal. Following incidents of behaviour that challenges, they look for the reasons for that behaviour. The focus of these reflections is on what they can learn from the situation and do differently in the future to avoid further incidents. As a result of reflective learning, autism specific support and a focus on improving quality of life and building skills, these incidents have dramatically reduced and are now rare. Michael is never restrained or secluded and all antipsychotic medication has been withdrawn.

How has PBS improved Michael's quality of life: Michael and his family's views

Michael and his family have noticed a big difference in his quality of life as a result of PBS in his new placement.

Michael says: "I used to be in a bad place, I used to have injections, and now it's better, 'cause I do lots of nice things here. There are lots of nice people here and my favourite is football man!"

His family says: "Since moving Michael's life has been transformed. He is safe, happy and learning every day. It used to feel like he was being punished for being autistic and we were very scared for him. Now he is achieving and has a much brighter future. PBS is a much more humane and ethical approach."

Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2018

Thank you to Michael and his family for providing this case study. Michael's name has been changed to protect his identity.