

Magic and sparkles: a creative approach to modifying children's behaviour

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An interview with Sarah Tollast, Primary Mental Health Care Worker

Sarah Tollast is employed by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team in Portsmouth, UK. We discovered how she has used 'magic and sparkles' to modify children's behaviour across the city. This article introduces a series of techniques developed by Sarah and her colleagues. She says they are "nothing new, just traditional behaviour management principles plus a little imagination".

Sarah's career path

Sarah's background is in paediatric nursing; she has worked as a ward sister and a school nurse. She went on to develop her interest in mental health when she completed further training in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. In November 2000, she joined the Child and Family Therapy team in Portsmouth, Hants. Her work in this field inspired her to create a post where she could concentrate her skills and time to a cause that she feels is vital to child development; capturing and celebrating children's "goodness". Over the years, Sarah recognised that

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there are many children with emotional and behavioural difficulties whose families have never had access to specialist services. She felt that the existing referral system and mode of delivery involved a variety of psychological barriers that restricted some families in accessing the services. She realised that one way of resolving this is to deliver services at school and at home, should the parents wish for additional visits. Parents, teachers and assistants, in fact anyone working with the child, are able to make direct referrals to her through the city schools.

Sarah works with children who have personal, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We met Sarah when one of the children that we support in a local school was referred to her by the Local Education Authority Primary Behavioural Support Team. Until recently, she has mainly worked with junior schoolchildren, but she is now working with infant school children. From our experience, we could see that our secondary school children with Down syndrome could also benefit from her fresh ideas and creative approach. She is steadily developing a consultancy-only role, sharing good practice and training others to carry out her methods, rather than always working directly with the children herself. Therefore, we hope that we will be able to help spread her good practice into the secondary schools.

There are many strands to Sarah's approach. Her work centres on increasing children's sense of worth. She believes that behavioural problems often stem from unhappiness, feelings of helplessness and lack of control and that these feelings are perpetuated when other people respond to the child in inappropriate ways. It is important to underline that behavioural problems arise for many reasons, but that there are some simple guidelines that, if followed firmly and consistently by everyone who interacts with child, can change behaviour. One aspect of her approach is firstly, to train others to respond more effectively to the child's behaviour and secondly, to develop ways of working that will empower the child and give them control over their environment without demon-

strating unacceptable behaviour. It is also vital for adults working with children to objectify or externalize the child's unacceptable behaviours. It is important to see the behaviours separately from the way in which the child is perceived 'as a person', e.g. "I like you as a person but I don't like that particular behaviour". Children develop their self-concept by observing how others respond towards them. In 1902, Charles Horton Cooley referred to the self-concept as the 'looking glass self', saying that we see ourselves reflected in the way other people behave towards us^[1]. This suggests that children with behavioural problems may develop a negative self-concept if other people in their world fail to behave positively towards them when their behaviour is acceptable.

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We had to chuckle when Sarah told us that she calls her approach "L'Oreal Therapy". Was L'Oreal a psychiatrist, psychologist or world-renowned therapist we had never heard of? No, Sarah practices "L'Oreal Therapy" with every child she meets, because "they're worth it!"

How to work the magic

A good magician never reveals her secrets, but we can! This section explains the principles that underpin Sarah's techniques. She explained that many of her ideas have been based on discussion at 'Skill Share' days with her colleagues. She uses *operant conditioning* whereby children are rewarded for desirable behaviours immediately after they have occurred, therefore increasing the probability that these behaviours will be repeated. Anything that increases the likelihood of a behaviour being repeated is called a reinforcer. Sometimes adults unwittingly reinforce undesirable behaviours and this makes them even more resistant to change. Sarah noted that undesirable behaviours, including negative talk and self-deprecation, should be "acknowledged but not colluded with". We think that this is central to managing the behaviour of children with Down syndrome. If a child shows unacceptable behaviour, adults and other children should withdraw eye contact and cease verbal interaction with the child. Social interaction is rewarding, even if the contact of the interaction is negative, i.e. telling children off and displaying negative emotions actually reinforces the child's unacceptable behaviour and makes it more likely to recur.

Capturing the moment

Sarah suggested that she has found that "nourishment is better than punishment" and concentrates her work on "capturing the moment", that is, capturing and rewarding a child's "goodness". When the child has behaved in a way that is "good enough, not brilliant, not amazing, but good enough" then that moment should be captured. The real magic in Sarah's approach is the ways in which she captures these moments in time. Rewards given after desirable behaviours will only increase the probability of that behaviour arising again if they are given immediately, otherwise the association between behaviour and consequence will be lost. The next section describes three of Sarah's techniques. Sarah and her colleagues are currently putting together a booklet with step-by-step descriptions of how to implement her many and varied techniques and

we will promote this in *News and Update* when it is ready for dispatch.

Magic pots

The magic pot is a receptacle for the child's "goodness" throughout the school day. It is a special pot designed to 'protect' the goodness and prevent it from escaping. The child, with help from their assistant or a parent, should make the pot. It can be decorated in whatever manner the child desires; encrusted with gold paint and jewels, 'Pompey' blue (the colours of Portsmouth Football Club) with pictures of the players or even a 'Harry Potter Pot'. Whatever the decoration, it must be special, and designed by the child. However, the pot does not belong to the child; it belongs to the assistant or teacher who is most involved with the child. The child owns his or her positive behaviour.

Now that the magic pot has been created it can be used throughout the day. Whenever the child is "good enough", as described above, the assistant, or whoever is working with the child, should choose an item that will remind them of the child's 'good' behaviour. This might be a pencil sharpener, sticker, small toy or anything else that is lying around at the time and will fit into the pot. These items are visual and tactile cues to remind the child of the goodness. The aspect that makes them rewarding is the social interaction, the praise and attention, that should go with the routine of putting them into the pot, e.g. "because you worked so hard and you were so good, I'm going to put this sticker into the magic pot".

Behaviour recovery

At the end of the day, or within a time frame that seems appropriate for the individual child, there should be 15 minutes built into the child's day for what Sarah calls "behaviour recovery". This is a chance to revisit the best parts of the day and will help to end the day in a very positive manner. The behaviour recovery session involves looking through the magic pot and recording the "goodness" in a book to take home. The following activities should take place in secure, warm and peaceful environment, away from the hustle-bustle of the main classroom. This

atmosphere should be one of relaxation and calm, in time the child will learn to associate good behaviour with feeling good.

The assistant or teacher should ask the child to go and fetch the magic pot. This should be exaggerated and made as dramatic and ceremonial as the assistant wishes; there should be special attention paid to the language that goes with this routine, e.g., "I give you permission to go and get the magic pot", "ooh you're so careful with the pot". At this point, the adult will take each item out of the pot one at a time and talk about them individually. It is best to aim to have about four items in the pot; otherwise, this activity will take a long time! Again, the language used here should be considered carefully and chosen to make the event of looking in the pot seem very important and special to the child, e.g. "oh yes, I remember why I put this sticker in the magic pot, it was because you so kindly shared your colouring pencils with Daniel". As the items are discussed, the adult needs to talk to the child about their feelings, e.g. "It seems to me that maybe you feel happy when you think about that drawing that you did with Daniel", "I'm wondering if you're happy because it looks like you're smiling and your eyes look a bit twinkly."

Sarah noted that as the child gets used to the routine of putting items into the magic pot and discussing them at the end of the day, the adult can move onto the next stage of the process. She explained that he or she should add an item to the pot that has not been discussed with the child. During the 'behaviour recovery' session the adult should say something like "ooh, do you know I can't remember why I put this *Smartie* in the magic pot, do you know why I might have done that?" This question aims to prompt the child to consider their own behaviour and remember for themselves an example for themselves. This is likely to be difficult for children with Down syndrome. Nonetheless, there are various ways

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What's in the magic pot today?



Posting a sparkle in the sparkle postbox



Let's see, how many sparkles did I get today?

in which this could be adapted, e.g. the adult could show the child pictures of the different activities that they taken part in during the day, for them to choose from, possibly helping them to remember something they enjoyed.

The Magic Book

Having looked through the contents of the magic pot, it is important to record this goodness in such a way as it can be taken home and shared with the child's parents and other member of the family. The magic book should be given a title of the child's choosing such as "The Golden Book" or "The Smiley Book" and again the adult and child can spend time decorating the front cover. The adult should then record simple sentences based on the child's own speech about the items in the pot and why they were in there, e.g. "Monday: There was a rubber, a sticker and a tissue in the magic pot today. The rubber was for writing my sentence. The sticker was for lining up at playtime. The tissue was for washing my hands in cooking." The child or the adult could draw a quick sketch of the items in the pot or take a picture if the class has access to a digital camera.

We felt that the 'Magic Book' was ideal for children with Down syndrome, as this idea can be combined with the 'conversation diary'^[2] that we recommend as an activity to promote speech and language, reading and sentence construction. Sarah has found that the magic book gives parents "an immense sense of pride". It is important to note though, that the magic book is about recording and sharing examples of the child's positive behaviour and both these activities should be rewarding for the child. It is important for this reason, that the speech and language and literacy opportunities that present themselves here do not become the focus of the activity.

Sending sparkles

'Sparkles' are another way of 'capturing the moment' and responding to desirable behaviour with an immediate reward. A 'sparkle' is, essentially, a postcard, a message to the child from the adult, or from another child. Teachers and assistants should have a supply of

sparkles close to hand, at all times. The sparkles might be on printed or written onto coloured or glittery paper and should say who it is to and from with a message to capture the moment, e.g. "To Sam, this sparkle is for being very quiet and grown up in assembly, from Mrs. Brown". The child should then be encouraged to post the sparkle into a 'sparkle post box'. As with the magic pot idea, at an appropriate point, either at the end of the day or the end of the week for older children, the post box can be opened or the sparkles counted. At the start of each day or each week, the child and the assistant should decide on a tangible reward (e.g. packet of stickers, set of colouring pencils) that will be given, if the child manages to receive, for example, one sparkle, five sparkles or ten sparkles. It is important to be flexible with regard to how many sparkles the child has to receive in order to get the tangible reward; for one child it may be extraordinary to receive two sparkles.

One idea, that we thought was particularly motivating for children and adults alike, was to receive a letter to home, as a reward. If the child managed to get a certain number of sparkles, they would receive a sparkle card or certificate, through the post, addressed to them. The local assistants at one of our schools have been sending sparkles cards home with glitter-filled envelopes! The most important thing to remember is to make the cards and certificate motivating for the individual child, e.g. with pictures of the *Tweenies*, football stickers, hologram card, fake fur, Formula One, pink and frilly and so on. Sparkles can be used in school and at home, providing a consistent approach of positive support is maintained in both settings.

The 'sparkle' system would work very well as a whole school policy and Sarah described to us the enchanting scene she observed in one local school where the teacher had introduced 'Sparkle Time'. The teacher dressed in a magic cloak and played the Harry Potter music, surrounded by all things magical and glittery. She would open the sparkle post box and read out examples of the sparkles received that week.

Another variation on the simple sparkle idea is to introduce the idea of children being encouraged

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to send sparkles to each other. The child with Down syndrome should be encouraged to think of a child they would like to send a sparkle to, who they think has been good or kind. The assistant can encourage the child to watch other children during the day, drawing their attention to good models. As mentioned above, children with Down syndrome are good social learners and the activity of observing others may well lead to imitation. The exchange of sparkles from one child to another is also empowering. It lets the child know that he or she also has the power to make other people feel good.

At home

Although the methods have above have mainly been described in the context of school, behaviour change is far more likely to occur and be generalized to other settings if everyone involved with the child uses a consistent approach. It is important to find ways that cohesion can be created between home and school, encouraging "school goodness" to tip over into home and vice versa. Parents could certainly use a version of the magic pot and the sparkle post box at home and in the same way that the magic book is a method of sharing "school goodness" with parents at home, "home goodness" could be shared with the child's teachers, assistants and peers through a similar 'magic home book'.

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Another way of creating a bridge between home and school is for the child to be encouraged to take something 'special' home that belongs to school. This gives the child the home responsibility to bring the item back again and the opportunity to receive praise for good behaviour. In addition, the child should bring things from home to school that can be used to prompt expressive language, e.g. 'show and tell'.

No such thing as a magic wand?

This expression is used so many times when it comes to behaviour change. The methods described in this article are certainly not quick fix solutions. However, we feel that they may be particularly useful for children with Down syndrome because they are based on sound behavioural principles, they are ideal for visual learners and they can be adapted in many ways to make them motivating for individual children. It is vital however, to remember that behaviour management principles need to be applied rigidly and consistently, and that partial reinforcement, or 'one off over-reactions', to a child's undesirable behaviour, can make behaviour even more resistant to change. Although at the moment there has been no systematic research looking at the effectiveness of Sarah's specific interventions, psychologists have used similar techniques, such as token economies, for decades and these have been shown to be effective methods for people with learning disabilities.^[3-4] In Sarah's experience, the consistent application of these simple techniques has led to successful behaviour change, has helped assistants and teachers to feel more in control and has

improved their job satisfaction. This article described just two methods from a large number of ideas that have been employed locally and we look forward to the publication of Sarah's booklet of interventions for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. We look forward to further collaboration with Sarah and her colleagues in the future.

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