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Commentary on “Training Staff to Respond to Behaviours that Challenge their Service:  
Increasing Staff Self-Efficacy and Positive Outcome Expectations”

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to provide a commentary on Stocks and Slater’s paper, “Training Staff to Respond to Behaviours that Challenge their Service: Increasing Staff Self-Efficacy and Positive Outcome Expectations”.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This is a narrative review or discussion on staff training in positive behaviour support (PBS) and challenging behaviour, based on Stocks and Slater’s paper and the core staff competencies outlined in the PBS Competence Framework (PBS Coalition, 2015).*

**Findings** – *Taking into consideration multiple outcome measures, including staff outcomes such as self-efficacy, changes in staff behaviour, and the impact on quality of life for service users, may provide a broader insight into the effects of staff training. Supports and systems such as hands-on training, supervision, and practice leadership are also important factors that are likely to lead to positive service user and staff outcomes.*

**Originality/value** – *This commentary reflects on Stocks and Slater’s paper in the broader context of staff training outcomes and factors that contribute to high-quality services for people with learning disabilities and challenging behaviour.*

**Keywords** *Staff Training, Positive Behaviour Support, Intellectual disability, Learning disability, Challenging behaviour, Competence framework*

**Paper type** *Viewpoint*

**Commentary on “Training Staff to Respond to Behaviours that Challenge their Service:  
Increasing Staff Self-Efficacy and Positive Outcome Expectations”**

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) provides a powerful framework for supporting people with learning disabilities and challenging behaviour. Demand for PBS has grown in recent years, particularly in the wake of the Winterbourne View scandal and the recent push towards community-based support as part of the ‘*Transforming Care Plan*’ (NHS England, 2015). This demand for PBS presents a challenge for services that support people with disabilities, and to the model of PBS itself. One of the key challenges is to establish and maintain a trained and experienced workforce, particularly within a climate of budget restraints within the sector (Sully and Bowen, 2012) and the known difficulties in staff turnover within disability services (Hatton *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, without regulation, there is a danger that the quality of PBS services will not be maintained. With such a vulnerable client group the focus of many PBS services, it is vital for both the clients and for the integrity of PBS itself that organisations claiming to provide PBS services are adhering to the PBS model and that quality standards are met. The *PBS Competence Framework* (PBS Coalition, 2015) outlines the competencies that define best practice in PBS, thus providing an important reference tool in relation to the skills and abilities necessary to provide high-quality support based on a PBS model.

One area addressed within the *Competence Framework* (PBS Coalition, 2015) is the need for systems to be in place to ensure staff wellbeing, which reflects the difficulties experienced by many staff working within services for people with learning disabilities and challenging behaviour. Support staff can often experience high levels of stress and even burnout. Robertson *et al.* (2005) found that staff working in supported accommodation for people with learning disabilities and challenging behaviour reported high levels of stress

(over 25% of the sample), with a third of the sample likely to actively seek new employment in the next year. Staff stress has been linked to negative staff interactions with service users, in addition to staff absenteeism and high staff turnover (Skirrow and Hatton, 2007).

Similarly, challenging behaviour can have negative effects on staff behaviour, for instance, increasing staff behaviours that have been reinforced by the staff member escaping or avoiding the client's challenging behaviour (Hastings, 2002). Given the important role that support workers play in disability services and in the lives of service users, this is an important area to address in both practice and research.

### **Staff Training Outcomes**

Certain staff psychological resources may moderate or mediate the impact of challenging behaviour on staff wellbeing. Staff ratings of self-efficacy (i.e., belief or confidence in one's abilities) in managing challenging behaviour have been found to strongly predict their emotional reactions to challenging behaviour (Hastings and Brown, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that staff negative emotional reactions may influence staff behaviour. For instance, negative emotional reactions may result in staff being more likely to respond in a way that reinforces the challenging behaviour (Hastings, 2005), although more research is needed on the links between these variables. This suggests that improving staff self-efficacy could be an important goal in improving the quality of support being provided to clients displaying challenging behaviour. Tierney *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that a brief 3-day training course on challenging behaviour could increase staff self-efficacy in managing challenging behaviour, with significant increases in perceived self-efficacy post-training. Similarly, Stocks and Slater found that a six-day workshop on PBS and challenging behaviour significantly increased staff self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations in relation to challenging behaviour and PBS. It is promising that brief 3-6 day workshops have

demonstrated potential to enhance staff confidence in relation to managing challenging behaviour. That said, improving self-efficacy is only part of the story in terms of enhancing staff wellbeing and quality of life for service users.

In addition to self-efficacy which was discussed by Stocks and Slater, there are many other outcome measures that could enhance insight into the effects of staff training, three of which will be discussed briefly here. First, the *PBS Competence Framework* highlights the importance of direct support staff having a core knowledge base in relation to PBS and challenging behaviour (PBS Coalition, 2015). Research has demonstrated that staff training can significantly increase staff knowledge (e.g., Lowe *et al.*, 2007) and positively change attributions about challenging behaviour (McGill *et al.*, 2007). While Stocks and Slater demonstrated that their staff training resulted in an increase in staff self-efficacy in relation to challenging behaviour and PBS, there is no guarantee that changes in self-efficacy will be mirrored by changes in staff knowledge. Verbal competence (i.e., demonstrating knowledge) has been acknowledged as an important step within training (Mansell and Beadle-Brown, 2012; LaVigna *et al.*, 1994); thus, staff knowledge and attributions about challenging behaviour and PBS are important outcome measures to consider following staff training.

Furthermore, improvements in staff knowledge and attributions do not necessarily lead to changes in staff behaviour, a second important outcome area within staff training literature. There is little support in the literature for a relationship between staff beliefs and their behaviour in relation to challenging behaviour (Grey *et al.*, 2007). Thus, while studies such as Stocks and Slater show improvements in staff self-efficacy, we cannot make any assumptions about whether staff training or increased staff self-efficacy contributed to an improvement in staff practices. This tendency within behaviour analytic literature to expect behaviour change without directly addressing or measuring it has been described elsewhere as a 'train and hope' method (Baer *et al.*, 1968; Lowe *et al.*, 2007; MacDonald and McGill,

2013). Generalisation to practice is likely to be critical in order to effect meaningful change for support staff and service users. As such, direct measures of staff skills in implementing PBS strategies pre- and post-training would enhance understanding of the effects of staff training on practice. Hands-on training or coaching may be needed in order to achieve changes in staff practices, as suggested by active support literature (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 2001).

A third important outcome measure is whether staff training has a positive impact from the point of view of the service users. Although the research base is limited, there have been some demonstrations of reductions in challenging behaviour among service users following staff training. An Australian study by Crates and Spicer (2012) used a ‘training for trainers’ approach to staff training, which led to significant reductions in frequency and episodic severity of challenging behaviour among clients. While results such as this are promising and seem to indicate that staff training can impact on important quality of life domains for service users, MacDonald and McGill (2013) found that staff training studies tended to report staff outcomes more so than service user outcomes. In particular, minimal research has been conducted on the quality of life of service users after staff training. Hastings (2010) also highlighted a tendency for research to be unidirectional and focus on the perceptions of, and outcomes for, support staff rather than service users. Thus, it would also be interesting to see staff training outcomes focusing on service users’ perspectives. For instance, research could investigate whether service users report any positive changes in the quality of their relationships or interactions with support staff following staff training. Service user quality of life is a critical outcome if training is to produce meaningful changes for the people in receipt of PBS services, and incorporating these measures into more staff training studies would provide a broader insight into staff training outcomes.

## **Practice Leadership**

Studies such as Stocks and Slater provide important demonstrations of the positive outcomes that can result from staff training. In order to produce the greatest improvements in staff and service user outcomes, additional systems are likely to be important both before and after training to support changes in staff practices. There is an increasing emphasis on the role of practice leadership within services for people with learning disabilities, with performance of front-line managers found to be an important factor in determining whether desired outcomes are achieved for service users (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2014). The main elements of practice leadership include staff organisation, coaching staff to provide better support (e.g., through modelling and providing hands-on feedback to staff), and providing individual supervision and team meetings to review the quality of support being provided (Beadle-Brown *et al.*, 2014). This is reflected in the *PBS Competence Framework* (PBS Coalition, 2015), which outlines the important roles of supervisors and managers in supporting the skills and wellbeing of direct support staff. Key aspects of practice leadership are outlined within the competencies for supervisors and managers, including the importance of individual and practice supervision, managers leading and modelling the implementation of PBS, and providing positive monitoring and review. An important system for monitoring the quality of support, which links in well with the concept of practice leadership, is the Periodic Service Review (PSR; LaVigna *et al.*, 1994), which uses positive behavioural approaches to staff management. Lowe *et al.* (2010) found that the PSR, when implemented in specialist health services for people with challenging behaviour, was seen by managers as a useful aid to practice leadership, and resulted in service improvements over time. Thus, while staff training undoubtedly makes an important contribution to staff wellbeing and the development of competencies, broader systems and supports are likely to contribute to positive changes within an organisation from the perspective of both staff and service users.



## Conclusions

Stocks and Slater outlined the effectiveness of a six-day training course in increasing staff self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations in relation to challenging behaviour and use of PBS. Given the important role staff play within services and the potential difficulties in relation to stress and high staff turnover within the sector, enhancing staff self-efficacy may be an important step towards enhancing staff wellbeing. The inclusion of further outcome measures in staff training studies could provide a more comprehensive insight into the effects of staff training for staff and service users. These include, but are not limited to, exploring the impact of staff training on staff knowledge and behaviour (i.e., theoretical and applied competencies), and quality of life outcomes for service users. Furthermore, staff training is likely to be most effective when accompanied by additional supports and systems, with research indicating that practice leadership, supervision, and hands-on training are all important in improving service quality. Developing a high-quality service with skilled staff is clearly a multifaceted task. Given the challenges that organisations can face in establishing and maintaining a well-trained workforce and providing high-quality PBS services for people with disabilities and challenging behaviour, the *PBS Competence Framework* (PBS Coalition, 2015) is an important resource. By addressing the core competencies outlined in the framework through staff training and organisational systems, organisations could ensure that they are providing high-quality PBS services that are likely to enhance outcomes for both staff and service users.

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