



Supporting Children with Behaviour



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Please note: This information is generalised. All children are unique; no two children will present in the same way. The information below has been designed to give an overview of a 'need' and to provide a starting point for further information.

So It Is With Behaviour

Learning to behave is a bit like learning to ride a bicycle.

No child is born knowing how to ride a bike but some have more aptitude for it than others and some catch on quite quickly.

Other children have to persevere and be shown over and over again or have to have someone running alongside to steady them.

So it is with behaviour.

While they are learning they may need the extra support of three wheels or stabilisers before they have the confidence to try on two wheels.

They often wobble and lose their balance; sometimes they fall off and have to start over again.

Even when they feel they have mastered it, they might find themselves on unfamiliar roads or uneven surfaces which can make them wobble and fall off all over again.

So it is with behaviour.

So every cycle ride is something of a trial and error – they never quite know what they will encounter or how well they will coordinate the steering and pedalling and they still need someone to help them along the right path.

So it is with behaviour.

Practitioners and parents are like the extra wheels or stabilisers on the bicycle.

They keep children steady until they are ready to try to balance by themselves.

As children become more confident adults can step back a little but are still alongside them to help them when they make a mistake, forget what they have been taught or encounter a difficult path.

So it is with behaviour.

By Chris Dukes and Maggie Smith (from: Building Better Behaviour in the Early Years, 2009)

Introduction

Humans are social beings, yet learning to be with others takes time. Young children begin this journey from birth and, through first-hand experiences, start to map out a picture of what responses are expected of them and how to respond to others. It is a complex journey because some of the things that children learn are acceptable in one context but not in another. In addition, not all adults respond in the same way and – just to make things particularly difficult – some adults say one thing, yet do another!' (Penny Tassoni, 2018)

All behaviour is a form of communication

Children do not often show their pain, distress or frustration through talking. They may demonstrate these emotions through challenging behaviour. They need adults to be supportive and to recognise, acknowledge and guide them through these difficult emotions.

Adults must move beyond seeing challenging behaviour as 'naughtiness' or a 'choice' and look to what children are desperately communicating.

Once we understand this we can look further than the behaviours and focus on the specific **needs** of the child. Once we have an understanding of the need we can find ways of meeting this **need**.

It is really useful to spend some time considering the reasons why a child may be displaying certain behaviours.

In some ways it is like becoming a detective; adults need to observe and consider a range of reasons as to why the child is demonstrating the behaviour.

Why do children behave in different ways?

Children find different ways to express their wishes and test the boundaries:

- Less verbal children are more likely to have tantrums if they are frustrated from not being able to express themselves. Tantrums are physical – screaming, drumming feet, throwing things, etc.
- Children who are able to speak may whine and fuss, and refuse to cooperate.
- Children with additional needs may get more frustrated. If they have learning difficulties they may find it harder to concentrate and understand what is expected of them, and find it more difficult to deal with their emotions. They may need different ways to communicate their needs in order to avoid feelings of anxiety, frustration and rage, which could trigger challenging behaviour.

When is behaviour an issue?

Behaviour that causes problems, escalates and becomes persistent can be considered problematic, for example:

- Frequent screaming and tantrums
- Kicking and hitting others
- Breaking things
- Biting people and objects
- Not sleeping
- Feeding problems
- Avoidance
- Smearing faeces, urinating in odd places

What are the causes of challenging behaviour?

- **Frustration** – especially if a child requires support physically to do something and/or communicate their needs
- **Anxieties, fears and phobias** – difficulty in accepting change in routine or being frightened of something; being bullied or discriminated against
- **Lack of understanding** – limited understanding of what is happening and not knowing what is expected of them or how to respond
- **Emotions** – being unhappy or angry; if they are unable to communicate their feelings, they may demonstrate this in their behaviour
- **Hyperactivity** – excess energy and needing to be constantly on the go during the daytime
- **Discomfort or illness** – hungry, thirsty, tiredness, being in pain or unwell, which could show in their behaviour if they are unable to communicate what is making them uncomfortable
- **Sensory issues** – sensitivity to certain noises, textures, tastes, smells, etc.
- **Misplaced attention** – if a child has learnt that a certain behaviour gets your attention, they may continue to behave in that way, even if the attention they receive is negative and meant to stop them from doing something

Can behaviour be linked to certain medical conditions?

Although children with some conditions and disabilities are at increased risk of developing behaviours that are considered challenging, it is important to recognise that it is not a foregone conclusion.

How to help a child

Establish your basic approaches to behaviour

It works best when everyone known to a child follows the same rules so that the child receives consistent messages. It is therefore extremely important that all adults work in partnership together; constantly sharing their knowledge and experience of the child's difficulties and effective strategies to support these.

It is important to:

- Set routines – children need clear, daily routines. Routines help them to understand and make sense of a confusing world.
- Build communication – communicate with children about their routines throughout the day, e.g. use pictures and photos to explain what is going to happen; show an object before commencing the next step in their routine; demonstrate routines visually; and break down your sentences into single words and keep them simple.
- Give choices – giving children choices helps them to feel more in control; that their view is being taken into account, e.g. 'Which book would you like me to read, *Kipper's Monster* or *Room on the Broom?*', 'Where would you like to sit? Next to me or next to Sam?', 'Would you like to play in the sand or in the water?', 'Would you like a red cup or a blue cup?' This typically leads to less frustration and improved behaviour.
- Give enough time – give children plenty of time to think about what is being asked of them before expecting a response. You may need to repeat what you have said several times to help a child understand what you want them to do.
- Provide opportunities to exercise – exercise is very effective in relieving stress and getting rid of frustrations and excess energy. It is shown to have a positive effect on behaviour generally. Explore these websites for some ideas and activities to try:
<https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities>
<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-under-five-years/>
- Calm and relaxation for children – it is important to know what can calm a child when they are stressed or overexcited. Explore this website for some ideas and activities to try:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/joinin/seven-techniques-for-helping-kids-keep-calm>

Strategies for changing behaviour you and others find difficult

- Rule out any medical, hearing or dental problems
- Rule out the possibility of bullying or discrimination
- Think holistically – consider what is happening in a child's family life and the wider community. It is likely these will be beyond your control but you may have to manage the effects on a child, e.g. not sleeping well/disturbed nights, a parent is away or in hospital, a new baby, the family has moved house, etc.
- Focus on changing the behaviour – it is important that a child knows it is their behaviour you don't like, not them
- Try to stay neutral – keep your responses minimal; try to speak calmly and clearly, and keep your facial expressions neutral
- Remain positive – say things in a positive way, "Please do..." rather than "Do not do...". Some children struggle to interpret "no" messages; the word "stop" can be more effective
- Be consistent – ensure all those known to the child use the same approaches
- Development matters – staff should use their knowledge of child development to support behaviour. It is important that both staff and parents have realistic expectations of behaviour at specific ages and stages. Where development is delayed, behavioural expectations will need to reflect a child's developmental stage rather than their actual age.

- Give appropriate rewards – make a point of rewarding appropriate behaviour. Rewards can be anything the child values, e.g. verbal praise and attention, favourite activities or toys. Rewards must follow good behaviour quickly. Rewards should be things a child doesn't get at other times
- Try to ignore attention-seeking behaviour

Remember, punishment does not work as many children do not see the connection between what they have done and the punishment that follows. Also, behaviour does not improve overnight. Things may get worse before they get better – a child will take time to adjust to strategies – it is important to persevere and be consistent.

Recognising triggers

Different factors cause children to react in different ways, some may be obvious, others not. Part of being a behaviour detective is to work out the triggers and look for patterns so that you can work out the strategies to deal with the behaviour. If a child has several worrying behaviours then you need to work out which one/s to focus on first.

Behaviour charts

These can be helpful to identify what triggers different behaviours, for example an ABC chart:

A. Antecedent – what was happening in the environment before the behaviour occurred? Where did it happen? Who was there? Were other children present? Which adult responded?

B. Behaviour – What did the child do?

C. Consequence – How did the behaviour finish? Any changes in the environment? What did you or the child do? How did the child feel at the end?

Keep an ABC chart over a period of time to identify possible patterns.

Alternatively, if you don't want to keep an ABC chart, a behaviour diary could be used. Make a note of behaviours that are cause for concern to help you work out why a child does things, in what circumstances and how frequently.



Remember to think about

1. What is the child trying to tell you through their behaviour?
2. Why is the child behaving the way they are?

Keep asking these two simple questions when behaviour occurs and it can help to work out what a child is trying to tell you through their behaviour.

However you decide to observe, record and analyse a child's behaviour, both staff and parents should do this to develop a holistic understanding of a child's behavioural needs; the information can help to understand what is happening more clearly.

It may show that incidents only occur when particular children or adults are present, or only at certain times of the day.

It would be advisable for staff and parents to come together to share their discoveries regularly.

The information gathered can identify how strategies, if applied consistently, can really make a difference and can help to recognise and celebrate how much progress a child is making over a period of time.

Positive behaviour management plans

For some children it may then be necessary to put in place a behaviour management plan in order to manage and change behaviour. Your policies and procedures linking to behaviour should guide this process.

Top tips – it is very important to enable children to self-regulate; many of these tips promote this

- Be patient
- Try to see things from the child's point of view
- Feelings matter; show the child you value their feelings
- Try to understand what is causing the child's behaviour
- Try to get to the child's level, speak calmly and use clear, concise and simple instructions; supported by gestures if appropriate
- Help the child to learn ways to express themselves and communicate their needs
- Support the child to recognise and label their emotions and accept the associated feelings
- Model strategies for them to manage these emotions
- Support and encourage them to manage situations; ask them "What could you do?"
- Model good behaviour and reward behaviour that is considered appropriate
- Ignore unwanted behaviour
- Divert the child's behaviour from that which is considered inappropriate
- Use stories to explore and discuss behaviours, feelings and emotions
- Be consistent and ensure all those supporting the child are aware of the strategies in place
- Support the child to develop a positive self-image; look for small but meaningful opportunities to celebrate and value them, e.g. for being kind. When the child feels good about their self; this will have a positive impact on their behaviour
- Ensure that other children have a positive view of the child and their behaviour

Accentuate the positive;
A positive environment and positive strategies
can make a huge difference to the way a child responds



Let Children be Children:

A skilled five year old,
Grows from a busy four year old,
A curious three year old,
A cuddled two year old,
An adventurous one year old
And a communicative baby.



Further websites

Challenging Behaviour Foundation is a charity that provides information, guidance and resources on challenging behaviour for parents and professionals. [Homepage for the Challenging Behaviour Foundation](#)

Contact – Behaviour that challenges: An article with top tips for managing children’s challenging behaviour and information about how to seek further help. The website also has a freely downloadable parent guide: ‘Understanding your child’s behaviour’. [Behaviour that challenges | Contact](#)

The Anna Freud Centre website details common behavioural difficulties that can arise in early childhood and provides practical information about how you can help with them. [Common difficulties in the early years | Anna Freud](#)

Early Support (2012) Information about behaviour booklet - Specific information can be found within the booklet to support children with a range of specific issues including:

- Tantrums
- Hitting, kicking and pinching
- Biting
- Sleep
- Eating
- Smearing

[Microsoft Word - Early Support Behaviour.doc \(councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk\)](#)