

LET'S TALK ABOUT BEHAVIOUR

PART 3: THE GUIDANCE APPROACH



FACT SHEET

In April 1999, RUCSN sponsored a visit to Western Australia by Louise Porter to provide training and information on the guidance approach to discipline. Those of us who attended Louise's sessions found them very valuable and thought provoking. This fact sheet summarises her approach. If you wish greater discussion of the content you are referred to her books¹.

A positive guidance approach has long been regarded as 'the ideal' when working with young children. There are, however, theoretical beliefs that underpin this approach and behaviour management implications from adopting the guidance style of discipline. As early childhood professionals it is important that we understand the theoretical basis of the strategies and techniques we adopt. This ensures that our chosen strategies are consistent with our own beliefs and understanding about child development. Lack of knowledge or understanding can lead to a real difference between what we say we do, and what we actually do.

When we work with young children, the greatest challenge we face is to help them learn to manage their feelings and their behaviour. If we want to do a good job, we must accept this challenge. Our choice is in the way we decide to go about it.

'Managing children's behaviour is not only a question of WHAT to do: it is also a question of HOW...to do it'².

Most caregivers say that they use 'positive guidance' in their interactions with the children in their care. But what does this really mean? Louise Porter has written and lectured extensively about the guidance approach to discipline and this fact sheet will explore her ideas.

WHERE DO WE START?

When we talk about the guidance approach to discipline, we need to be sure that we understand what we mean. Traditionally, most of our

behaviour management strategies have been designed to help adults manage children's behaviour, i.e. to control and influence the ways in which children act. We have used lots of techniques to try to maximise the 'good things' that children do and minimise the 'bad things'. The adult, however, has generally remained in charge of deciding what was right and wrong, what was and was not appropriate, and advising the child accordingly.

Approaches that emphasise controlling the child and the child's behaviour require the adult to evaluate what is going on and to decide how to act. They are frequently built on rewards and punishment - or re-inforcement and praise. These approaches are inconsistent with positive guidance. To fully understand the difference between a **controlling approach** to discipline and a **guidance approach**, Porter examines and reviews:

- the aims of the discipline style
- the adult's role/status
- their response to considerate behaviour
- their view of disruptive behaviour and
- their response to inconsiderate behaviour.

Her beliefs are summarised in Table 1. and will be discussed in further detail.

DISCIPLINE STYLE—AIMS

The controlling style of discipline has as its aim the **compliance** of children to adult direction – that is, obedience. This style of discipline expects that children 'do as they are told' and implicitly expects that children will learn behavioural skills by direct instruction. When we think of the ways in which children learn – experientially, through trial and error, kinaesthetically (by touching and feeling and manipulating) – it seems a bit naive to expect that they will learn behavioural skills without the opportunity for exploration and practice.

¹ See Reference List

² Porter, L. (1999) Young Children's Behaviour: Practical Approaches for Caregivers and Teachers. MacLennan and Petty Pty Ltd, NSW, p 110.

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The goal of compliance also fails to give children any responsibility for learning skills associated with self discipline as they are reliant on an external locus of control, i.e. the adult. A discipline style that focuses on controlling children provides no role modelling of co-operation, problem solving, turn taking, sharing or any of the other pro-social skills that we seek to encourage in small children.

Further, it leaves children open to an abuse of power by adults as they are taught only to obey and accept control – not to evaluate and gain self-protective skills. The 'rules' are externally controlled and order is imposed.

An additional weakness of this discipline style is that it is built on a power imbalance between the adult and the child – yet all children grow and eventually may be too big or too strong to be externally controlled if they have not developed relevant self-discipline skills. This is of particular relevance when we consider those caregivers working with school-aged children.

In contrast, the guidance style of discipline aims to develop **considerateness** in children.

*'Children are encouraged to become self-disciplined, express their feelings appropriately, co-operate with other people, develop integrity and empathy, and be orderly when being disorderly would interfere with other people in the group.....Considerateness has two aspects: first, that children learn to think in advance about what effect their behaviour could have and, second, when told that their behaviour is harming someone else, they can consider this information and change what they are doing.'*³

The guidance approach to discipline aims to teach children to think for themselves within a framework of respect for their own and other's rights. The long-term intent is that they learn to control their own behaviour regardless of the presence or absence of adults. This approach does away with power imbalances based on age and size, and recognises children's skill acquisition and competence.

DISCIPLINE STYLE—ADULT'S STATUS

If you seek to control the behaviour of others, you must take on the role of boss. This means that you are the primary decision-maker, adjudicator and determiner of the group. You make the rules and invoke the consequences. You must also be vigilant to ensure that all breaches of discipline are appropriately and firmly dealt with.

In a child care environment, you will be very busy as you will need to make many rulings on whom is at fault, and you will need to consistently and fairly apply the known and understood limits. Children will appeal for your intervention and intercession whenever they have a dispute.

In contrast, if you adopt a guidance approach and seek to develop considerateness in children, you take on the role of group leader. You have expertise resulting from your skills and knowledge, yet children are encouraged to use their own skills first. Your role is to lead them to skill enhancement, for example, by assisting in collaborative problem solving, demonstrating an awareness of the rights of others and how to stand up for their own and other's rights. Although you are not 'the boss', you are still in charge of the group by virtue of your experience and expertise. Louise Porter describes this as follows:

'A disruptive child is the boss of you, and your whole centre. You have a good day if he behaves well; you have a bad day if he acts up. His moods determine yours. That is too big a job for a child, so it is important that you can be a leader in the centre - but not its boss. Being the leader means not exerting your power over the children, but guiding them.'

*It also means that you deal with adult business, so that the children are free to develop and grow without worrying about adult's problems. It means being in control of yourself, insisting that your rights are respected, and teaching the children to be in charge of their own feelings. This means making sure that their feelings do not upset other people, and it protects the children from being disliked or behaving inconsiderately.'*⁴

³ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 33

⁴ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 110.

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SUMMARY OF DISCIPLINE SKILLS FOR CONTROLLING AND FOR GUIDANCE

Discipline Style	Control	Guidance
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Obedience ⊙ Compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Self-discipline ⊙ Handling feelings ⊙ Cooperation with others ⊙ Integrity
Adult's Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Boss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Leader
Response to Considerate Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Praise ⊙ Rewards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Acknowledgement ⊙ Natural consequences
View of Disruptive Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Naughty ⊙ Inappropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Developmental ⊙ Natural
Response to Inconsiderate Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Intervention ⊙ Change the child ⊙ Aggressive ⊙ Inappropriately patient ⊙ Inflexible ⊙ Identify a culprit ⊙ Impose a solution ⊙ Punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Prevention ⊙ Change the demands ⊙ Assertive ⊙ Responsive to circumstances ⊙ Identify a solution ⊙ Find a solution collaboratively ⊙ Natural consequences

TABLE 1: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DISCIPLINE STYLES ⁵

⁵ From workshop notes provided by Louise Porter, April 1999 and sourced from Porter, L (1999) op. cit.

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DISCIPLINE STYLE

–RESPONSE TO CONSIDERATE BEHAVIOUR

The controlling style of discipline **rewards** children for behaving in a considerate way. It provides an external judgement of the value of the child's behaviour. In childcare circles, this is likely to be expressed as 'praise' or positive reinforcement, either tangible or social.

Louise Porter asserts that:

*'...praise is an attempt to manipulate children into repeating a behaviour that we like. Because we decide what standards to enforce, and are in charge of giving or withholding praise, we are boss....Praise tells children we approve of them when they meet our standards.'*⁶

She further argues that:

*'...we don't reward our adult friends or tell them that they are good people when they help us out. All we do is thank them, so we can do the same for children. They are not good people when they please us and bad people when they displease us. It is not up to us to judge or label them, but we can say when we appreciate their considerate behaviour. This is a natural outcome (consequence) of their behaviour, not an attempt to bribe them into repeating the behaviour again.'*⁷

Porter believes that rewards:

- ⊙ have a negative effect on children's self esteem
- ⊙ interfere with learning
- ⊙ provoke disruptive behaviour
- ⊙ are ineffective in many instances and
- ⊙ are often unfair in individual and group settings.⁸

Instead, when using the guidance approach, she advocates acknowledging (or encouraging⁹) children's behaviour and achievements, together with recognising the natural consequences of their behaviour. Acknowledgement differs from praise in that it:

- ⊙ teaches the child to evaluate his/her own efforts,
- ⊙ doesn't judge the child or the child's work,
- ⊙ focuses on process rather than product or outcome,
- ⊙ is a private event which doesn't show up or compare children (thereby reducing the potential for competition between them).

Using acknowledgement is fundamental to the guidance approach as it builds self-esteem by helping children learn to self-evaluate and become aware of their own behaviour. They can then begin to take responsibility for it! This is the first step in learning to behave considerately.

DISCIPLINE STYLE

–VIEW OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

If we adopt the controlling style of discipline and seek to **make** children do as we wish them to, we imply that they are naughty and not likely to behave well naturally. Not many of us would truly believe this, yet, when we try to direct their behaviour through praise, rewards and punishment, we act as if we believe that they will only behave considerately with such reinforcement.

*'The key to using the guidance rather than the control approach when disciplining is to realise that learning to behave is a developmental task like any other - although it is far more complex than any other skill a child will learn. Just as a child needs to learn how to walk, so too he needs to learn how to be considerate. And just as we wouldn't punish a toddler for falling over, so too we should not punish a child who makes a behavioural mistake. Mistakes are just an opportunity to teach a child more skillful behaviour.'*¹⁰

Unlike the controlling approach, which views disruptive behaviour as naughty and inappropriate, the guidance approach sees disruptive behaviour as being a part of the normal developmental learning of all children. Louise Porter describes growing up as *'...learning to be*

⁶ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 57

⁷ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 34

⁸ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 103

⁹ Although Porter prefers the term 'acknowledgement', it seems fairly interchangeable in the literature with 'encouragement'.

¹⁰ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 33

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the boss of our feelings.'¹¹ The underlying belief of the guidance approach is that all children, in a developmentally appropriate way, can learn to manage their emotions and develop the skills of considerate behaviour which Porter describes as:

- self-discipline,
- handling feelings,
- co-operation with others, and
- integrity.¹²

DISCIPLINE STYLE – RESPONSE TO INCONSIDERATE BEHAVIOUR

Table 1. outlines many of the overt responses to inconsiderate behaviour traditionally associated with the controlling style of discipline. Most of these focus on changing the child's behaviour (the most difficult place to start!). We can see that these strategies are geared towards intervention **after** the occurrence of an unacceptable behaviour.

If you are seeking to control the behaviour of children and want compliance with your rules and limits, then most of your time and effort will be spent dealing with **what has happened** and with evidence of non-compliance. Because most of the controlling discipline measures are punitive, we delay using them and give children lots of second chances and 'warnings'. This gives children very mixed messages – we say one thing but do another, they find it hard to know when we are really serious. They also get lots of opportunities to practise inconsiderate behaviours and fewer chances to practise the newer higher level skills associated with managing their own feelings and behaviour. In short, by being patient with children we are doing them an enormous disservice. We deny them positive learning opportunities, we fail to model appropriate honesty and assertion and we fail to protect our own rights and the rights of other members of the group.

Many of us would contend that we are more pro-active with the children in our care and more concerned with preventing the occurrence of inconsiderate behaviour in the first place. With

this in mind, it is worth reviewing how patient we are with the children in our services and what developmental learning opportunities are presented to them by our discipline style.

The guidance approach to discipline is preventative and seeks – where possible – to change the demands on the child. For example, is it either necessary or reasonable to expect a three-year-old to sit still in a large group to listen to a story? Are some of the demands placed on the children based on adult convenience rather than the needs of the children? Are we flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances – even if this means some programme modification?

Table 1. outlines other skills for responding to inconsiderate behaviour associated with co-operation, collaboration and skill building. These are all pro-social skills and based on open and assertive communication (particularly listening skills) together with positive role modelling.

Although the guidance approach is very positive and pro-active, it requires that caregivers develop and sustain a positive assertive caregiving style. This doesn't mean that you have to be loud and aggressive – rather that you are honest, open and state your needs clearly. You are the role model for children in your care and, as early childhood professionals, we know how much children learn from imitating others. As Porter states:

*'.. there is no way that children will learn to control their feelings unless you do....Children will copy your example and learn to manage their feelings if you show them how.'*¹³

This places responsibility on you to ensure that you show children how to express all sorts of feelings – not just the happy ones. In fact, children have most difficulty with negative feelings, emotions and frustrations. These are the very things that lead to 'acting out' and 'poor behaviour'. They need lots of opportunities to observe you standing up for yourself and saying clearly if and when you don't like something.

Part of being a learning model involves the way in

¹¹ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 125. See also Boxed Section on 'Teach Children About Growing Up'.

¹² See Table 1.

¹³ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 110

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which you assert your own rights and protect the rights of other children. You need to talk to children in a tone of voice that lets them know that you expect to be taken seriously. Your non-verbal communication must give the same message. Without any hostility you must tell children when their behaviour interferes with your needs or others in the group. This gives them the information that they need to modify their own behaviour and take control of their emotions and feelings. It also provides a visible model of 'how to do it right'. **Do not tolerate intolerable or inconsiderate behaviour!**

'..When you are debating whether to respond to a particular behaviour, ask yourself whether anyone is being inconvenienced by it. If your rights or the rights of another child in the group are being violated, you have a right and a responsibility to take action to stop the behaviour'¹⁴

Table 2. summarises Porter's suggestions about the most useful skill to employ given differing circumstances:

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS ¹⁵

	The behaviour is disruptive	The behaviour is not interrupting the task or interfering with others
The child is in need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use listening skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the child doesn't want to talk, or its only a passing mood, do nothing.
The adult's or other children's needs are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use assertive skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If its only a difficulty, not a problem, do nothing.
Both adult and child have unmet needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate to find a solution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If it's a conflict of values: express your values without imposing them, or do nothing.

At times children will be inconsiderate for a variety of reasons - because they are tired, hungry, upset, or unwell. Even children who are normally considerate in their behaviour can, from time to time, be overwhelmed by their feelings. This is part of being a child and we know that 'two steps forward, one step back' is the way that many children develop and build new skills. If we consider that learning behavioural control and considerateness is a skill like any other, we will accept and understand children's progress toward skill development. We can help scaffold their learning.

When you decide to respond to a particular behaviour, be sensitive to the child's level of emotional distress. Don't try to reason with a child while they are being unreasonable! It will not work.

'When children are out of control of their feelings, their behaviour is a sign that they are already too stressed to listen to us. At times like this it will only make matters worse if you try to reason with them.'¹⁶

When children get out of control, our role as leader is to help them calm down enough to regain control of their feelings. We need to model a calm slow pace and demonstrate our acceptance of their ability to master their emotions.

¹⁴ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 111

¹⁵ Porter, L (1994) Children are People Too, Flinders University of South Australia, SA. p. 22

¹⁶ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 113

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TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT GROWING UP

'Growing up is a process of learning how to be boss of our feelings. Adults mostly have learnt that we can't act on every impulse. In contrast, young children think that if they feel something, then it's OK to act on it. This is part of normal development. However...they need to be beginning the life-long process of learning how to be in charge of what they do about their feelings.'

*So, I explain to a child that while his body - his outside - is getting taller, bigger, stronger, and so on, his insides might have forgotten to grow up. His feelings boss him around, and get him into trouble - or get him upset - as the case may be. Since he is growing up to be a kindy or school person shortly - or will be **this** old at his next birthday - now is the right time to start thinking about growing up on the inside as well.*

You cannot talk a child into growing up, or he will not want to do it. Also, you cannot give him ideas of how he can achieve it. All you can do is say that it will take him a lot of time to think about growing up, and that you are sure that part of him knows how to do it.

*While he is thinking about how to teach his feelings to grow up, you will help him when they get out of control.'*¹⁷

SUMMARY

Louise Porter believes that children rarely need 'information' about what they have done wrong, rather, they need practice in managing their feelings and staying in control. She believes that they are doing the best that they can with the information that they have; that learning to behave is a developmental skill like any other and that children need time and practice to acquire and master the skills associated with considerate

behaviour. Our role, as early childhood professionals, is to give children the support that they need to grow, develop and learn. The guidance approach to discipline is positive, developmental and based on helping children learn to be considerate of themselves and others.

SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS

If you are having difficulties with the behaviour of children in your care, consider discussing your issues and problems with your Regional Inclusion Support (SUPS) team. They are able to offer practical suggestions, advice and information about relevant local resources. If you are unsure which SUPS team covers your service, contact RUCSN. RUCSN can offer staff training if skill enhancement is required.

REFERENCES

Porter, L. (1999) **Young Children's Behaviour: Practical Approaches for Caregivers and Teachers**. MacLennan and Petty Pty Ltd, NSW.

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Porter, L. (1994) **Children Are People Too**, Flinders University of South Australia, SA.*

RUCSN (1999) **Teaching Children Considerate Behaviour**. (Video of Westlink training session 'The Roadshow', Duration 1 hour.)

* There is a revised second edition of this book that contains information not covered in the original edition. (Revised 1997).

This feature article was prepared by Lee Jeffery, Training and Resource Development Coordinator from information, material, notes and discussions with Louise Porter and RUCSN staff members. Any error, oversight or omission is regretted.

The contents of this fact sheet summarise the ideas and approach advocated by Louise Porter and not necessarily that of RUCSN. This fact was originally an article insert in the RUCSN Newsletter No 2. 1999.

¹⁷ Porter, L (1999) op. cit. p 125

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