

LET'S TALK ABOUT BEHAVIOUR

PART 1: BACK TO BASICS



FACT SHEET

Those of us who work in childcare and related fields are bombarded with information, terminology and apparently contradictory statements about children's behaviour and 'best practice' in behaviour management. We hear about non-directive discipline, behaviour management, behaviour modification and positive guidance approaches; we are advised to use encouragement rather than praise, to give choices and developmentally appropriate experiences; we are informed that discipline is 'out' and punishment is unacceptable but that children need to learn self-control and self-discipline. The terminology, words and labels applied to children's behaviour vary according to which book we read or to whom we talk. The end result is often information overload and uncertainty about what best to do and how best to do it!

Let's go back to basics!

Caregiving is a delightful, challenging and important job. To be a good caregiver you must be involved, empathic and able to take part in that magical world that is childhood. You must have the skill to really see and hear children - to understand what is happening beneath the surface. You must participate and enjoy your participation.

Your caregiving style is a reflection of the sort of person that you are. This style is uniquely your own. Every carer is different - we have different backgrounds, upbringing, values, and self-concept. Our temperaments vary as do our energy levels and degrees of emotional control.

Just as we vary greatly - so to do our care environments and the children for whom we care. Services differ in so many ways - in philosophy, structure, staff composition, environment, nature of care (centre or home based) to name but a few.

Every child is different. They have a unique personality, temperament, developmental rate, health pattern and way of relating to others.

Becoming aware of the individuality of everyone involved in the care environment highlights the demanding but rewarding nature of the caregiving

role. It reminds us that every situation and every person is different and that knowing only one way of relating to others will not result in successful caregiving.

When you are confronted with a child with difficult behaviour, you will often read or hear that you should take a problem solving approach, or a trial and error approach and that you need to 'do some observations' before you put strategies in place. This isn't because those offering advice or writing texts do not have helpful suggestions to make. It is not a 'cop out'. Rather, it is a recognition of the individuality of each set of circumstances and the need to know and understand specific situational dynamics. Taking a cookbook approach and applying a standard recipe when working with children just doesn't work. It does not provide positive support for caregivers or children.

Children have the same need as adults to feel important and significant, however they often don't have the same opportunities to have their needs met. Children's behaviour isn't random, it is purposeful and goal driven. They can't always communicate what they want - in fact they may not know what they want or may not have the language or cognitive awareness to tell us directly. Their behaviour is directed to satisfy some need for them. Most of their needs are legitimate - it is when these needs become excessive, frustrated or are not met (or when we move into the 'wants' rather than the needs) that 'problem behaviour' is generally noted.

Children also require stimulation, emotional release, interaction, mastery, security, and a sense of significance. At times children try to feel significant in ways that we decide are unacceptable. This is when poor behaviour, misbehaviour or - as it is beginning to be termed - **mistaken behaviour occurs**. To try to meet their own needs, children may misbehave or mistakenly behave. *They seem to be saying: 'If I can't be significant by being helpful or useful, then I will find other ways'*. According to the psychiatrist Rudolph Dreikur, children who **mistakenly behave** have one of four primary behavioural goals¹. These goals are attention seeking, power

¹ These goals form the basis of the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) programme.

Inadequacy and Avoidance.

Children don't enjoy failing and may avoid situations and circumstances where failure is a likely outcome; e.g. if activities are too hard, rules are too rigid, or they don't understand what is required of them. Children may become so discouraged that they withdraw and stop trying. Older children may develop school phobias, compulsive eating or psychosomatic illnesses. Often we feel helpless, uncertain of what to do and very discouraged. We may also give up on the child. This reinforces the child's feelings of inadequacy and they may become more passive. We must be very aware that children with additional needs may seek to avoid situations more so than typically developing children².

To determine how best to respond to individual children, we need to consider the goal of their behaviour, and the need or want that it is seeking to satisfy. We need to consider why some children seem to need - or want - more attention, power or security than others. We must address the underlying issues - not the immediate behaviour.

Let's consider some examples of possible responses to inappropriate behaviour.

Attention Seeking Behaviour

A possible response is to give constructive attention at appropriate times and ignore the misbehaviour. Making contracts such as 'when I am finished, then I will play with you' may be helpful. However, if we make contracts, it is essential that we are consistent and follow through. Unconstructive attention such as nagging should be avoided.

Power Seeking/Control Behaviour

Procedures to use when dealing with power issues include removing yourself from the area, enlisting the child's help with an activity or other

task, and providing situations where the child can use their power constructively, such as being in charge of something. Do not engage in a power struggle with the child because no one wins.

Revenge

This requires that we listen actively to children and avoid retaliation. It is also necessary for us to demonstrate our commitment to a process that entails mutual respect. Recognising that conflict is inevitable and being willing to compromise is also essential. This where we can model and teach problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

Displays of Inadequacy/Avoidance

This usually requires that we make a concerted effort to trust the child with small responsibilities and to build on all successes no matter how small. The child who feels inadequate needs a great deal of encouragement to develop self-confidence. We must also provide play experiences that enable the child to be successful. This is one important reason to offer unstructured 'process oriented' experiences rather than 'making' or 'doing' some specific product related activity.

It is important for the healthy development of children that they learn self-control and how to get along with others. This is part of growing up. Caring for children for long hours each day gives caregivers a wonderful opportunity to help shape, guide and nurture the behaviour of children.

A good understanding of children and child development together with your interest and skill in seeing things from their perspective is the basis for sound behavioural guidance. A solid foundation rests on your knowledge of typical child development, age/stage appropriate expectations and awareness of the interests of each child in your care. This will enable you to provide a stimulating and 'fun' environment for the child and a programme reflecting their interests, passions and enthusiasms with enough challenges and excitement to keep them on their toes.

² When children have skill deficits resulting from delays or disabilities, e.g. limited fine motor control, they may actively avoid instances where this skill deficit is evident. Such situational avoidance may take many forms including passive refusal to try/attempt activities, non-compliance with instructions, aggression or other externalising behaviours.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers are learning about the world around them. They ask lots of questions, and love to imitate adults. They are learning to share and take turns (but don't always want to). Sometimes they want to play with others, and sometimes they want to be alone. Preschoolers are also quite independent. They like to try new things and often take risks. Getting attention is fun; being ignored is not. Preschoolers like to make decisions for themselves and this helps them feel important. However they can get a little carried away and become rather bossy. They have lots of energy and play hard, fast, and furious. They may get tired suddenly and become irritable. Preschoolers spend a lot of time learning how to get along with others.

School-Agers

Although school-age children seem grown up, their social skills are not well developed. It's not uncommon for school-agers to argue and fight a great deal with friends. They need help learning the social skills involved with making friends, trusting others, working in a team, and resolving conflicts. Children also need to be taught to use good manners, ask for help, and negotiate with others. School-agers enjoy being "older" but may not like the responsibility that goes with getting older. Often they have to be reminded to do their homework or household chores. Learning self-discipline is an ongoing process that improves each year. School-agers often set standards for themselves that are frustratingly high or unsatisfyingly low. Children this age have not had much experience in setting and achieving goals or in measuring their own strengths and weaknesses. They need adults to provide experiences that are challenging yet achievable.

HOW CAN CAREGIVERS GUIDE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR?

We can do this best by providing an environment where problem behaviour doesn't occur (or is minimised), where children receive attention and encouragement for appropriate behaviour and where they can learn, grow and develop. We try to head off potential problem behaviours before they become difficult to manage. We try simultaneously to help children learn the skills to satisfy their needs in an acceptable manner.

How do we translate this ideal into practice?

One way is to focus on the factors that influence children's behaviour:

- the care environment
- the home environment and family
- child development (ages and stages) and
- the child's past experience of behavioural outcomes.

We have already briefly reviewed the ages and stages of development. The child's home environment and family are outside our direct control. Nonetheless, we need to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of how factors in the home environment and family influence a child's behaviour. As caregivers, however, our primary area of influence is within our own service.

THE CARE ENVIRONMENT

We need to review both the physical and human environment of our service. This includes the organisation and content of the programme as well as the way that adults and children interact. Consider your service and ask yourself the following questions.

- Do I pay more attention to appropriate or inappropriate behaviour?
- Am I consistent in my expectations for each child?
- Are my expectations consistent for all children?
- Are my instructions geared to the 'understanding level' of each child?
- Am I willing to follow through on my

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instructions i.e. impose limits and apply consequences as necessary?

- ⦿ Does my programme content engage the interest of all the children?
- ⦿ Does my programme content meet the needs of individual children?
- ⦿ Are my transitions well planned and structured?

Honest answers to these questions will help pinpoint areas for your own skill enhancement and helpful environmental changes.

'Other elements of the childcare environment that must be examined include the programme, routines, physical environment, philosophy, and service culture. The childcare environment may set the scene for difficult behaviour by being over/understimulating, intrusive, poorly resourced, inflexible, and lacking clear limits. In addition, caregivers may not meet children's needs for attachment and interaction.'³

We need to have an awareness of the best strategies to apply to increase the chances of children's positive behaviour. The following ideas and strategies are positive, pro-active and designed to inhibit and prevent the occurrence of problem behaviour.

IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

1. Acknowledge and Encourage Positive Behaviour

The best indicator of how a child will behave in any given situation is how they have behaved in the past. For example, if Tim is restless and inattentive at 'mat time', he is likely to continue to be restless and inattentive until something changes. We need to discover what Tim needs, and how we can meet his needs. He may be seeking to be noticed (attention seeking), he may be bored (session lacking in interest for him) or he may not have the necessary skills to sit and listen. Knowing the goal of his behaviour usually leads to a natural solution with a twofold outcome that:

- ⦿ prevents the problem behaviour, and

- ⦿ teaches new desirable behaviours to achieve the same outcome for the child.

In the above example, let's assume that Tim's goal was attention. To reduce his inappropriate behaviour we should focus on increasing our level of attending to (reinforcing) appropriate behaviour. We could notice and encourage his sitting behaviour or posture, or his initial involvement and participation. This concentrates on Tim's positive behaviours and help him learn 'the rules for mat time'. At the same time he receives adult attention - his apparent behavioural goal. We should also give Tim attention throughout the day when we see him engage in positive behaviour or interactions with others. This highlights for Tim the connection between adult attention and positive pro-social behaviour. In simple terms '**catch him doing something good**'. This is the single most important strategy that any caregiver can use.

Children learn to behave in certain ways. Their behaviour will be strengthened (reinforced) if it is successful in achieving what they want, i.e. if the consequences are desirable. Consider a further example. Suzie tantrums when she wants her favourite toy and it is being used by another child. She has not yet developed either the communication skills to ask for the toy or the social skills to share it. She sees a tantrum as the most effective way to get the toy – not necessarily because she '**reasons**' that a tantrum will work but because she has learned that they **have worked in the past**.

As caregivers, we need to help children learn new ways of achieving their goals. Recognising and attending to desirable behaviour increases the likelihood that it will be repeated. When we provide verbal acknowledgment and encouragement we are most effective when we are specific and positive. For example, say '*Max... great toy sharing*' rather than '*Good boy, Max*'; or '*You packed away without being asked. Thankyou.*' rather than '*Thank you for being a helper*'. Specific encouragement helps children to identify and learn the precise behaviour that we are seeking to encourage.

'If the child cannot readily perform the new behaviour, effort must be expended to teach,

³ Kilpatrick, Y. (1998) *Problem Behaviour in Childcare: a Literature Review*. Unpublished Paper, p 3.

model, coach and reinforce it over a period of time. Furthermore, the environment may need to be rearranged so that the new behaviour does actually meet the child's needs. If the new behaviour is unsuccessful, the child is likely to revert to the old behaviour.'⁴

2. Teach Pro-social Skills

Children who regularly exhibit problem or difficult behaviour often lack the skills to interact with others. One important strategy for caregivers is to teach children pro-social skills. This includes the skills involved in joining and participating in groups and play situations, resolving conflicts, turn taking and sharing. It also includes assertive communication skills and learning about teamwork and co-operation.

Children with poor social skills often have few friends and are avoided by other children in the care environment. This reduces their opportunities to learn about appropriate social interaction and to practise 'getting it right'.

'Caregivers can help children learn to recognise and label their emotions, consider other's needs, learn problem solving skills, consider non-hostile interpretations of social signals, and consider the consequences of their actions.'⁵

3. Model positive behaviour and language

Children learn through imitation, repetition and play. As carers we must ensure that we '**be what we want to see**'. Whether we like it or not, we are role models for the children in our care. The way we interact with others – adults and children alike – sets the scene for their learning. We must ensure our language and behaviour provides a positive example. Tell children what to do. Avoid telling them what not to do! Use clear statements that give children information about what is expected. Negative statements don't provide the information that children need to learn.

4. Build your relationship with each child

Children have a need for security and attachment. This gives them the confidence to explore their world and learn from a 'safe' base. This sense of security lets them take risks and chances and also helps the development of healthy self esteem. Caregivers must get close to children and allow attachment rather than holding children at an emotional distance. We must get to know them and develop a real relationship with them. Keep up to date with their significant family events, likes, dislikes, interests and enthusiasms and then use this knowledge in developing your programme.

5. Be involved and participate

Sit in the sandpit and join in the play! Demonstrate, model and coach appropriate language and social interaction. Use pragmatic communication skills.⁶ Don't just say '*Use your words*'. Help children learn the appropriate words to use by requesting or using more specific language such as '*Do you want something*' or '*What are you trying to tell me?*'. Listen actively to children's communication. Consider the following example:

CHILD:

John won't let me play with the bike!

CAREGIVER:

Sounds like you're cross about that.

CHILD:

Yeah, he's mean!

CAREGIVER:

Mmm

CHILD:

I had it first!

CAREGIVER:

You were playing with it before John?

CHILD:

Yeah, he took it.

CAREGIVER:

I wonder why?

CHILD:

⁴ Kilpatrick, Y. op cit, p 6.

⁵ Kilpatrick, Y. op cit, p 6.

⁶ Pragmatic communication skills relate to the social aspects of language rather than the actual words. It includes eye contact, body language and all other non-verbal cues. It is very important to help children understand and learn the meaning and intent of communication.

He wanted a go.

CAREGIVER:

I wonder how both of you could play with the bike.?

CHILD:

Maybe John could ride and I could be policeman.

This shows a caregiver trying to understand the problem as well as the child's feelings. The caregiver encourages the conversation and, with time and support, helps the child explore the situation, understand the problem, and (hopefully) offer a solution. Sometimes young children may not need an adult to intervene. Instead they may need someone to listen and help them sort out their problems.

6. Set clear and fair limits and enforce them consistently

Children need to know what is and is not acceptable. We need to establish clear and fair rules and behavioural limits. These must be applied in a consistent way. Caregivers must be firm yet flexible when maintaining the behavioural limits of their service.

Children will learn best when the consequences of 'breaking the rules' are clearly known and understood. Natural and logical consequences are very effective in helping children see the connection between their actions and the results of their behaviour. For example, the natural consequence of refusing to eat is going hungry. The natural consequence of dropping your sandwich in the water trolley is that it gets wet. Logical consequences require some adult input but make sense in the context in which they are applied. For example, a logical consequence of Tony's refusal to help pack away the bikes might be not being allowed to play with the bikes for a set period of time. A caregiver might say:

'Looks like you've forgotten how to help pack away. When you remember how to do this, then you can play with the bikes again.'

The following examples also illustrate the use of natural or logical consequences:

- Three-year-old Theresa says 'Yuck!' and throws her muffin across the room. Her caregiver calmly picks it up and puts it in the bin. Theresa goes without morning tea and is not offered 'seconds'.
- Five-year-old Tara and 4-year-old James are squabbling. Their caregiver says, 'Looks like you two are having trouble getting along. Find

something that you can play with together, or you will have to play in different areas. I'll wait while you decide.'

Whatever your chosen consequences, they must be known and understood by the children in your care. They must also be consistently applied.

7. Redirection/ distraction

This technique works especially well with very young children. When a child is doing something unacceptable, intervene and re-direct them to another activity. Our goal is to distract the child and, since young children's attention spans are very short, this is frequently an effective option. However re-direction on its own is not enough! We need to ensure that we simultaneously teach and reinforce appropriate behaviour.

8. Planned Ignoring

Behaviour that is primarily attention seeking can be ignored as long as it is not harming anyone. Our goal is to have children stop undesirable behaviour because we are not paying attention to it. This is most effective with older toddlers and preschoolers. Planned ignoring requires that we withhold all attention, encouragement, and support from the child whilst they engage in the problem behaviour. This can be very hard and you may need to physically distance yourself, turn your back or busily engage in another task to ensure that you do not respond. As soon as the child ceases the problem behaviour, return your attention. It can be useful to provide some 'verbal back up' to reinforce the desired behaviour. For example, Michael was 'whining' and you were ignoring this. He ceased and began talking in his 'typical' voice. You could say 'I really like to listen to you when you talk in your real voice'. This helps Michael learn how to gain attention in an acceptable way. Make sure that you reinforce this same idea at different times of the day in different ways if you wish to see any reduction in whining. Simultaneously, attend to positive communication and behaviour from him. In planned ignoring, remember that you are ignoring the behaviour not the child.

9. Make it worthwhile to behave appropriately

Children will only behave appropriately if it is worth their while to do so – if their needs and

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wants are met. One of the most effective strategies for dealing with difficult behaviour is simply to make sure that the child receives enough reinforcement for all the appropriate things they do. Encouragement and reinforcement can take the form of social or material rewards or reinforcement.

Social reinforcement makes a child feel special and includes such things as smiles, verbal acknowledgment, pats and hugs, attention and careful listening. If you smile and nod when children help pack away, they may learn that cleaning up is valued and appreciated.

Material reinforcements (Rewards) are objects that children desire. Money, lollies, toys, stickers, star charts, etc., are all material rewards. These too can be used to reinforce desired behaviours but have some long-term drawbacks. Children can become too focussed on the reward and refuse to behave properly without it. Frequent use of material rewards can teach children to bargain for more frequent and/or bigger payoffs. Children can learn to place significant importance on the reward itself rather than on their behaviour or the consequences of their behaviour. A child who is rewarded with a 'star' every time he helps clean up begins to place more importance on the star than on the feeling of accomplishment or achievement. If we use material rewards, we need to fade them out before they 'take over'. We also need to re-focus on teaching children to value social reinforcement.

OVERVIEW

If we focus consistently on the 'positives' of our interactions with children we create an environment where children receive attention and encouragement for 'doing something good' and have many of their needs met through pro-social behaviour. Our relationship and interactions with children will be enhanced when we 'look for the good' and find it in the children for whom we care. We will probably also discover that our work is more enjoyable and rewarding. It will be less stressful. We will then remember why we work in childcare – because it is an important job, because we care for and enjoy children and we can be a positive influence on their growth and development.

At times, however, some children will have problem behaviours that need more specific management strategies. This may be because

these behaviours are entrenched, or because they are very challenging and/or disruptive. They may not respond to the positive preventative ideas and strategies noted above. The feature article in the next edition (January 1999) of our newsletter - **Let's Talk About Behaviour; Part 2: Problem Behaviour in Childcare** – will focus on strategies to deal with problem behaviour in the childcare context.

SUMMARY

Strategies to promote positive behaviour

- Notice and encourage desirable behaviour.
- Know your children.
- Teach pro-social skills.
- Model positive behaviour and language.
- Build your relationship with each child.
- Be involved and participate.
- Set clear, fair and consistent limits.
- Re-direct and distract children where possible.
- Ignore attention-seeking behaviour.
- Make it worthwhile to behave appropriately.

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 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 for further details. SUPS teams and RUCSN can offer staff training if skill enhancement is required. Please telephone to discuss your requirements.

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This feature article was prepared by Lee Jeffery, Training and Resource Development Co-ordinator from information, material notes and ideas from past and present RUCSN staff.

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For further information and advice, contact CHILD Australia.

5 Carson Road, Malaga WA 6090

Telephone: 08 9249 4333 ● Facsimile: 08 9249 4366

Email: admin@childaustralia.org.au ● Website: <http://www.childaustralia.org.au>

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