How to... Support children’s positive behaviour
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The term “supporting children’s positive behaviour” may sound like an obvious phrase and something that would naturally occur when working in early years, but the importance of laying the foundations of how these young people will behave as they grow older can never be underestimated.

The manner in which we act, speak and treat other people is what forms our behaviour. Those children who have a positive social and emotional development are more likely to make friends, settle into school with fewer problems, and understand how to behave appropriately in different situations. This crucial development will allow them to have strong self-esteem and a good sense of self-worth, but also grow feelings of empathy for others. They can have a good understanding of what boundaries are and why they are needed.

How children are guided in their behaviour will have a significant impact on current and later success - in terms of social skills development, education and employment.

Policies and procedures

Let’s start with the more formal requirements. Every setting should have what’s called a ‘behaviour policy’ and each will be different; specific to the aims and needs of that particular setting. However, in all cases, it should include guidelines for promoting positive behaviour in both children and adults. A behaviour policy will help staff understand that children need to develop the positive skills and attributes of:

- Self-respect and self-esteem.
- Consideration and empathy for others.
- Social skills, e.g. being able to negotiate with others; and problem-solving.

The behaviour policy should also include guidance in two important areas:

- Promoting appropriate behaviour to the children in the setting.
- Discouraging inappropriate behaviour in the setting.

To help your team keep on track to achieve these aims, it’s a good idea to include specific procedures for them to follow, for example:

- Being a positive role model: showing the children what is appropriate behaviour in the setting, by yourself setting a positive example in your own behaviour.
- Showing respect to children, young people and other adults: by the way you listen, your facial expression, your body language and by what you say.
The EYFS requires that “children’s behaviour must be managed effectively and in a manner appropriate for their stage of development and particular individual needs”.

**Code of conduct**

If you are an owner or manager of an early years setting, you need to ensure you have a Code of Conduct in place to clearly lay out your expectations for your nursery and principles for acceptable workplace behaviour. A Code of Conduct is essential to assist staff by offering guidance on reasonable conduct with children. Schools are also legally required to have policies and procedures in place to identify and prevent bullying. Codes of conduct generally form part of a setting’s behaviour policy and these relate to the behaviour of staff as well as to the behaviour of children.

Having a Code of Conduct in place for your team will provide extra guidance as and when the occasion arises for dealing with inappropriate behaviour, for example:

- Keeping calm when dealing with inappropriate behaviour.
- Listening to both sides of the story when there is conflict and apologising if you have made a mistake.
- Being consistent when dealing with inappropriate behaviour.
- Making sure that you do not make any negative comments in front of the children.

Many settings have ways of rewarding positive behaviour and use sanctions to discourage inappropriate behaviour. We will look at that in more detail later on.

The main features of a Code of Conduct for children deal with issues such as fairness and taking turns, playing safely and not bullying - we’ve listed some of the key issues below.
Dealing with conflict and inappropriate behaviour

Everyone working with children needs to be clear about what is meant by ‘inappropriate behaviour’ - this is why it is so important to have a behaviour policy. Practitioners must follow the Code of Conduct by dealing with conflict in a fair and consistent way.

The importance of being fair and consistent

It is important that everyone in the setting is both fair and consistent when dealing with children’s behaviour. When you are fair and consistent in your response to inappropriate behaviour, the child’s sense of security and knowledge of right from wrong will be reinforced. The adult response to inappropriate behaviour should be the same, every time that behaviour occurs.

Consistency in applying the boundaries is also important, especially where children need to relate to several adults. If you are supervising an activity, the children will expect you to apply the same rules as other staff. It undermines your own position if you allow unacceptable behaviour and another staff member has to discipline the children you are working with.

Rules and targets

Your policy should explain the rules that are applied, and how children will be helped to understand and learn to keep them. In most cases, the rules are simple and reflect the concerns for safety and for children to be considerate of others and their environment. They should be appropriate for the age and stage of development of the children and for the particular needs of your setting. Rules apply to the forms of behaviour that are encouraged and cover physical, social and verbal aspects.

Rules – or targets – should be realistically set for the child’s age and stage of development.

Examples of rules or targets for a child aged four to five years are to:

- Say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’.
- Share play equipment.
- Tidy up.
- Be quiet and listen for short periods (such as story time or register time).

Boundaries

These are the limits within which behaviour is acceptable – they identify what may, and may not, be done or said. Children need to understand the consequences of not acting within those boundaries. It is important that the boundaries are appropriate for the age and stage of development. Examples of boundaries for young children are that they may:

- Play outside – but must not tread on the flowerbeds.
- Watch television – but only until tea is ready.
- Use the dressing-up clothes – if they put them away when they have finished.
Stages of behavioural development

The following stages of behavioural development are, of course, linked only loosely to the ages shown. As with any normative measures, they serve only as a rough guide to help understand children’s behaviour and how best to respond to it. Much will depend upon children’s experiences and the way in which they have been helped to develop effective relationships.

Linking behaviour to child development

When it comes to assessing the children’s behaviour, it is important to bear these developmental stages in mind and to view the behaviour in the context of overall development. For example, it is a well-known fact that tantrums are a common, even expected, feature of a two-year-old child’s behaviour. There is bound to be some cause for concern, however, if they are a regular feature of a six-year-old child’s behaviour.

Factors affecting behaviour

It is also well known that behaviour is commonly affected by certain factors that are out of the children’s control, for example:

- Illness.
- Accident and injury.
- Tiredness.

Other factors result from situations that occur, also out of their control, for example:

- The arrival of a new baby.
- Moving house.
- Parental separation or divorce.
- Change of carer – either at home or in a setting.
- Loss or bereavement.
- Change of setting – such as the transition from home to nursery or nursery to school.

Individual children will respond to these situations differently but regression is common (usually temporary) when they revert to behaviour that is immature for them. Events that they do not understand will leave them confused, leading to frustration and aggressive outbursts, or they may blame themselves, which could result in withdrawn behaviour and the development of inappropriate habits through anxiety.
Generally, any factor that causes stress may result in the child:

- Needing more comfort and attention.
- Being less sociable.
- Being unable to cope with tasks that they would normally manage.
- Being subject to mood swings.
- Being unable to concentrate (this includes listening to instructions) and less able to cope with challenging situations and difficulties.

So, to help you pre-empt and manage these situations, try putting these strategies in place:

- Set clear boundaries, which can be applied in a calm and consistent way.
- Encourage children to make their own choices about behaviour – and to understand the negative consequences if they choose inappropriate behaviour.
- Set ‘positive’ rules rather than ‘negative’ ones. Negative rules tend to begin with the word ‘Don’t’, and tell children what they must not do, but do not guide them as to what they may or should do.

**Skills and techniques for supporting and encouraging positive behaviour**

Here, we look at how we can understand behaviour, and in doing so, it’s helpful to note whether there are particular incidents or situations that seem to trigger inappropriate behaviour. Some of these can be avoided altogether by minor changes in routine or approach, but others, such as siblings or peers teasing each other, will occur frequently. It’s not just adults that need strategies in place - children also need to be given strategies and support to be able to cope with them effectively.

It is important never to reject the child but only what the child has done (for example, ‘That was an unkind thing to say’ rather than ‘You are unkind’).

**Remember... the A-B-C of behaviour**

- **Antecedent**: what happens before, or leads up to, the observed behaviour
- **Behaviour**: the observed behaviour - what the child says and how he or she acts (this is any behaviour, both positive and negative)
- **Consequence**: what happens following the observed behaviour

As a childcare practitioner, you observe children’s behaviour on a daily basis (whether or not you make a written record) in order to contribute to discussions and develop positive practice in managing inappropriate aspects. In your setting, you should try to see not only how other staff and parents deal with incidents, but also which methods seem to be effective with which children.
Using rewards

Rewards work on the principle of positive reinforcement – based on the idea that if children receive approval and/or a reward for behaving acceptably, they are likely to want to repeat that behaviour. If one child is praised (for example, for tidying up) others are often influenced to copy or join in so that they, too, will receive praise and attention. For young children, the reward must be immediate so that they understand the link between it and the positive behaviour. It is of little value to promise a treat or reward in the future. Similarly, star charts and collecting points are not appropriate for children younger than five years old.

There are different forms of reward:

- Verbal praise (such as ‘well done’).
- Attention: this could be non-verbal (smile of approval, a nod)
- Stars or points (for older children) leading to certificates or for group recognition.
- Sharing success by telling other staff and parents.
- Own choice of activity or story
- Tangible rewards such as stickers.

But... are rewards really a good thing?

There could be potential problems associated with rewards in that some children may behave in a particular way purely to receive the reward rather than from an understanding of the need to consider safety, others and their environment or enjoying what they have achieved for its own sake. The type of reward also needs to be considered; for example, is it desirable for children to be given sweets as rewards? Some parents may have strong views about this.

Rewards might work in the short term, but do not always succeed in the long term. Some suggest that they might even undermine lifelong learning by encouraging children to constantly seek reward, rather than have the desire to learn because something is interesting.

Providing an effective role model

Children learn about positive behaviour – such as sharing and saying ‘thank you’ – by watching others. They can also learn about inappropriate behaviours – such as being unwilling to share and swearing – from watching adults. It may sound obvious, but we need to act as a positive role model for children by showing positive behaviour at all times.
Children who seek attention will challenge your patience, but with regular reminding about turn-taking, and clear expectation that they will do so, they can learn to wait for their turn. It is important to give attention when they have waited appropriately so that they are encouraged to do so again. You could try the following strategies:

- Whenever possible, ignore attention-seeking behaviour!
- Distract the child’s attention - this is particularly appropriate with younger children.
- Remove the child and place in another activity or group.
- Express disapproval – verbally and/or non-verbally through body language, frowning and shaking of the head.
- Use a sanction – withdrawal of a privilege (such as removing a toy or activity).

We have explored many ways to promote positive behaviour, but what about inappropriate behaviour? The behaviour that goes against the ethos of the setting? It’s worth remembering that this behaviour may be demonstrated not just through speech, but also non-verbal behaviour or physical abuse and includes:

- Attention-seeking.
- Aggression (both physical and verbal) towards others.
- Self-destructive behaviour or self-harming.

Children will do just about anything to get the attention they crave from those who care for them. This is often shown through disruptive or aggressive behaviour and it needs managing. Sometimes children who are trying to please can be just as disruptive. Those who desperately want adults to notice them will call out, interrupt, ask questions and frequently push in front of other children to show something they have made or done.

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These are usually associated with children around two years of age but can occur in older children too. They are so common that some practitioners would not describe tantrums as ‘inappropriate’ behaviour in toddlers because they will happen in all children. They generally happen when a child is tired or even ill, but they are also often the result of a build-up from an argumentative situation when the child is asked to do something (or not to do something) and so begins a battle of wills!

As you will no doubt know, temper tantrums generally involve lots of shouting and crying and refusal to co-operate. This mounting anger is shown through stamping, kicking, screaming and hitting – and, on occasion - self-harm. In the younger children tantrums can be over quickly - sometimes just as quick as they start - but in older children, it can take longer to reach the ‘peak’ and also longer to calm down afterwards.

As a childcare practitioner, it is highly unlikely that you will never experience a child in your care having a tantrum - but these few techniques have the potential to avoid one and also ease the situation when it does happen. They provide great tips to pass on to parents too!
Avoiding:

- Give plenty of positive attention.
- Try to give the little ones some control over the little things.
- Keep those objects that are off-limits out of sight and out of reach. Out of sight, out of mind!
- Try to distract from the things they are insistent on and suggest alternatives.
- Help the children learn new skills and succeed in things.
- Consider the request very carefully when the child wants something.
- Know the child’s limits.
- Be realistic when promising something.

In the moment:

- Try to find out why the tantrum is happening.
- Try to understand and accept the child’s anger.
- Wait for it to stop - as difficult as that is!
- Don’t change your mind and give in.
- Try holding the child firmly until the tantrum passes.

Sources and further information:

NHS UK
Kidshealth.org
Cache Level 2 introduction to Early Years
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