

MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

In understanding children, particularly those whose behaviour is negative and disruptive, it is necessary that early childhood educators have some knowledge of the psychological principles behind behaviour. Alfred Adler (1957), whose theories of personality development are the basis of *Individual Psychology*, stated that the basic motivation behind all social behaviour is the desire to belong; to be accepted and to contribute. *Individual Psychology* recognises people as active decision makers, as purposeful and goal-oriented individuals, relatively free to determine their own behaviour. Rudolf Dreikurs (1985) suggests that behaviour is best understood from this teleological approach. Children have a need for recognition, a need to be noticed. Challenging and disruptive behaviour is often an attempt to meet this subconscious need.

Influences on behaviour

Children do not grow up in isolation - all behaviour such as language, play, emotion and skills are learnt and developed in social situations such as the home, early childhood centre and school. Beginning at birth, as they seek to understand and respond to the environment around them, children develop a unique pattern of behaviour which becomes their personality and part of their lifestyle. Young children operate on a trial and error basis, evaluating each experience in terms of their own perceptions of its consequences. This is referred to as the child's 'private logic' because, even though the interpretation may be inaccurate, their perceptions make sense to them. By the time children are about five or six years old, this lifestyle perception becomes stable.

Understanding behaviour

Early childhood practitioners can best understand behaviour by using a holistic approach within each social setting, rather than looking at misbehaviour as a series of isolated incidents. Children perceive themselves as 'belonging' according to the responses that they have gained from significant people at home, day care, family day care, kindergarten or school. Disruptive behaviour can be attention seeking, or it may be a means of challenging, or seeking to get back at an adult. As stated earlier, even young children are purposeful and goal-oriented individuals. Antisocial behaviour is often their way of seeking a place in the classroom, based on the mistaken perception (private logic) that they cannot belong through constructive, co-operative or acceptable means.

Not all 'difficult' behaviour is intentional however, as certain

negative behaviours are developmentally appropriate, even though non-acceptable. For example, a two-year-old child will be likely to physically push another child wanting to use his or her toys, because most two-year olds are in a developmental stage of egocentricity and autonomy. This does not mean that adults accept pushing and hitting behaviour, rather that they respond to it in a calm, well thought-out manner such as redirection. If adults respond firmly yet calmly, then children receive minimal or no reinforcement for their negative behaviour.

Challenging behaviours may also be brought on through inappropriate planning or thoughtless room set up. Rather than simply blaming the misbehaving child, it is also important to examine ourselves, our planning and our own responses to the behaviour.

Associated problems

Although they are usually unaware of their goals, children will continue to repeat behaviours which are reinforced, or given recognition. Thus, if they believe that they only receive acknowledgement or 'belong' to the group when behaving in this manner, then these inappropriate behaviours will continue. The chart below illustrates children's inappropriate goal-directed behaviour. Adults can learn to recognise these mistaken goals by examining their own feelings (see chart) when the behaviour occurs. It is only when children with difficult behaviours receive different responses from those around them that their behaviour will change.

Children are sometimes (inadvertently) categorised as difficult, and everyone - teachers and other children - expects them to misbehave. Consequently their behaviour may become more and more challenging, as they feel themselves being increasingly excluded and rejected. Unfortunately, their inappropriate behaviour can make providing inclusive activities more difficult for teachers and caregivers.

When adults accept that anti-social behaviour and misbehaviour are children's expressions of belonging, based on their mistaken private logic, or faulty belief, that they cannot belong through constructive, co-operative or acceptable means, then steps can be taken to plan for changed responses. It is this mistaken belief that adults will be attempting to change, in order to deal with children's challenging behaviour. To change a child's behaviour, it is necessary to firstly change adults' customary way of responding.

With this understanding, and in light of the framework below, teachers and caregivers can learn to respond appropriately in order to guide children in a co-operative, respectful manner.

Step by step management of challenging behaviour

1. Promoting self-esteem

Plan for a relationship with children that shows they are valued and trusted. Acknowledge each child, making him or her feel welcome, assist children in developing friendships and encourage co-operative play together. Children are less likely to misbehave when they feel worthwhile and competent.

2. Focus on positive behaviours

Ensure the focus is on positive behaviours and attitudes more than inappropriate behaviours, without comparing children or inadvertently encouraging competition. This may require the adult to 'redirect' a misbehaving child to another activity where he or she can legitimately let out angry or frustrated feelings. It is inappropriate to simply direct a child elsewhere without taking into account the feelings that the behaviour exhibits.

3. Set limits. Use choices and consequences

Make sure all children, but particularly the challenging child, have the opportunity to be involved in decisions about limits. If necessary, redirect them as a consequence of inappropriate behaviour.

Consequences should be directly linked to the behaviour, and time-out as a rejection should never be used. However some children do need 'space alone' play experiences, where they can be at an activity without having to be close to others.

4. Be firm but fair

As the adult, it is your responsibility to ensure a safe environment, so you need to make sure your limits are clear. Use a pleasant, but firm, voice and respect the child's needs whilst maintaining consequences as described above.

Make sure you have planned for the challenging child's needs, particularly identifying their need to 'belong'. (2004).

The following chart can be used to provide a framework for managing challenging behaviours across a range of ages and behaviours.

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References

- Adler, A. (1957). *Understanding human behaviour*. New York: Fawcett.
- Dreikurs, R. (1985). *Happy children: a challenge to parents* (Tenth edn). Great Britain: Fontana.
- Harrison, J. (2004). *Understanding children: foundations for quality*. Melbourne: ACER.
- The information in this article, *Managing challenging behaviour*, is further elaborated in Jeannette Harrison's latest book, *Understanding children: foundations for quality* (2004).

| Child's mistaken or faulty belief | Child's Goal | Adult's Feeling & Reaction | Alternative Response for Adult |
|--|--------------------------------|--|--|
| I belong only when I am noticed or being served. | Attention (Demanding). | Feeling: annoyed, frustrated. Typical Reaction: remind & coax. | Ignore misbehaviour when possible and give attention and encouragement for positive behaviour. Set and maintain limits without giving undue attention. |
| I belong only when I am in control or I am boss. | Power (Controlling) | Feeling: angry, provoked, threatened. Typical Reaction: fight with child or give in. | Withdraw from the conflict - set and maintain limits using consequences. Help child use power in a constructive and co-operative way. Fighting or giving in only increases child's goal. |
| I belong only by hurting others as I feel hurt. | Revenge (Hurting) | Feeling: deeply hurt, humiliation Typical Reaction: retaliate and 'get even' or use sarcasm. | Avoid feeling hurt. Accept encouragement from other adults to build up your self-esteem. Build a trusting relationship and encourage the child. Avoid punishment but use consequences. |
| I belong only by convincing others not to expect anything from me I am unable to give. | Assumed Inadequacy (Giving up) | Feeling: despair, helplessness, giving up. Typical Reaction: go along with child's behaviour. | Stop all criticism Encourage positive attempts - no matter how small. Use encouragement, not praise. Be careful not to pity the child and give up. |