

# Turning tantrums into healthy learning

One of the biggest issues early childhood educators face today is the increasing complexity experienced by families coming into the centres, with young children expressing 'big' behaviours. It's often beyond the scope of what most early childhood educators were prepared for in their training.

Before starting primary school teaching, I completed a psychology degree and was working in a psychology clinic. This experience has helped me in the classroom and informed the way I have developed support programs for early learning professionals at The Benevolent Society over the last 11 years.

We were first approached in the early 2000s to help an inner city Sydney learning centre that was really struggling with the complexity of children's behaviours coming into the centre, as well as social problems experienced by the parents.

When we started to work with the staff, they were dealing with three- and four-year-olds who had very big tantrums—outbursts that could hurt other children and educators. The staff had very poor opinions of these children and their behaviour, and even believed the children were acting violently intentionally to upset them.

We first needed to create empathy—to help the educators see that when a child behaves in that way, they're actually not having a good time, they're distressed and they're out of control. If an adult meets that state with a disciplinary approach, anger or feels out of control themselves, the emotions just escalate and the child doesn't learn how to regulate their own behaviour.

If we want anyone to behave in a different way, we have to give them a new behaviour model.

We developed our Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) program from this first experience, which involves placing a Family Support

worker in an early learning or childcare centre to coach the staff to understand the social and emotional world of the child and respond to their underlying needs, rather than react to their behaviour.

When this program was evaluated by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales, it found that participating children showed improved social and emotional development; a decrease in peer problems (such as being picked on) and conduct problems (such as lying or fighting); and an increase in pro-social behaviours like sharing, helping and cooperating (The Benevolent Society, 2010).

'... when a child behaves in that way, they're actually not having a good time, they're distressed ...'

In our most recent PIEC project working with childcare centres in South Australia, one early childhood professional described her own revelation:

*We had one little girl who we thought was a bully and a biter. Every time an incident happened we would straight away get frustrated at this child. But we filmed her and only for maybe 30 seconds, maybe a minute, we finally saw that all she was trying to do was make friends and she was getting frustrated. It was a beautiful video and it was so clear what was going on for that little girl ... That was just one of those wow moments.*

At the Benevolent Society, we've found that the biggest challenge for early learning educators in developing this more empathic approach to their students is integrating a relationships-based approach from child psychology and social sciences with their own early childhood education training.

That's why we've also found putting a Family Support worker in the centre to support the staff for 12 hours a week has been so effective. They coach and support the staff in the approach of being more socially and emotionally available to children and to support their development.

Another program that we run called Strengths Based Practice (SBP) is very successful because it brings educators together, to talk, to implement new approaches together and to change their practice.

The first time we ran the SBP program we worked with 45 centres in Eastern Sydney. We invited the leaders of the centres into



Subscribe today!  
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/shop/product/every-child

learning circles to discuss how they could implement new strategies in their centres over a period of 12–18 months. This enables them to be responsive to the needs of the community, the needs of parents, the needs of children, and build the capacity of staff at the same time.

One example of a new approach is asking educators to call the parents of each child in their class and tell them something that they appreciate about their child. At first parents are a bit shocked about getting a call out of the blue, but most of our educators said that the next time they saw the parent they said, 'Thank you, that really made my day'. Even that simple practice started to change the expectation of parents about hearing from the early childhood centre—that it's going to be good news, instead of bad—and that's improved positive relationships between staff and parents.

We're really keen to help shift thinking and practice so that we all see early childhood education centres as being key sites for early intervention—of putting in a range of supports for children and families before problems escalate.

**Greg Antcliff**  
Director Professional Practice  
The Benevolent Society

**Reference**  
The Benevolent Society. (2010). Evaluation of the Benevolent Society's partnerships in early childhood program. *Research Snapshot August 2010*. Retrieved 1 September, 2014 from [www.benevolent.org.au/PIEC](http://www.benevolent.org.au/PIEC).  
Further reading <http://benevolent.org.au/resilience>.

**Rattler**  
Community Child Care Co-operative NSW QUARTERLY JOURNAL  
& Read relate!  
[www.cccnsw.org.au/rattler](http://www.cccnsw.org.au/rattler)