Guiding children's behaviour

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Guiding children's behaviour remains a challenge for many educators, and is one of the most frequently requested workshop topics.

It is also the workshop from which educators are most likely to leave disappointed. Perhaps this is because educators attend to collect strategies to guide children's behaviour in the same way they collect ideas for their learning spaces or craft activities. While good ideas can be effective, not all good ideas work in behaviour guidance.

The explanation is simple.

Our behaviour guidance strategies need to be consistent with our beliefs about the way children learn to behave.

To enable us to adopt and implement new strategies on behaviour guidance, we need to clarify what we believe about the way children learn to behave.

Clarifying beliefs

The National Quality Framework (NQF) draws upon findings that human beings are born with a need to belong, and to be valued and respected by others. The NQF identifies educators as pivotal in helping children satisfy their need to belong, and in scaffolding children's relationships with others.

Since our behaviour guidance strategies must be consistent with the NQF, these strategies need to facilitate children's desire to belong and also uphold their dignity. We would not use behaviour guidance strategies that would in any way better one child's social standing over that of another. An example is 'parallel praise' where one child is praised so others copy that child's behaviour. "Wow, Jamie! I like the way you're packing up the blocks" (said so that other children will imitate Jamie).

Also consistent with the NQF is the understanding that social skills are complex; acquiring and perfecting them is a work-in-progress for us all. Everyone makes mistakes, especially young children. In Gartrell's Young Children article, 'Misbehaviour or mistaken behaviour', he reasons that the social experiences of children are limited and their thinking skills are still developing.

Identifying our role

Myth 1:

Guiding children's behaviour takes us away from our work with the children.

Guiding children's behaviour is not a distraction from our work but an important and large part of it. Equipping children with the social skills to relate happily, purposefully, and respectfully to others is one of the greatest gifts we can impart to them.

Myth 2:

Children's behavioural mistakes need to be drawn to their attention, so they know not to repeat them.

We encourage children's attempts to walk and talk without emphasising or punishing their 'mistakes'. We need to take a similar approach to their attempts to use new social skills. We need to encourage and support them as they learn.

We know from our own experience that having our mistakes brought to our attention is less helpful than being shown a better way to do the task.

Myth 3:

Our behaviour guidance strategies need to be different for all children if we have a child with challenging behaviour in our group.

No matter how skilfully we apply the best behaviour guidance strategies, they will not work with all children. Some children have highly complex social needs which demand additional strategies specific to those needs. These additional strategies need to be consistent with our beliefs to be effective. Further, when we use these strategies, it is important to recognise that onlooking children are also affected.

Remember that our role in guiding children's behaviour is to:

- Provide children with a physical environment that supports happy and harmonious play.

- Model respectful social interactions with others, including children.

- Use children's 'mistakes' as opportunities to teach them social skills – without impatience, anger, or the need to highlight their 'mistakes'.

Teaching social skills

As educators, we need a well-rehearsed repertoire of skilful professional responses to draw from to shape children's social skills and guide their behaviour. Part of our problem in teaching social skills to children is that we are not clear about what these social skills entail.

How would you support a child to be included in group play with other children? Maybe you would ask the children if the child could join them. However, if we consider how we would manage joining a group at a social gathering, we would feel uncomfortable if someone intervened in that way on our behalf. Instead we would more likely listen to the group's conversation and, when timely, contribute something valuable to the conversation. Perhaps then, a strategy for supporting a child to join the children playing 'cars' might be to suggest to the child to drive a police car to the scene as if someone had made a 000 call.

Social environment

A supportive environment helps children learn the social skills they need to play and learn happily with others. Such environments are aesthetic, well-organised and uncluttered, and children can freely choose activities.

Guidelines are displayed to remind children how to care for one another and to look after the physical environment (inside and out). The children, even young children, need to be involved in the development

of these guidelines. The guidelines need to be couched in positive terms, clearly displayed, and used as a reference when responding to inappropriate behaviours.

Social problem-solving

To promote social problem-solving, educators need to teach children how to effectively resolve disagreements. This involves strategies such as:

- Prompts to "use your words" (e.g. Did you ask Joseph to share the blocks with you?)

- Following up a child's assertive message

- Arbitrated solutions

- Facilitated social problem-solving

Encouragement and choice

Understand the difference between praise and encouragement, and the different effects these have on the child to whom they are directed and the onlooking children. Children are encouraged when their efforts are acknowledged in a way that develops their ability to recognise and accept their positive qualities and strengths. Encouragement focuses on the deed rather than the doer, develops the ability to self-evaluate, and enables children to value learning. It also accepts diverse abilities and strengths rather than compares.

The choice approach refers to providing children with options to replace their inappropriate behaviours. To be effective we need to remind children of the guidelines that they helped to create, but without disapproval. Ask, "Are you able to follow our guidelines? How can I help you to do this?" Even a toddler can sense your message.

Guiding Children's Behaviour may continue to be one of the most sought after workshops. However, the focus of the workshops should be on how to create effective social environments for young children, and on strategies to teach children social problem-solving.

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