

Behaviour Guidance – Relating to Children

- Written by Dr Brenda Abbey



Guiding Children's Behaviour is one of the most frequently requested workshop topics in the early education and care sector. It is also the workshop from which educators are most likely to leave disappointed, or be initially motivated but soon disappointed that few of the strategies suggested work for them.

Perhaps the greatest contributing factor to this problem is that educators collect strategies to guide children's behaviour in the same way as they collect ideas for arranging indoor learning spaces, displaying children's work, or undertaking craft or cooking activities. While using good ideas can be effective in most areas, not all seemingly 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* (i.e. acquire social skills). With this in mind, a 'must do' before attending any workshop on behaviour guidance, or adopting a new strategy or idea is to clarify what we believe about the way children learn to behave.

Clarifying beliefs

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

Since our behaviour guidance strategies must be consistent with the NQF, these strategies need to facilitate children's desire to belong and to uphold their dignity. We would not therefore, use behaviour guidance strategies that would in any way better one child's social standing at the expense of another. One such strategy that comes to mind is 'parallel praise' where one child is praised to coerce others to follow that child's behaviour. "Wow, Jamie! I like the way you're packing up the blocks" (said for other children to hear with the motive that they copy Jamie).

Also consistent with the NQF is the understanding that social skills are complex, and acquiring and perfecting them is a work-in-progress for us all. From time to time, everyone makes mistakes, especially young children. In his 1995 article in *Young Children*, titled 'Misbehavior or mistaken behavior', Gartrell explained that this is because the social experiences of young 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. Nothing could be further from the truth. Guiding children's behaviour is not a distraction from our work; it is a very important and large part of our work. Equipping children with the social skills to relate happily, purposefully, and respectfully with 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 that they know not to repeat them. We excitedly encourage children's attempts to walk and talk, to use a spoon, and to wash their hands, all of this without emphasising their 'mistakes' or punishing their failed attempts. We need to take a similar approach for many of children's attempts to use new social and thinking skills. We need to encourage them and support them as they learn these new social skills.

Myth 3: Our behaviour guidance strategies need to be quite different if we have children with challenging behaviour in our group. No matter how appropriate our behaviour guidance strategies are, or how skilfully we use them, they will not work with all children. Some children have highly complex social needs, and they require us to use specific and quite specialised strategies. You should still re-evaluate your beliefs and strategies, but do so in an informed way. Meanwhile, respond to all of the ways children acquire social skills, and recognise that the onlooking children are also learning from your responses to other children, including those with challenging behaviours. Educators with a clear vision of their beliefs, their role, and which strategies will be effective and consistent with their beliefs, are better placed to apply strategies for children with highly complex behaviour guidance needs.



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

- Provide children with a physical environment that supports happy and harmonious play.
- Model respectful and skilful social interactions with others, including children.
- Use children's inevitable mistakes as opportunities to teach them social skills – without impatience, anger, judgement, or the need to highlight to children that they did the wrong thing/made a mistake.

We know from our own experience that others bringing our mistakes to our attention is less helpful to us than being shown a better way to do the task. Educators need to know a range of strategies to plan and sustain a social environment that supports children playing happily and harmoniously with one another.

Teaching social skills

Educators also need to learn and use strategies for teaching social skills. If we are to teach children social skills, we need a well-rehearsed repertoire of skilful professional responses to draw from at those times when children need us to shape their social skills or to teach them new skills and guide their behaviour. Just as acquiring social skills is a life-long process for us all, so too is our task as educators in acquiring and perfecting strategies to teach these social skills to children.

If we are honest, part of our problem in teaching social skills to children is that we are not clear about what these social skills entail.

Let me use the example of how we would approach supporting a lone/regularly excluded child to be accepted in group play with other children. Maybe your first instinct would be to ask the other children if the child could join their play, appeal to their sense of fairness, or something similar. However, if we consider how we would personally manage joining a small group at a social gathering, we would feel uncomfortable if someone intervened in that way on our behalf. Instead we would be more likely to listen to the group's conversation and, when timely, contribute something that the group would value or be interested in. Perhaps then, a strategy for supporting a child to join a group of children playing 'cars' might be to suggest to the child to drive a fire-truck or police car to the scene as if someone had made a 000 call.

Social environment

Most educators know that the physical environment



impacts upon children's behaviour, and so provide aesthetically attractive and well-organised environments, where children can freely select resources and activities. However, educators should also involve children in devising rules and guidelines to govern their social environment.

Successful social environments display rules to guide the way children look after the environment and relate to one another and their educators. These rules need to be developed with the children, couched in positive terms (e.g. be kind to others), openly displayed, frequently discussed with the children, and used as the point of reference when responding to children's social mistakes and unacceptable behaviour.

Even educators working with infants and toddlers can still rehearse this process in their mind, and use these rules to guide their responses to children.

The task for educators is to learn how to effectively lead a session to devise these rules; discuss them with children; and, most importantly, use them as the point of reference when talking to a child who has not followed them.

Encouragement and choice

Children are encouraged when their efforts are acknowledged in a way that develops their ability to recognise and accept their positive qualities, strengths, or internal resources. Encouragement focuses on the deed rather than the doer, develops the ability to self-evaluate, and enables children to value learning and to work for self-satisfaction. It accepts and respects diverse abilities and strengths rather than compares.

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The task for educators is to understand the difference between praise and encouragement, and the different effects each of these has on the child to whom they are directed and the onlooking children.

When we remind children of the rules, we need not make it sound like a censure. For example, the old faithful approach goes something like this: "Stop! What are you doing?" A less censorious reminder could be: "What do our rules say about this? Are you able to follow the rules now? How can I help you to follow the rules?"

A choice approach goes further and refers to carers extending to children the right to decide upon significant aspects of their day. Importantly, it also refers to carers providing children with options or alternative behaviours to replace inappropriate behaviours.

The task for educators is to learn the difference between either/or and how choices can be effectively used when guiding children's behaviour.

Guiding Children's Behaviour may well remain one of the most frequently requested workshops in the early education and care sector. However, these workshops would be most useful to educators if they enhanced professional skills in social problem-solving and creating a social environment that enables children to learn the behaviours that will support their development and interactions with other children and in the wider community.

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