

# Encouraging positive behaviour in a learning environment



*This e-Book explores what positive behaviour looks like at an early years or school setting. It suggests **strategies to reduce challenging behaviour** and **how to handle conflict** between children. There is also a section on when challenging behaviour, or behavioural changes, may be a cause for concern or sign of an additional need.*

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# 1. Positive behaviour

What do we mean when we say that we want a child to be 'good' or behave well?

Every one of us would give a slightly different answer to this, depending on our own upbringing, our tolerance levels, and our own beliefs on what is appropriate child behaviour. The children we support often come from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds and their families may also have their own behavioural expectations and standards for child behaviour.

There are certain behaviours, or 'positive behaviours' that we can all agree should be encouraged when in a learning environment. These include:

- Sharing
- Turn taking
- Being considerate
- Self-awareness (cognitive skills)
- The ability to see another's point of view
- Managing feelings (emotional intelligence)
- Forming positive relationships (social skills)



Expectations of children and young people's behaviour should be realistic. They should take into account the child's age and stage of development, and be consistent between adults. Behavioural expectations will be different for children of different ages. You cannot expect a 1-year-old child to understand the concept of sharing, but most 5-year-olds will, therefore, you would respond differently to a one-year-old who took something from another child to the way you would with the 5-year-old.

You need to consider child development when making judgements about behaviour, but this does not mean you should be inconsistent with your approach.

## 2. Challenging behaviour

Inappropriate, or challenging, behaviour is defined as behaviour that affects others in a negative way. It can manifest in different ways – from general disruption to physical aggression. Staff working with children need to know how to react to challenging behaviour appropriately and promote positive behaviour.

Different types of challenging behaviour includes:

- Bullying
- Hurting themselves and others
- Breaking things and being destructive
- Being verbally abusive to peers or to staff
- Hiding away from people and not wanting to be with others
- Refusing to follow instructions or take part in tasks, games, and activities
- Repetitive behaviour, such as saying the same word over and over again
- Interrupting or distracting peers, or intruding on someone's personal space or privacy
- Acting out and doing things that other people do not like and find offensive, such as swearing, spitting, or taking their clothes off

**REMEMBER:** It is the behaviour that is the problem, not the child. These behaviours are not uncommon, and they happen for a reason.



Sometimes, children's behaviour is challenging because they are upset or worried about something. It is important for practitioners to be sensitive to their needs and try to establish what is causing them to react negatively towards others. Behaviour can be influenced by many different things. You should take the circumstances at the time of the behaviour into account, for example was the child / young person frustrated, tired, or feeling unwell? Behaviour can also be influenced by diet, parenting influences and family circumstances, and by social influences, such as television and peer pressure.

Children and young people are very good at testing the boundaries of your patience and will go just as far as you will allow them to. It is important, therefore, that you are clear about your limits and convey this to the children and young people you work with.



Most children who do, or say, something inappropriate expect the adults around them to react and act in a way that shows their disapproval of the action and sets limits. This gives children and young people security, the attention they were seeking, and shows them that you care. So, children will keep pushing the boundaries until you hit your limit and respond emotionally, as a way of testing your commitment and care for them. Setting boundaries and rules and ensuring they are adhered to is the way to show them that you do care and are committed to helping them stay safe, enjoy, and achieve.

You are a role model for the children around you, and you play a vital role in helping children to interact appropriately with others. It is important that children's positive behaviour is rewarded and praised so they gain an understanding of what is not appropriate behaviour. Children who are well occupied and fully engaged in activities do not have time to misbehave. It is important, therefore, that activities are well planned, appropriate to the age group, and do not allow children to become bored or frustrated.

## 3. Strategies for encouraging positive behaviour

It is important to focus on positive behaviour, and offer praise and rewards for this, rather than resorting to sanctions for inappropriate behaviour. Children respond well to positive attention and it raises their self-esteem and helps them to feel appreciated. They are also likely to try harder in order to gain this positive attention. Adults need to be a good role model for the way they would like the children to behave, for example by being polite and saying 'please' and 'thank you'. Children may also respond well to rewards, such as stickers or certificates.

**REMEMBER:** Children are not born with an understanding of acceptable behaviour – they have to learn it, and you will need to help them do this.

All children will, from time-to-time, display unwanted behaviour; often, this is just part of being a child or young person and developing, and no further action will be necessary. Behaviours such as being grumpy or moody, daydreaming, not listening, or other minor upsets are normally just part of everyday life in an educational setting.

The times when we should start to take notice is when a child is showing an increased amount of unwanted behaviour, when they respond disproportionately to little or minor incidents by shouting, screaming, throwing things, and so on. Sometimes, unwanted behaviour escalates in a child generally; everything starts to annoy or upset them, or they annoy and upset the people around them. Sometimes, this behaviour is directed at a certain person, perhaps a certain member of staff or another child.

One of the main reasons why you should always record and report unwanted behaviour is that it can often highlight a person, time of day, or routine event that triggers the behaviour. Finding the trigger can often be the first step towards helping the child sort out the problem and start behaving in a far more appropriate way.

Another strategy is 'time away from the activity'. You should always follow the most up-to-date guidance for this. General guidelines include taking the child away from the activity to a separate place for a short amount of time where they are supervised, but with little or no response from the supervising adult. This should be used sparingly and always as a last resort.

Try to make sure you are consistent in your approach to behaviour. Do not let a child do something one day that you tell them they cannot do the next. When you need to say no to something they want to do, try to give them a reason and express it in a way they can understand.

For example, they may want to climb a tree in the playground, but you know the branches may break as it is an old tree. There will obviously be a rule stating they may not climb trees without your consent, but take time to explain the reasons behind this rule. Alternatively, there may be a rule that allows them to only climb the trees without a red band on them.

When responding to challenging behaviour, you should:

- Take a positive approach to managing children's behaviour
- Give praise and encouragement when children behave well
- Establish clear boundaries according to the level of understanding
- Be sensitive to the individual needs of each child, and their cultural and family backgrounds
- Respond to unwanted behaviour appropriately, according to the child's age and level of understanding

**TRY IT OUT:** Phrase goals and boundaries in a positive way. "Don't run inside" only tells the children what they should not be doing, but saying, "We walk when we are inside" teaches them appropriate behaviour.



Sometimes a change of environment, such as going outside or into a different room, will help.

Good strategies for older children and young people include:

- Appealing to their sense of humour
- Verbal reasoning and asking 'what if' questions
- Talking about self-control and making good decisions
- Mediation to allow those involved to talk through events
- Individual behaviour planning and behaviour management plans
- Talking about behaviour in a calm moment after the challenging behaviour or conflict has passed, and trying to understand why they acted in a certain way

You may be able to intervene to reduce inappropriate behaviour. Strategies for doing this can include:

- Conflict management
- Teaching problem-solving skills
- Teaching them more effective coping skills
- Providing variety in equipment and activities
- Reminding children of boundaries and expectations of behaviour
- Keeping noise levels reasonable, and minimising distractions in the learning environment

It may occasionally be necessary to physically restrain a child in order to stop them hurting themselves or others. If this happens, you must use the minimum force possible, record the incident, and report to your manager and parents / carers as soon as possible.

**REMEMBER:** You should NEVER physically punish a child, frighten, threaten, or humiliate them. Children often mirror the behaviour of the adults around them so they may do the same to others, and all this teaches them is that you are someone not to be trusted and their behaviour will get worse.



## 4. Conflict between children

When conflict between children occurs, it is important that adults who intervene seek to negotiate solutions that are appropriate and fair.

Very young children can be self-centred and may find it difficult to think of other people's feelings. This is due to the level of their cognitive development – it is not until a child reaches the age of 3 or 4 that they can begin to express their feelings in ways that others can understand, and begin to understand the needs of others.

You can help children to develop their understanding of meeting others' needs by encouraging them to do things for others, for example: sharing at snack time, or holding doors open for others when at the shops or on day trips.



When children are upset, it is important that the adults who are helping them stay calm. Children, especially siblings, will have disagreements with each other and conflict is inevitable.

If possible, you should encourage children to sort out their own squabbles and should not feel that you always need to interfere. However, if a child might be hurt or their feelings may be affected, it would be right to get involved.

Children will copy the behaviour of the adults who look after them. This is why it is important that they see adults relating to each other in a positive and friendly way. They will take their cue from what they hear and see and they will notice animosity or aggression between adults. In your interactions with other adults, be it with parents at the beginning and end of the day, or when out on a day trip, be sure that you are providing the children in your care with a good role model for positive and friendly interaction.

## 5. When behaviour is a cause for concern

Most children, on most occasions, want to behave in a way that is reasonable and acceptable. However, there are always occasions when children may lack the emotional, social, or behavioural skills to cope with conflict and challenging situations. For some children, their challenging behaviour can indicate a more serious problem and extra support and care will be needed to help them.

A child or young person may show behaviours of concern because they:

- Are being bullied
- Are malnourished
- Have attachment issues
- Are misusing substances
- Have experienced a trauma
- Are going through a transition
- Are in physical or emotional pain
- Are experiencing mental ill health
- Are experiencing hormonal changes
- Have a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND)
- Are sick and/or their medication is causing the behavioural change
- Are very tired

**REMEMBER:** You never know what someone else is going through and that is why it is important to label the behaviour, and not the child.

### Transitions and trauma

Much of the time, with children, unwanted behaviour stems from tiredness or frustration; this is normal and will require some time and attention. There are other times, however, when undesirable behaviour has a serious root cause, such as the child having experienced a trauma or upset that they cannot come to terms with.

Transitions and significant life events can feel like impossible mountains to climb for children at times, especially if they are 'looked after' children or are learning in a language that is not their mother tongue – for example, English as an Additional Language (EAL).

With approx. 72,670 children in the care of local authorities and these numbers steadily rising year on year, having a good knowledge and understanding of how to support 'looked after' children is becoming more important than ever.

You need to bear in mind that these children may have had to deal with a lot of transitions in their lives already. Some of these transitions may have been extremely traumatic and they may not have always been handled in the best way so children may be anxious when facing any future changes. You need to be aware that they may display undesirable behaviours at times like these so before reacting, try to think about why they are behaving in this way – is it fear, anger, or resentment?

Life may have been upsetting, lonely, and perhaps even dangerous for them up until now so now they are in a more caring environment, it is your job to keep things as stable, smooth, and stress-free as possible.

We do know that some events or transitions can cause children to display inappropriate behaviour, but might not cause a problem in another child, and so what is a trauma to one child may not be to another. Children are individuals with different coping mechanisms and different emotional experiences.

It might be the death of a family member or a pet that causes the initial problem, but equally, it could be losing a sentimental personal item or changing classrooms. Transitions of all kinds, whether we consider them big or small, can cause quite serious upset to a child. It is for us to support and guide them, get them the help they need, and support those who are struggling with their undesirable behaviour. It is not for us to decide if this is something they should really be upset about.

We have all, no doubt, come across an insensitive person who, on hearing a friend or colleague is upset about something, belittles their upset as trivial or suggests that they should just 'get over it'. This response to someone's genuine feelings of worry or loss is not sympathetic and certainly not helpful; it just means the person is likely to suffer just as much in the future but will not share their concern. The same is true of children; we need to value their emotions and give them support so that they learn to manage the situation and develop coping mechanisms for the future.

## **Attachment**

If a child has experienced harsh or neglectful parenting or has not had the opportunity to form an attachment to a parent figure, it can result in them displaying anti-social behaviour.

It is essential we acknowledge the important role that parents play in helping children to behave appropriately and to be emotionally stable. Especially in the early years of a child's life.

We now know that the brain of a child under the age of 3 years is still developing. At birth, there are 100 billion neurons (brain cells) and 50 trillion synapses (connections). By the age of 3 years, the number of synapses has increased 20 times.



If a baby experiences trauma, stress, or lack of care before the age of 3 years, it can significantly affect the brain's development and result in permanent damage. A scientist called Ian Schore wrote a paper about infant development. In it he stated:

'The child's first relationship, the one with the mother, acts as a template that permanently moulds the individual's capacity to enter into all later emotional relationships.'

So, in thinking about behaviour management, we really need to focus firstly on the strength of a child's primary and secondary relationships, and secondly on their emotional well-being. Where this is challenged or absent, a child's behaviour will often reflect this in a negative way.

### **Abuse and neglect**

Practitioners working with children and young people need to be aware that some children are at risk of abuse. Sadly, abuse is found in all areas of society and part of the difficulty in identifying abuse is that it can happen anywhere, and by anyone. Practitioners need to be able to identify whether a child may be at risk and some of the warning signs to look out for. Here, we will consider some of the behaviours that may indicate a child is suffering from abuse or neglect.

According to the NSPCC, some common signs that there may be something concerning happening in a child's life include:

- Seeming anxious
- Becoming withdrawn
- Running away or going missing
- Poor bond or relationship with a parent
- Becoming uncharacteristically aggressive
- Lacking social skills and having few friends, if any
- Unexplained changes in behaviour or personality
- Knowledge of adult issues inappropriate for their age
- Always choosing to wear clothes which cover their body

**REMEMBER:** Not every sign listed here or change in behaviour means a child is being abused. There could be other things happening in their life which are affecting their behaviour. You should always share concerns with your manager, the person at your setting or school responsible for safeguarding, or talk to a specialist at NSPCC.

## SEN

Challenging or inappropriate behaviour could be an indicator of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Particularly when you also notice developmental delay. The behaviour of a child with SEN often times is not actually wilfully 'bad', but they are in a situation where the expectations for behaviour are inappropriate for their developmental level.



For example, if a child has ADHD, they may display the following behaviours:

- Losing things
- Being forgetful
- Being easily distracted
- Difficulty in turn taking
- Difficulty with time management and organisation
- Being risk adverse and engaging in risky behaviour
- Difficulty in playing or taking part in activities quietly, and talking excessively
- Not following through on instructions and failing to finish school work or chores
- Interrupting others and blurting out answers before questions have been completed
- Avoiding, disliking, or being reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Not being able to stay 'still', fidgeting, and getting up from their chair when they are expected to be seated
- Unable to pay close attention to tasks or instructions, difficulty sustaining attention, and making careless mistakes

No two children are the same, but if you observe a number of the behaviours, it might be worth raising a concern with your manager or the Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCo) at your setting. If you suspect a child may have SEN, you will want to raise this as soon as possible. Early identification and intervention are a crucial part of improving long-term outcomes for children.



Challenging behaviour is not always an indicator of SEND. There could be another explanation, such as housing, family, or domestic issues. If this is thought to be the case, a multi-agency approach is needed, and specialists may need to be brought in to support the child.

If you enjoyed this e-Book and would like to learn more about the topics covered here, then you may be interested in taking the following short courses:

## EARLY YEARS

- **Managing behaviour**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.2>
- **An introduction to safeguarding**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.12>
- **Recognising and supporting children with SEN**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.15>
- **Wellbeing in the early years**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.92>

## SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- **Promoting positive behaviour**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.75>
- **Awareness of substance misuse**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.95>
- **Bullying awareness and prevention**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.94>
- **Transitions: Primary to secondary school**  
<http://www.lasershortcourses.co.uk/course.php?c=LSC.IP3.69>