

Guiding children's behaviour

By Phillip Rowell

Children need to learn how to manage their emotions, which affect their behaviour, and in turn impacts on how they interact and form relationships with others.

Children require the support and expertise of child care professionals who understand that learning to successfully manage emotions and behaviour is a lifelong process. It is also beneficial for child care professionals to recognise the ways in which they can prevent or minimise situations that can cause children to demonstrate challenging behaviours.

The aim of behaviour guidance is to teach children how to manage their emotions and develop ways to appropriately control their behaviour by themselves.

Behaviour guidance is a process that focuses on the 'whole' child. Children need to be guided and taught about their emotions and behaviour, just as they require support when learning other new skills, such as walking or counting. A holistic approach involves collaborating with families to discuss behaviour guidance expectations, and to negotiate individualised behaviour guidance strategies.

Vital to guiding children's behaviour are the leadership qualities of adults who, as role models, understand the importance of establishing a nurturing, respectful and equitable relationship with children. It is also important that child care professionals recognise the external influences



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.3,2.1, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4 and 6.2

OSHCQA Principles: 1.2, 2.3 and 6.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 1.6, 2.3, 4.2, 5.1 and 6.3

which can affect children's behaviour, including their family structure and lifestyle, culture, religion, peer relationships and the events that occur in their daily lives.

The factors that influence children's behaviour

All behaviour has a purpose and function. A 'challenging' behaviour can be considered a momentary loss of self-control, a 'cry for help', or a sign that children are uncomfortable, insecure, threatened, confused, require attention or lack the experience to understand or manage their emotions and behaviours. There is a reason why children behave the way they do and this often involves factors such as changes to routines, events outside the service or relationships with other children.

When children have difficulty coping with their emotions, and are just beginning to learn what behaviours are acceptable or unacceptable, they may express their emotions in ways that can be perceived as challenging. Sometimes a behaviour can be displayed as an isolated incident, for example, a child having a tantrum because someone chose the same coloured pencil as they did. In other circumstances, children's behaviour is the result of more complex issues and may require an ongoing behaviour guidance plan.

Child care professionals need to be aware of the range of issues which may influence children's ability to cope with their emotions in a child care environment. For example:

- When they first start child care, children are unfamiliar with the service's routines, and play limits, which can make it difficult for them to understand what behaviour is expected or appropriate.

- Children who are in group care for the first time may be inexperienced at negotiating and cooperating with other children.
- Different times of the day may affect individual children's behaviour. For example, early in the morning some children may feel anxious when separating from parents, whereas toward the end of the day some children may be feeling tired or irritable.
- The varying age range, abilities and interests of children in care, especially in multi-age care groups, can be difficult for some children to cope with.
- Children may be confused about the behaviour that is acceptable in child care when there are varying behaviour expectations in other settings, such as at home or school.
- Children may experience circumstances or events outside of child care that make them feel anxious or unsettled. For example, parent separation, birth of a sibling or starting a new school.

The quality of children's play and learning and other experiences, as well as the way in which the environment is set up, also have a significant affect upon children's behaviour. For example, frequent changes to routines or staffing can be unsettling and cause children to feel insecure, and a very noisy or overly busy environment can cause children to become overly stimulated.

The service's orientation process and its effectiveness in preparing children and families for child care can also influence the way that children behave as they settle into care.

Adult expectations

Focussing on challenging behaviour can overshadow the positive experiences and behaviours happening in the service throughout the day. It can also result in a behaviour being labelled as 'challenging' when it is a behaviour that is consistent with normal child development.

Adults often expect that children who are beginning to develop their expressive and receptive language skills will know how to behave and socialise appropriately. The misconception is that when a child can understand words they are automatically able to be held accountable for their behaviour and actions.

While language skills are important, there are many other factors which affect children's ability to self-regulate their behaviour. Just as adults may

behave irrationally due to factors such as stress, tiredness or misunderstanding, children face the same challenges but do not have the same life skills or experiences to assist them to recognise and cope with difficult situations.

Behaviour guidance should be a responsibility shared between children, families and child care professionals. When children are emotional and behaving in challenging ways, they rely upon the skills, knowledge and support of adults to model appropriate responses and to reassure them that they are still valued.

Child care professionals may consider the following questions when reflecting upon their expectations of children's behaviour, especially when they are planning and implementing behaviour guidance strategies:

- What events or circumstances may cause children to experience difficulty coping with their emotions?
- How can the service prepare for, and minimise the likelihood of, children experiencing difficulty in coping with their emotions?
- How does the service support children's emotional needs while meeting the behaviour guidance expectations of families and colleagues?

Positive behaviour guidance strategies

Child care professionals can approach behaviour guidance in two ways: by considering what children need to learn about their emotions and how they can support the learning process. Both approaches require child care professionals to:

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings and for child care professionals to listen to their needs.
- Provide children with opportunities to work through their emotions independently.
- Acknowledge children's attempts to deal with their emotions as they begin to develop the skills to manage these appropriately.
- Build relationships with children that are safe, and secure, and convey respect.
- Promote children's participation in decision making, such as setting play limits and behaviour expectations.
- Give children choices in managing their own behaviour.



- Discuss with children the types of emotions they experience and how to recognise similar feelings in the future.
- Plan experiences and environments which challenge and strengthen children's skills as they learn about their emotions and social interactions.
- Establish routines and limits which meet children's needs and level of understanding.
- Role model empathy and express their own emotions and behaviour appropriately.

It is also essential to reinforce that behaviour guidance practices which physically or mentally punish children, or that create feelings of isolation, humiliation, intimidation or worthlessness are unacceptable.

Strengthening behavior guidance strategies

Services should consider how their current behaviour guidance practices support children's emotional and social development. The following

suggestions may support child care professionals when implementing behaviour guidance strategies:

- Consider the time of the day, the weather, how experiences are set up, and the consistency of staffing. All of these can affect children's emotional stability and sense of security.
- Recognise the importance of consistency and fairness when developing and using behaviour guidance strategies.
- Remember to 'guide' rather than 'control' children's behaviour to avoid the creation of power struggles.
- Consult with families about their values, beliefs and expectations regarding behaviour guidance.
- Communicate regularly with colleagues about behaviour guidance strategies, and support other child care professionals to meet individual children's needs.
- Develop a behaviour guidance policy based on current professional knowledge of children's social and emotional development.
- Access professional development opportunities to improve the skills and knowledge of child care professionals. For example, contact support and training agencies or encourage discussions about behaviour guidance at service meetings.

Guiding children's behaviour is an integral part of daily practice in child care services. When developed and implemented effectively, positive behaviour guidance strategies empower children and provide them with safe environments in which they can experiment and develop the skills to manage their own behaviour ■

References and further reading

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