

BEHAVIOUR GUIDANCE GUIDE - PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

We've all heard the saying that "*prevention is better than cure*". Promoting and supporting positive behaviour in children is no different. Below are some questions to consider if you find that the children in your care are not as positively engaged in the daily experiences, as you would like them to be.

IS THE ENVIRONMENT ADEQUATELY SET UP TO SUPPORT POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR?

The physical environment can play a large part in children's behaviour. For example, are different experience areas well defined? If not, play from one area can easily and inadvertently impose on another area creating conflict. Use rugs, small dividers, or furniture to create specific spaces. Try not to have long empty spaces in the indoor environment that allow for running.

When changing the layout of the room, children should be forewarned and involved in suggestions/discussions for changes. Modifications made over time. It can be very unsettling for some children to enter the room only to find that everything is different and unfamiliar.

Also examine how the different spaces are set out. Is the quiet book or puzzle area too close to the noisy block area or home corner? Do children have to cross through other areas after messy activities such as finger-painting to get to the bathroom to wash their hands, risking upsetting someone by getting paint on their work or clothes?

ARE TOYS AND RESOURCES APPROPRIATE, IN GOOD CONDITION, AND AVAILABLE IN SUFFICIENT NUMBER?

Equipment should be age-appropriate and cater for the children's interests, strengths, and developmental needs. They should be rotated regularly enough to prevent boredom, but not so frequently that children don't get to fully engage and master skills. Whilst some activities may be changed or modified daily, it is good to maintain at least one familiar activity (such as easel painting) every day.

Children then have the opportunity to engage in the familiar, whilst 'checking out' the new. Providing toys that are broken, or books that have been scribbled in, send the message that it is OK to not care for the equipment. If we want children to respect the resources and care for them, well-maintained resources must be presented to them.

It is unrealistic to expect young children to share or take turns. Conflicts arise when there is only one baby doll pram to push around, or only one of each colour crayon or pencil. Sufficient numbers of equipment and resources need to be provided to allow for several children to engage in each activity at the same time, particularly in the baby's room (where some babies are mobile) or toddlers' room.

ARE EXPECTATIONS CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE?

Children need to know what is expected of them. It is part of their social development to understand that there are different behavioural expectations for different environments. For example, there are probably different guidelines at home to what there are at Grandma's, but that's OK. Educators will provide clear, consistent guidelines for children's behaviour as part of a caring and trusting relationship with children and families to help them feel secure and self-confident.

Expectations should be stated as what you want the child/children to do, rather than what not to do. For example, *"we walk inside"*, rather than *"don't run"*, or *"we put our bottoms on the chairs"*, rather than *"stop standing on the chair"*. This also ensures that there is no miscommunication or misinterpretation. For example, if telling a child not to shut the door, the child may only hear the last part of the sentence – *"shut the door"*.

ARE EDUCATOR'S EXPECTATIONS AGE AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE?

Having an understanding of child development will assist greatly in having appropriate expectations for children of all ages. For example, a two-year-old biting or hitting is age-appropriate behaviour, but not acceptable behaviour and would therefore be responded to differently to a four-year-old doing the same thing. Likewise, a pre-verbal child crying because someone took a toy from them is age-appropriate, while we would expect a four- or five-year-old to communicate verbally.

Perhaps consider, is it realistic to expect a toddler not to run in the room when they are practicing and mastering the skill of walking with absolutely no control over their speed? How can we accommodate mastering this new skill in a safe space?

ARE EXPECTATIONS CONSISTENT AND CONSISTENTLY ADHERED TO?

Once behavioural expectations have been established with the children it is vital that they are carried out consistently, and consistently adhered to by all educators. If a particular educator ignores some expectations, it may send the message to the children that only some of the expectations are important. Of course, they will also quickly learn what they can 'get away with' with particular educators which can lead to inappropriate behaviour as they attempt to 'push the boundaries' with other educators.

IS THE DAILY ROUTINE ADHERED TO?

Children quickly learn the routine of the day, and some can become anxious if this routine is drastically altered. Within the daily routine there should be flexibility to allow, for example, for indoor activities to continue for longer if children are actively engaged, or extra time outside in the sun after a period of rain. However, whilst being flexible, the actual order of events should be adhered to as closely as possible. In this way children feel secure in knowing what is going to happen next.

It is also important to warn the children when an experience (such as indoor free play) is coming to an end, so that they can begin to finalise what they are doing. No one likes to have to stop what they're doing right in the middle of it, so additionally, whenever possible large periods of time should be allowed for free play so that children have the opportunity to develop their play.

ARE EDUCATORS MODELING RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS?

Children learn by observing others – even when we don't think they're watching! Educators must therefore model the behaviour they wish children to mimic. Communications with other educators, families, and children should be respectful and caring, and sarcasm should not be used. Children are sensitive to being reprimanded publicly or privately and should be communicated to in a non-reprimand tone or way.

Instead, if an educator observes inappropriate behaviour, he/she should cross the room to the child, get down to the child's level, and using eye contact, calmly explain the undesirable behaviour and provide alternative behaviour suggestions. "I" messages are a great way to explain negative behaviour in a manner that does not 'put down' the child, shame the child, make judgment, or assign blame. Instead, they inform the child of the behaviour that is not acceptable and explain why, without provoking a defensive reaction.

How do I construct an "I" message?

I feel (emotion) when you (behaviour) because (possible reaction).

For example, *I feel sad when you throw the sand because it could go in your friend's eyes and hurt them.*

ARE CHILDREN BEING OFFERED APPROPRIATE CHOICES AND AGENCY?

Developing a child's sense of agency is important to support children's decision-making and self-regulation of behaviour. Are educators providing appropriate choices for children throughout the day, while respecting the child's right to say no. By offering choices to children, they feel a sense of control and power within their environment and routine. Too many choices, however, can be overwhelming for a child, by limiting the choices still allows the child an opportunity to cooperate in the decision-making process. For example, to guide an unsettled child, it is better to give limited choices such as *"Would you like to do a puzzle, or play with the blocks?"* rather than asking *"What would you like to do?"*

There may be times when it seems like children do not have choice, for example nappy changes, however by offering children choices that are acceptable they continue to feel involved in the process and activity. Educators can reflect upon practices to balance the health and safety requirements while providing learning opportunities for independent decision making. While the task itself may be non-negotiable educators can reflect upon how to invite the child to participate in the routine task. For example, *'I can see you are busy with your puzzle, would you like to have your nappy changed now or when you are finished your puzzle?'*

ARE PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT BEING USED EFFECTIVELY AND SINCERELY?

Rather than always saying "good girl" or "good boy", it is important to actually tell the child what it is that is 'good'. When we frequently just use these words, it can sound very insincere, as we are saying the same to all children. Instead, tell them what they are doing (or have done) that pleases you, and use their name. For example, *"Great job Tara. I can see you're trying really hard to work out that puzzle."* or *"I'm really happy with how you helped pack the blocks away Josh."*

What's the difference between praise and encouragement?

Praise is usually given upon the completion of an experience or job, whereas encouragement is given throughout the process (a much more effective strategy when working with children).

In a busy room it can be so easy to overlook the children that are doing 'the right thing'. Educators should actively make a point of interacting with all children each day, even if it is sometimes just offering praise or encouragement while passing.

HAVE FEELINGS UNDERLYING THE BEHAVIOUR BEEN CONSIDERED? FRUSTRATION, ANGER, HAPPINESS, EXCITEMENT...

Children can become overwhelmed by emotions that they don't necessarily understand or are able to express. As educators it is our role to support the child on their journey to self-regulation, and to identify and label behaviours. For example, if a child is becoming frustrated or angry at not being able to complete a puzzle, an educator could say *"Sometimes I get frustrated when I'm trying to do something tricky too. Would you like me to help you?"* In this way the child is having his/her feelings acknowledged, is learning the word to go with that feeling (in this case 'frustrated'), but more importantly, learning that other people, including educators, also feel this way sometimes, and it's OK to feel this way.

To assist children with their feelings educators should provide alternative strategies for the child. While older children can be taught to verbalise their feelings and request help when needed, even children as young as eighteen months can be taught to hold their hand out in front of them and say "stop" if another child is doing something they don't like.

EXTREME BEHAVIOUR

Sometimes despite all our efforts, some individual children may demonstrate extreme behaviour. If all factors above have been reviewed, the following questions should be asked:

HAVE UNDERLYING FACTORS FOR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR BEEN IDENTIFIED?

Not all children respond well to change so frequent changes can cause emotional disturbance and consequent undesirable behaviour. These could include changes such as being new to care, moving house, the arrival of a sibling, illness or illness of mum or dad, the death of a pet, the death of a family member, or changes in the family structure (such as divorce or a new partner moving in). Of course, there are many other changes that could temporarily upset a child, usually due to the lack of understanding, or the feeling of loss of control of a situation.

In extreme cases there may be abuse, trauma, neglect or domestic violence that the child is unable to process and trying to cope with. Educators can focus on building strong positive relationships with children to help improve the child's confidence and connections with others. It may be necessary to consult with other professionals in trauma specific behaviour guidance plans.

HAVE TRIGGERS FOR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR BEEN IDENTIFIED?

Quite often we only see the inappropriate behaviour, but not what happened immediately before.

Frequently a behaviour has been provoked by an event, such as another child very quietly taking a toy, or even transition times when children have not been adequately warned of the pending transition, or are new to care and not quite sure what is happening or what to do.

It is therefore important for educators to be closely monitoring such children to ascertain if there is a particular event that is triggering negative behaviours.

Being armed with this knowledge enables educators to intervene before problems arise and implement constructive strategies.

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