

Bossiness and beyond

In some children, confidence can escalate into controlling or aggressive behaviour. **Sue Cowley** offers advice on managing the leaders of your pack...

Some children are naturally confident from a young age and willingly take the lead during group play, with the other children happy to follow them. However, a confident manner within the peer group can sometimes tip over into bossiness and even aggression. Ideally, we want children to develop both the key skills of confidence and empathy: to learn how to play with their peers in an inclusive and friendly way, rather than always feeling the need to be 'in charge'.

The scenario

Mark seems to be a happy and confident child. He settled quickly into your setting, and you were delighted at how well he seemed to be doing. However, some practitioners have now mentioned that Mark is becoming very bossy. He will barge into other children's games and insist that they play in 'his' way. If they refuse to do as he tells them, he can become destructive or aggressive. Because of this, some children have already told staff that they don't want to play with him. Recently, Mark has extended his demands to the adults as well. Yesterday he told a member of staff that she couldn't read a book to the children because it was "rubbish". It is proving almost impossible to have group discussions on the

carpet, because Mark shouts his ideas over everyone else. When other children give their ideas, Mark calls out that they are "stupid". Staff are asking you what they should do...

The issue

We tend to worry about young children who appear shy, but not so much about children who appear confident on the surface. Sometimes, though, outgoing children can find it difficult to accept that their peers are entitled to ideas and feelings of their own. They try to control the behaviour of the other children, so that it conforms to how they want the world to run. If over-controlling behaviour is left unchecked, this can lead to a child becoming alienated from the peer group. Ironically, bossy behaviour can also be a symptom of a child who lacks self-confidence. The child might use controlling behaviour to try to handle peer group situations, because of a lack of self-esteem.

Dealing with the behaviour

In the early years, children need to learn that their own desires and wishes do not always come first, ahead of those of the group as a whole. They need to develop empathy, so that they understand how other children feel and why others might want their own opinions and ideas recognised.

- 1 Have clear expectations about how the children will share their ideas when learning as a group.
- 2 Be clear that children should learn to listen to each other, and that they must give respectful comments about other children's suggestions.
- 3 Have a set of rules, backed up with visual cues, to clarify the behaviour that you want to see in your setting.

4 During carpet time, focus on those children who are behaving as you wish. Praise those who sit and wait, with their hands in the air, and choose them to answer questions.

5 Have a clear set of procedures in place to deal with disruptive or aggressive behaviour. Take the child to one side and talk through the behaviour, its impact on others, and why it is not appropriate.

6 Talk a lot about feelings with your children – encourage them to share the impact of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour on their emotional state.

Finding solutions

Work together with staff and parents to help Mark channel his confidence in more positive ways:

■ Talk to Mark's parents about his behaviour at home. Can you get any clues as to where the behaviour is coming from? For instance, it might be that he has an older sibling who bosses him about, and he is modelling this behaviour in the setting.

■ The tactical ignore may be very useful here. Encourage all your practitioners to ignore Mark when he calls out answers during carpet time, and to praise him if he puts up his hand to answer.

■ Acknowledge Mark's feelings and opinions, but do not give in to his demands. For example, if he comments that a story book is "rubbish", you might say "I'm sorry you feel that way. Let's read it together and maybe you can tell us what you didn't like about it when we have finished reading it."

■ Support Mark in entering other children's play in an appropriate way. You might model asking questions, such as "Is it okay if I join in?" or "What can I do in your game?"



about the author

Sue Cowley is an educational author, trainer and presenter, and also helps to run her local preschool. For more information, visit suecowley.co.uk

