

Changing labels

It is easy to give up on difficult children, but our low expectations are the real cause of poor behaviour, says **Paul Dix...**



Observing the children in a nursery class, I was approached by their class leader. "That one, that one and that one," she whispered quietly to me, indicating three boys. "They are trouble now, they will be trouble when they go to school, they will be

trouble right through." The children she had labelled were three years-old.

You see the direct effect of low adult expectations every day – from the parent who leaves their child with a "Just try not to

bite anyone today, Ryan", to the practitioner who greets a child with a "I do hope we aren't going to have another day like yesterday". Tell a child that she is naughty often enough and she will believe it, feel important for it and route every instruction through it.

The range of expectations for nursery age children is huge and varies widely between cultures. In some New York kindergartens they chant the mantras

Negative language

ARE YOU GUILTY OF SAYING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?

- This is the fourth time this week that I have told you...
- Not you again...
- Why are we always waiting for you?
- It's the same every day...
- You are always interrupting me.
- Your mother said you were going to have a difficult day...
- Silly boy/girl.
- You have always had trouble with that.
- Just like your brother/sister/ those other children.
- You'll never be able to...

of the university that they want to go to (more likely that their parents want them to go to). In some inner city nurseries in the UK they are happy just to get them in and off the street safely. Some groups of children are caught immediately doing the right thing and directed into routines with high expectations and large slices of responsibility. Other groups are welcomed with barely a grunt, or with the crime sheet from yesterday being read out to everyone. The key difference is not the environment, the families or the community. It is the behaviour and performance of the adult. It is your mood that sets the climate, your rituals that set the standard and your thoughts that drive the expectations.

Low expectations

The inner or private voice that we all use for mapping our own understanding of the working world is often where our preconceptions stir, our prejudices seed and the process of labelling begins. Labelling damages your relationship with the child, the child's self-image and your ability to manage your own behaviour. It perpetuates undesirable cycles of behaviour and leaves your language littered with negatives. The roots of expectations lie in your thoughts. Your



thoughts drive your emotional or rational responses. Your thoughts drive your non-verbal responses and the nuances of your body language. The more you allow the negative labelling to creep in, the harder it is to separate your private thoughts from your public performance. Spend 15 minutes in the staffroom complaining about the children and you will find it difficult to sustain the high expectations that your children so desperately need as you set up the next activity.

High expectations means giving each child each day a clean sheet. Despite your

extensive experience of Tanisha's daily hair-pulling, paint-splattering tantrums, you must believe that today she can be better. Early years practitioners' performance must be deliberately laced with expectations that rise above the difficult reality of some children's behaviour. Welcome every child with enthusiasm, letting them know that you are genuinely pleased to see them – "I am so pleased that you are here, I need your sharing skills and I have a little job for you". Suppress negative thoughts. This is not real life, this is a series of Oscar-winning cameo performances that are designed to gently convince the children that even if it is chaos at home, here things can and will be different.

Great expectations

Sustaining high expectations is not about showering children with positive reinforcement or raising the bar and hoping for the best. It is the drip-feed of your daily positivity that has a lasting effect. This is not a change to make for a single day but a consistent and constant message that gradually wears away the "I can't", "I won't" or "I'm no good at". What you reinforce is also important. Only reward behaviour that is above and beyond what is expected. Refuse to use rewards to tempt or bribe.

Instead, celebrate positive behaviours that children have chosen to adopt without prompting. The climate

you create in your room is important, but you can also change the culture. Make it cool to do the right thing. Let the children identify others who have gone above and beyond. Make poor behaviour seem out of place and certainly 'not what we do here'.

Walking into work with a mindset that you have chosen to adopt is a good start, but deliberately changing your own behaviour is also essential.

Change your behaviours towards those children whose behaviour is irritating or disruptive. Be positively vigilant and recognise when the tricky children are doing the right thing. Don't let sleeping dogs lie. Reinforce the quietest children as well as the noisiest. Your daily routines, rituals and responses shift children's view of themselves much faster than just talking about better behaviour. If you want to change children's expectations of themselves you need to work from the outside in rather than the inside out.

Stand back and look at your room. Does it scream high expectations or does it mutter low achievement? Are your routines stretching the children to learn and understand new behaviours or are they limited to the old favourites. How high is your expectation of how children treat each other? What about responsibility children are given for organising the activities? Are the displays tempting children's curiosity, tickling their imagination, or are they simply a reflection of the status quo?

'The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she is treated.' In Bernard Shaw's play, *Eliza Doolittle* is the flower girl transformed, not because of her behaviour but because of the behaviour of the people around her. She arrives at society balls ill-equipped to conduct herself in polite company but blossoms as people treat her as a lady. In 'Pygmalion in the Classroom' research, false test scores were used to label average children as high potential and their achievement rocketed. In the 'Brown Eyes, Blue Eyes' experiment children were negatively labelled by eye colour and responded accordingly. Even 'Jailers and Criminals' on *Big Brother* shows us how simple it is to influence behaviour. Every psychological experiment with children and their teachers regarding expectations comes to the same conclusion: adult expectations drive behavioural responses, and the younger the child the more profound the influence. It seems that with behaviour management, if you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

findoutmore

Paul's award-winning training is now available as an excellent interactive online Behaviour course for early years practitioners. To start today, visit pivotaleducation.com/online or call Ellie on 020 7000 1735.

