

Bertie likes to get naked. Regardless of the task, time or temperature he would much rather not wear clothes. Your back may be turned momentarily, but that's all it takes for him to perform a quick change and begin parading his *Ben 10* underpants. As you rush to cover him up there are screams of pleasure and horror in equal measure from the other children. Encouraged by the reactions, Bertie runs around the room in a manner that is eccentric and adorable at home, yet difficult to explain in public. As other children sense an opportunity to join in, you urgently escort him out of the room wrapped in a blanket with tears and protestations. It is clear that you that you need a more sustainable solution that relies less on you policing the nakedness...

How do you respond?

Costume cure – agree a signal for when Bertie gets the urge to abandon shirt, and steer his behaviour to undressing a proxy toy rather than himself.

Belt and braces – through cunning and positive manipulation, tempt Bertie to have fun wearing more clothes rather than less. Divert his behaviour and help him find a different routine.

Things are different here – Underline behaviours that are OK in nursery and those that might be OK at home. Agree with Mum rewards at home for self-control in public, and provide consequences in class for 'incidents' in nursery.

The bare facts



A subtle response is called for if you're to modify the behaviour of persistent preschool streakers, says **Paul Dix...**

The consequences

Costume cure
A Bertie listens intently when you sit him down to talk about your new idea. You introduce the concept of undressing the doll whenever he gets the urge to undress. He agrees to let you know when he is feeling 'undressy', you agree to pass him the doll from your drawer and let him play for a minute. Sure enough, within five minutes you feel a tug on your sleeve and you pass the doll to Bertie. He begins to play with it and you feel satisfied that the plan is working...

But while you're distracted by other children, Bertie seizes his opportunity, and you look up in horror to see the naked doll down Bertie's pants and him about to do 'that dance' again.

He has made a mountain out of a molehill, and you fear an unsuspecting visitor to the room might not be able to comprehend what they are confronted with. Before a major safeguarding investigation needs to be initiated, you grab

the blanket, cover him up and go back to the old routine.

Talking behaviour

■ Can using a proxy ever be a useful strategy in trying to divert behaviour?

■ If you spent time talking with Bertie as he plays with the doll would there be a more positive outcome?

■ Is this a safeguarding issue?

Belt and braces
B Trying to suppress Bertie's natural urges with punishment does not appeal to you. Yet it is clear the behaviour needs to be modified. You decide to make clothes as fun, curious and attractive as they can be. You put the call out to parents for any bits and pieces of fancy dress, and go about seriously upgrading the dressing up box. Rejecting the old jumble of random items, you enlist the children's help to hang

costumes, categorise them and sort them. As new costumes emerge, a desperate urge grows in each child to take on a particular role. Suddenly, having lots of clothes is far more appealing than having none. The children arrive for each day keen to dress up rather than dress down. The first week is hectic with detailed negotiations on whose turn it is to wear what, but by the second week the children are happy to wear just a beard and moustache... Well, the girls are anyway. Bertie is utterly lost in his make believe world from the first day, his naked ambition finally scotched by his relentless desire to be a superhero. And yes, Bertie, even the Invisible Man was fully dressed!

Talking behaviour

- *Wouldn't punishment be a quicker solution?*
- *How does the involvement of the other children in this strategy help everyone?*
- *What would be your next move if he went back to his old routine?*

C **Things are different here**
You agree with Bertie and Mum that there are different rules in the nursery. You underline that Bertie cannot get undressed in front of the other children. Mum agrees that Bertie's reward for a whole day of being dressed will be 'crazy shirtless time' at home. You make it clear that if Bertie chooses to take clothes off he will be moved away from the others for five minutes. This seems a simple and straightforward carrot and stick approach. Bound to work.

Things don't start smoothly. The first time that Bertie has to sit away from the others he takes the opportunity to put his trousers on his head and t-shirt around his legs. By the end of the second day he has spent too much time in the 'thinking corner' and way too much time semi-naked.

Mum soon reports that the situation at home has deteriorated rapidly. Bertie is virtually in his birthday suit by the time they get home from school. He now refuses to wear clothes at home at all, and whilst this is not ideal Mum also reports that this has resulted in Bertie refusing to get dressed in

the mornings. The 'leaving mum in the morning' routine is also suffering, and although Bertie is generally more clothed in nursery, the pay off is seeding problems in other areas. You agree to rethink the strategy as it seems you are creating more behaviours than you are solving.

Talking Behaviour

- *Should rewards and consequences be applied by the same person?*
- *What is an appropriate consequence for his behaviour?*
- *What needs to change at home to make sure all the adults are being consistent?*

Which approach did you use?

A YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Wishful thinking

You may have been watching too many 'emotional trauma movies'. Playing with a toy might help Bertie to explain how he feels when he gets undressed, but it won't ever provide a substitute for the real feeling or the reaction of a real audience. Asking him to signal when he wants to get

undressed is, however, a good strategy. It will help him to recognise when he can make a different choice.

B YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Cure with curiosity

You understand that you can change behaviour in less direct and dictatorial fashion. By stimulating the children's curiosity and then supporting this with a new routine, old rituals are soon forgotten. Your patience and guile mean that neither Bertie nor his Mum feel like they are failing.

C YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Blunt stick

You get more of the behaviour that you recognise most often. With a heavy focus on undressing you may be encouraging more of the behaviour that you are trying to stop. Carrots and sticks can be useful for encouraging/discouraging functional behaviours (coats on, line up, one voice, etc.) but Bertie's desire to run free is born of a more complex emotional need. Because of his age, he needs a more subtle and sensitive approach that punishment isn't sophisticated enough to deal with.

With a heavy **focus** on **undressing** you may be **encouraging** more of the **behaviour** that you are trying to **stop**

find out more

If you want to learn outstanding behaviour practice for yourself, have a look at Paul's Online Behaviour Management Course for early years and nursery nurses at pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources. Join the conversation on Twitter @PivotalPaul

