

take it slowly

Decelerating children's poor behaviour and stepping calmly through consequences will yield positive results, says **Paul Dix**...



can a child accelerate to the top? True skill in the management of behaviour lies in increasing disapproval in tiny increments. Skilful shifts in intonation, verbal and physical language cues stop you relying on the big sticks. From disappointment to disapproval, there are a million shades in between. The best actors only ever show part of their range, the rest left for the audience to guess, and so it goes in the nursery. The adult who barks constantly at the children is soon ignored; those who never shout always have somewhere to go. Your skilful management of behaviour can be as useful in demonstrating linguistic skills as your well-rehearsed reading of *Bear Snores On!*

There are more subtle skills that it's not easy to observe in others: control over the pace of the conversation, the subtle tonal changes of direction, empathetic shifts in body language. Being able to manage the arc of the intervention and end on the right note can be the difference between compliance and crisis. Your behaviour directly influences the outcome. From the time you take to calmly repeat instructions to the contrast you make with a sharp 'No', it's

the unseen skills that are pivotal.

The skill is in decelerating, in slowing down the rush towards consequence and encouraging pause for thought. Offering to 'make a deal', giving the child a clear choice, walking

away and giving 'take up' time, waiting for the tears to stop, diverting attention, refocusing on the rules, criticising the behaviour and not the child. For some children, the distance between emotional upset and physical aggression is short. The quicker you can decelerate, the less chance you have of the legs kicking out or the hands grabbing for hair.

Model behaviour

When you intervene to stop poor behaviour, it's the model that you give to the child that is critical. Not simply the model of your own calm and assertive behaviour, but the example that

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PAUL DIX

Our emotional responses to poor behaviour are often disproportionate. Reaching for the 'biggest stick to crack the smallest nut' is irrational and unfair. It might seem to work for a short time, but you are storing up problems for later. Use the biggest sanctions too soon and you leave yourself nowhere to go. Lead with fear and no one thinks that their behaviour is their responsibility.

What does your ladder of consequences look like? Is it planned in big steps or small increments? How fast

The three 'A's

WHEN YOU INTERVENE IN POOR BEHAVIOUR, THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING...

Audience

How might the audience affect the interaction? How could they be affected by it? Consider moving to quieter space or having the conversation away from the group.

Acceleration

How can you stop the situation accelerating? Which deceleration techniques work with this child?

Anger

How are you managing your anger and the anger/emotion of the child? Do you need to give the child time to calm down, time to think or consider their next move?

you use of the child's previous conduct. "Do you remember when I gave you the sticker before, that is the behaviour that I need to see from you, that is the lovely Sam that we know." Of course, you'll need to expend energy in creating this anchor, in catching children behaving well and marking the moment. It's time well spent and should be the foundation for all of the work you do on behaviour.

Unfortunately, careful 'stepping' of consequences in the nursery can quickly be undermined at home. In some homes, big sticks can be seen as a quick fix for younger children. Encourage consistency between the nursery and home by telling parents what you're using, what works and what you're aiming to do. Frame the conversation around 'teaching Sam to take responsibility for his own behaviour' and they will sense that you're on their side. Explain the steps that you use to intervene, reflect and repair.

The mindset that you choose to adopt before you decide to intervene is crucial. See the child's behaviour as a

symptom of 'broken Britain', a symbol of society in decline or the ills of modern parenting, and you're unlikely to achieve the inner calm that you'll undoubtedly need to deal with the tantrum/dirty protest/uninvited 'hairdressing'. How you frame or reframe the behaviour in your head will affect how and what you say about it. Check your emotional response throughout. Plan your interventions or your thoughts may ambush you. Words follow thoughts like ducklings following their mother. You perceive it, ruminate on it and then speak it.

versions of adults, they are apprentice adults. Their brains are not small versions of our own. They're in rapid development, not fully formed, and the emotional triggers and routines need learning, internalising and embedding. Teach them that their behaviour can provoke a disproportionate response and you teach them a dangerous lesson: that your emotional response is controlled by their actions. That is too much power in the hands of an apprentice. Such power corrupts. It can tempt some to make a habit of it...

Consider rewards

As you step your negative consequences for poor behaviour, consider the steps that you use in the other direction. Smiles, stickers, smiley faces, special cushions, responsibility, going first – just as with your response to poor behaviour, it's small increments that work, as they keep the children's expectations realistic and are sustainable over weeks.

Children are not imperfect

Watch your thoughts

They become words

Watch your words

They become actions

Watch your actions

They become habits

Watch your habits

They become character

Watch your character

It becomes your destiny

LAO TZE



Small steps

Redirection

Non-verbal cues, adjust seating plan, acknowledgement

Rule Reminder

Clarify expectations, give choices, remind of previous good conduct

Repair

Repair trust with the child, talk through what happened

Verbal Warning

Calm assertive intervention, clear verbal warning, clarify choices

Time out

Five minutes maximum, reset expectations, allow time for tempers to calm

Disappointment Points

Emphasise child's choices, show disappointment, re-engage

findoutmore

Paul Dix is Managing Director of Pivotal Education and author of *Taking Care of Behaviour*. His one man show, 'The Behaviour Show', is on at The Space Theatre London E14 on November 8th. Tickets are £12 and available from The Space box office – call 0207 000 1735 or visit space.org.uk/?page_id=1409&event=pauldix

Support Request (Panic Button): Request for support from Senior Staff.

(For example: violent tantrum, other children at risk of harm)