

Mo loves messy play. He likes nothing better than upending a box and swimming in Lego, liberally flicking paint on the walls, or wallowing in the only island of mud in a concrete playground sea. There is a furious pace to his play that is hard to keep up with. After a few days of running around and clearing up his devastation you are exhausted. The trouble is, Mo loves messy play but hates clearing up. Hates it with a passion. The monumental effort it seems to take to place a single block in the box is a performance to behold. The tears and anger follow shortly afterwards. Even when you try to help him to clear up, he tries to do as little as possible. From behind his screw face there are mutterings of "Woman's work!" that you have so far ignored. As you find yourself on your hands and knees hoovering up glitter again, you realise two things: Mo's behaviour needs to change, and you need more lockable cupboards...

How do you respond?

A Pincer movement – team up and quickly agree a strategy with Mum.

B Carrot and brick – baton down the hatches; take the messy stuff away until Mo can learn to clear away his own mess.

C Peer pressure – some of the children are brilliant at clearing up. See if you can get this to rub off on Mo.

The consequences

A Pincer movement Talking to Mum, you realise that there are different rules operating at home. As you try to steer the conversation around to Mo's aversion to clearing up, she makes excuses for him. She tells you that he has always hated it, and to avoid the tears and tantrums, they clear up after him at home.

It seems that Mo is rarely challenged to tidy his own mess, and you explain that this is making things difficult in the nursery. Mum seems slightly incredulous when you explain that it is not your job to clear up after Mo. You suspect that she believes that is precisely the job you have got and at 3pm she takes over again.

You try to broker an agreement with Mum about Mo's behaviour at



home, but she is not really interested. There, the women do the clearing up, and she is not sure that her husband would agree to Mo becoming a 'domestic servant'. Besides, she just wants Mo to "be a child" and not take on "adult responsibilities". She explains that she spent most of her childhood working in the home and she is not

prepared to have Mo doing the same thing. The conversation becomes a little prickly, and it is clear that there are different values operating at home and nursery. Your intervention does not end with a positive resolution and you wonder where to turn next.

Talking behaviour

- *Is it right to challenge the values that are prompted by parents?*
- *Is Mo's mum wrong to clear up after him?*
- *How do you change a child's behaviour without support from home?*

B Carrot and brick Reducing Mo's access to messy play immediately seems cruel. He stares longingly out of the window at the muddy patch, pushes

around his seven pieces of Lego with sadness, and has taken it as a personal affront that the paints have been moved to a higher shelf. Even with his restricted access he still causes a fuss when it is time to clear up. Yet you calmly persist, balancing your positive reinforcement with the threat of further restricting his play. Unfortunately, by the second day of your new regime, Mo tests the boundaries. The Lego pieces are thrown to the four corners of the room, the muddy patch is secretly accessed and someone has climbed up to the forbidden shelf. You want to teach him to clear up his own mess, but his obstinacy is remarkable. It seems that the further you restrict his movements, the less cooperative he becomes. The sanctions are simply exacerbating the problem, and the positive reinforcement is not penetrating his thick skin. You are not sure how long you can continue with this strategy. The other children are starting to feel sorry for Mo, and he is enjoying the negative attention much more than the positive...

Can't clean, won't clean



When the messy play never seems to end, it's time to take considered action, says **Paul Dix...**

Talking behaviour

- At what age can children learn through reward and sanction?
- Does restricting Mo's access to messy play solve the problem?
- Are there some tweaks to this strategy that might improve it dramatically?

C **Peer pressure**
There are a group of children who are fantastic at clearing up. They quietly get on with it without a fuss. Yet these children are not Mo's natural allies. You resolve to split the children into teams for clearing up. Alongside this, you introduce some 'tidy up' music to give clearing up a sense of urgency.

Mo seems unimpressed with the new team and complains bitterly that he would prefer to be with his friends. He is more enthusiastic about the clearing up music as you allowed him to choose it. It is his favourite tune. After a rocky start, with Mo demonstrating some non-essential dance moves, he is drawn into the group. As all the children are clearing up together, he no longer feels exposed. The routine is normalised, and although he is still not the most enthusiastic at clearing up, he has stopped crying and stamping his feet.

The other children are brilliant at gently encouraging his involvement. They ask him for help rather than ordering him around; they model the behaviour that you are trying to teach. You resist the temptation to dive into the group and offer advice. When you see Mo standing back you wait those extra moments to see what choices he will make without your intervention. As the routine develops there is teamwork emerging and the other children's expectations of Mo begin to change. Some days are better than others, but gradually it is clear that the other children have taught Mo as well as you ever could have done.

Talking Behaviour

- What other musical cues could you use to sharpen the focus on behavioural routines?
- Is peer influence more effective than teacher instruction?
- What other behaviours are taught by the children?

Which approach did you use?

A YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Home help

The values that you hold dear in the nursery are not always shared at home. At times, Mum can be really useful in supporting new routines and behaviours; at others it is more effective to concentrate on what you can control - what happens in your room. Before you run to Mum, try to adjust the behaviour yourself.

B YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE Clumsy carrots

Carrot and stick is only one way of teaching behaviour. Nothing works

Try not to get caught up with sanctioning very young children; it can quickly spiral out of control

universally and adjusting Mo's learned behaviours needs a more intelligent approach. Try not to get caught up with sanctioning very young children. It can quickly spiral out of control as children at that age don't have the ability to reflect on their own behaviour and adjust it accordingly. Punishment doesn't teach new behaviours, it simply stamps on the ones that you don't want.

C YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE It's not all about me

You realise that behaviour is not simply taught by adults but learned through the behaviour of others. Your creative solution means that you have to step back a little. At first this is always uncomfortable, but you know that children can slip into new routines without the threat of sanction or indeed the bribe of a sparkly reward.

findoutmore

Paul Dix is author of *Taking Care of Behaviour* and runs a leading training consultancy. If you want to learn outstanding behaviour practice for yourself, have a look at Paul's Online Behaviour Course for Early Years. Visit www.pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources or join the conversation on Twitter @PivotalPaul. You can also find a new, free behaviour podcast on pivotalpodcast.com

