

THE JOINT approach

Managing problematic behaviour requires a strong partnership with parents, says **Paul Dix**...

Handing over a child at the end of the day with a detailed crime sheet seems like a responsible act. The trouble is that many young children struggle to recall what happened five minutes ago, let alone the paint-splattered, hair-pulling struggle that kicked off at lunchtime. As the parent (through slightly clenched teeth) thanks you for the information, they try to hide their embarrassment from others. Whisking their child away you can see them wondering how to correct the litany of paint, poking and poo crimes remotely. The truth is that parents can't remotely control their children, and unless there's a well-communicated, focused and agreed plan, the crime sheet will make a daily appearance.

The old metaphor of the child as a three-legged stool supported by nursery, home and community is still relevant today. Take a leg away and the child starts to wobble. Work out how to communicate effectively with and engage parents and you can give stability back to the wobblest children.

For children who struggle to control their behaviour, a clear, simple and practical agreement must be in place with the home, one that fits with the approach at nursery and is targeted to change one behaviour at a time.

Conversations at the door can elicit defensive reactions from even the calmest parent. Meet in private to discuss behaviour. When you meet, resist the urge to reveal the entire catalogue of crimes. The meeting must be a genuine request for support. Ask questions, refuse to discuss other children and keep the collaborative atmosphere

Watch out for...

Becoming too familiar and informal with parents – especially in the early stages of the relationship they may interpret your throwaway remarks as an indicator of your level of professionalism and commitment to their child. Keep your conversation friendly but always professional, and don't take risks by being indiscreet or flippant.

irresistible. Criticise the child and parents can infer personal criticism. Gently negotiate the level of rewards and sanctions that might be appropriate. In some homes sanctions still result in physical punishment, in others rewards are over inflated. Be specific and negotiate small rewards and small sanctions. It's not the size of the sanction or reward but the speed and manner in which given.



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PAUL DIX



Practical steps

Sharpen the lines of communication and try a very simple practical approach. With paper wristbands that you'll have seen at swimming pools or festivals you can communicate discreetly with all parents and sustain a consistent approach. For each child note down the five key daily activities on the wristband. All parents now have a chance to have an insight into what their child has been doing and to have an informed conversation at the dinner table. This clarity means that parents can ask their children about the day rather than rely on the child telling them. For children who need support with their behaviour you can agree a subtle coding so that the parent knows not just what happened but when it happened and what the child was doing. Try different colour pens to code it or small dots to indicate good behaviour and ticks to identify problem areas. The quality of the conversation at home, the ability to recall and the willingness to discuss are immediately enhanced.

Now agree with the parent a simple rule to focus on for the first week. This is not to say that you're going to ignore other behaviours but that one will have a strong emphasis. It's this behaviour that will be discussed at home, reviewed over breakfast and reinforced on the journey in. It's this behaviour that is the focus for rewards and sanctions if

find out more

Paul Dix is a multi award winning behaviour specialist. For free tips and a free sample of his Online Behaviour Management Course, email ellie@pivotaleducation.com or call 0207 000 1735.

necessary. With parent, child and practitioner all trying to adjust a single behaviour the chances of success are vastly increased.

Of course, if the children are wearing wristbands you might want to include information that may be useful to other members of staff too. Smiley face stickers to indicate that the child has been to the toilet, a note to say Dad is doing the pick up, or a reminder of allergies that we need to be aware of. Analogue paper solutions may not be very 21st century, but they are simple enough to work, easily sustainable and can be used immediately.

The management of parents is often far trickier than managing the behaviour of the children. Tempting Carly out from behind the coats seems like a walk in the park compared to meeting with her mother. With strategies for both mother and daughter you can create a consistency that ripples through the classroom and the home.

Watch out for...

Making assumptions about the domestic circumstances of a student. Your complaints about punctuality may seem trivial when you discover just how many people are living in one house, or that there has been a recent bereavement in the family.

Meeting the parents

- Try not to dive in with the conversation that you want to have. Diffuse the parent's anxiety before you discuss their child's behaviour or the two may become one.
- Ask for help and advice. Try not to tell the parent how to manage their child's behaviour but search for collaborative approaches.
- Make notes during the meeting so that you can send the parent a record of what you've discussed.
- Try to understand the style of parenting and the common approaches at home.
- Make small agreements that last a week and are then reviewed.
- Don't discuss the behaviour of other children or the attitude of other parents during the meeting.
- After the meeting refer to any agreements made between you in private and not in front of other parents.

Start with the good stuff...

You'll find that starting communication with parents with positive news about the behaviour of their child is a much easier way in. It also makes them more disposed to support you when there are problems. If you contact parents for the first time with bad news they'll make assumptions about how you deal with behaviour. If you open your discussion with the crimes the response may well be defensive. Send some positive notes home early in the new term and you'll get parents on side quickly. Let the parent know the good stuff first so that you can set the poor behaviour in context. When they realize that you recognise the good behaviour first they'll be more disposed to listen and act on the bad news.

