

THE PERFECT role model

How you react to challenging behaviour is the key to improving it in your setting, says **Paul Dix**...

From the children in your setting you may hear echoes of chaotic home lives, snippets of bad attitudes or wisps of fruity language. You have little influence on the models of behaviour that are demonstrated at home, but your model can be less improvised, more carefully planned. It will need to be. The tears, tantrums and screaming fits that get results at home for some children will not work in the classroom.

There's an advertising campaign in Australia that shows parents smoking, arguing with other drivers, dropping litter and more, while their children follow them doing exactly the same thing. The message is hard hitting but simple: children see, children do. In the classroom there are many influences on the way that children behave, but our behaviour has the most powerful effect.

Small adjustments to your own behaviour can have a huge impact: using more non-verbal cues; subtle changes in tone, pace and

volume of the voice; suppressing emotional response; getting as close to the child's eye level as is practical; turning away from children and leading them rather than standing over them and directing; standing at the door, smiling and welcoming children in; feigning excitement well and disappointment brilliantly. But whilst on a Monday morning we may be able to improvise this performance convincingly, by Thursday afternoon lines are dropped and the audience begins heckling...

Putting on a performance

If children's behaviour meets the adult's emotion, disproportionate responses are inevitable. It's so tempting to grab the biggest sledgehammer to crack the smallest nut. It seems rational to come down hard, squash the behaviour, make sure it never happens again. Yet human beings respond differently to being squashed. Some are scared, others enjoy the attention, many begin to mistrust. If behaviour management was as simple as stamping on bad behaviour you wouldn't be reading this

article and I would have nothing to write about.

Your teaching performance needs to be carefully honed. A polished and exaggerated model of a civilised human being needs rehearsal! To sustain a strong model and make it obvious, clear and unassailable is quite a skill. Honest self-reflection and at times direction from others is essential if you are to maintain the most convincing performance.

The effect of a good performance at the beginning of the day is palpable. Your enthusiasm for the arrival of the children sets the tone, your consistent routine makes the hand-over safe and predictable. The power of your smile is infectious, your energy irresistible. At other times your behaviour has a more gradual effect, one that develops over time. It's the certainty of your positive reinforcement, the gently repetitive and insistent interventions and unflappable commitment to success that erodes bad habits and builds a strong model.

Being able to leave your own life at the door, to celebrate small success with a dramatic flourish, and to deliver your lines with conviction all contributes to the best performances. At times they're Oscar-winning: to pretend that you actually care about who goes first, to fake patience when you're asked the same question for the ninth time, repressing your natural urge to gag in the face of Kylie's dirty protest. It's your performance that directly affects the behaviour of the children, your reassurance that makes even a tricky day feel safe.



Changing your behaviour to change theirs is not a quick fix. It's the drip feed of your positive model that has the most profound effect over time

PAUL DIX



Keeping your cool

Working with young children every day has a strange effect on your ability to keep your reactions and responses proportionate. To the outside eye the paint squirted on the wall (again!) seems charming and amusing. From the inside the repeated defiance of a three-year-old can seem like a planned personal attack – one perfectly timed to cause maximum stress, disruption and confusion. You begin to think they're ganging up on you.

We can feel ourselves raising our voices and yet we know that it's going to do more harm than good. We can feel the frustration rising and are conscious of what's happening, yet it seems impossible to stop. Emotions are difficult to turn off. To really address our emotional responses we need to examine our thoughts. Emotions follow thoughts like ducklings following their mother.

You see a situation, think on it and then emote. If you can tilt your thoughts, you can change your emotional response. Reframing what you see and adjusting your response is an essential skill. Spend your time looking for bad behaviour and you'll see a lot of it. It will lead you

findoutmore

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to believe things are getting worse. Spend your time looking for good behaviour and the good behaviour seems to multiply.

Set yourself a simple aim. When children behave appropriately show them your encouragement, enthusiasm and excitement. When they choose not to follow instructions give them the calm, assertive, repetitive choice. Show them that your emotion is reserved for praise.

Changing your behaviour to change theirs is not a quick fix. It's the drip feed of your positive model that has the most profound effect over time. Changing patterns of behaviour that emerge from home takes time, patience and sensitivity. The message is simple: "When you walk through the classroom door, different behaviours work here".

Diversion ahead!

Change emotional direction with these three tips...

The skill of diversion doesn't lie in the language that you choose but in the ability to change emotional direction. Time and pace it well and the child finds it irresistible. Commit to and pursue the diversion with enthusiasm and the child moves on. Unconvincing diversions just make a frustrating situation more confused.

Verbally backing children into a corner means nobody gets their needs met. Before you find yourself in a cul de sac there are some diversions you can take:

- **Offer three choices.** Three is important as two choices usually become 'my way or the highway'. Three alternatives require some thought from the questioner and from the child.
- **Making a deal.** Everyone likes a deal and you can frame it so that the deal works in your favour. The enthusiasm with which you propose the deal is important – with some more wily children the deal will need some selling!
- **Agree for a moment.** Children's demands are not time related. Chloe must have a lie down. To the adult this appears to be a request for a lengthy nap, yet Chloe simply wants to lie down for a few seconds. She is then ready to do what you're suggesting.

