

Two of the biggest challenges children face are learning acceptable behaviour and being able to control their own behaviour. They need to be with adults who understand this and who will help them manage these tasks. Being in a small family day care group offers children opportunities to learn about looking after themselves, other people and the world around them.

Helping children learn to guide their own behaviour can be a test for carers due to the different ages of children in the group, working with your own children alongside other people's children, different family experiences, having to make decisions about reasonable limits and how to react when children's behaviour is unacceptable.

What is behaviour guidance?

Behaviour guidance is all the things you do and say to help children learn and demonstrate acceptable behaviour. The aim is for children to improve guiding and controlling their own behaviour and to rely less on carers to guide them. This takes a long time and means that the child needs to not only understand what is acceptable but also needs to develop the willpower or self control to manage their own behaviour.



The term 'behaviour guidance' is used by many people these days instead of the term discipline because they associate discipline with punishment. Behaviour guidance is different to punishment. Punishment is doing something negative to a child when they have done something you do not approve of. Punishment does not help children learn to guide their own behaviour, but rather teaches them to try to avoid getting caught. Punishment involves the use of power and teaches children that if you are the person with the most power you can use that over others. Punishment is often disrespectful to the child. Guiding behaviour, on the other hand, although it requires firmness at times, is always respectful of the child.

As a carer you will use what you know about supporting children's learning in general to help children develop skills to guide their own behaviour. Behaviour guidance is more than reacting when

children do something unacceptable. It is about supporting children to learn to do the 'right' thing and to want to do it. As with all learning, the foundation of children's learning is the warm and caring relationship between you and the child.

How does the child's age affect what you do?

A child's age is important to everything you do. Just as you would not expect a baby to use a ball the same way a four or nine year old would, so you adjust the ways you speak to children and guide their behaviour. However, regardless of a child's age there are some common guidelines. It is important to take a positive approach and show respect for the child. It is also important to remember that your aim is for children to take increasing responsibility for guiding their own behaviour.

Behaviour guidance is part of your relationship and daily interactions with all children, including babies and toddlers. For example, you help children to learn to guide their behaviour when you:

- help them to feel secure and let them know that you are there to help them
- let them know when they have done something that you approve of. For example, something kind or helpful
- encourage them to use language to express their needs, wants and feelings
- help them deal with conflict constructively
- offer materials, equipment and experiences that engage their interests
- give them choices and let them make some decisions
- respect their individual preferences for time away from the group, active play, and quiet times
- help them to feel good about themselves and to appreciate, care for and respect others

As children develop they gain skills and abilities that can help them to guide their own behaviour. These include:

- increasing willpower and self control – they are better able to wait, share, stop, sit still, be in a group for extended amounts of time
- an increased understanding of appropriate and acceptable behaviour
- the ability to make judgements about the context or situation and which behaviour is appropriate to this
- the ability to communicate what they want and express their feelings in words
- improved memory
- a reduced need to be 'hands on' and the ability to stand back and watch without touching
- the ability to respect the needs and rights of others better

There are periods when many children have a developmental need to assert themselves. This is typical of toddlers who are establishing their sense of self and what their rights are, as well as learning the limits of their own power and learning to get along with others. Adults need to support and guide toddlers so that they feel good about themselves and begin to take into account the needs and rights of others. Toddlers and preschool-aged children are usually developing increased self control, but can struggle with this. Sometimes they simply do not have the willpower or self control to do the 'right thing' even when they know what kind of behaviour is expected and is acceptable.

What influences behaviour guidance?

Your scheme will no doubt have policies about behaviour guidance. It is important that you understand those policies and how they relate to your daily practice. This will help you to talk about your behaviour guidance philosophy and practices with families. It is important that carers play a major role in developing and revising behaviour guidance policies so that they feel a sense of ownership of them. This can also help to ensure that the policy and strategies actually work with children.



It is worth thinking about your own beliefs about behaviour guidance, and how these are influenced by the ways adults reacted to your behaviour when you were a child. Sometimes our immediate reaction to children's behaviour is emotional. It can be beneficial in quieter times and in training sessions or discussions with other carers and coordination unit staff to consider how you respond to children's behaviour, and the ways you could change or improve this. Some questions to consider about children's behaviour and how you guide this include:

Is the situation or the environment contributing to or creating problems?

Some environmental factors that can contribute to inappropriate behaviour include: too many children in too small a space, not enough equipment, a rigid schedule, limited opportunities for children to be alone or with one other child, too many or too few changes, and excessive noise, stimulation or excitement. Changing the environment or situation to support children to do the 'right thing' and avoid or reduce problems can be helpful.

Are my expectations appropriate?

Think about whether you are expecting children to behave in ways that do not suit their current skills or abilities.

How serious is the behaviour?

Try to match the seriousness and strength of your reaction to the seriousness of the child's behaviour so that they get a sense of what matters strongly and what is relatively minor. Save your sternest responses for the most unacceptable behaviours, such as hurting another child.

Am I being consistent?

Responding to the same behaviour in exactly the same way every time is not always possible. However, a consistent response assists children to learn more quickly which behaviours you do not approve of or allow. For example, if swearing is sometimes ignored, sometimes laughed at, and at other times responded to with a strong reprimand, a child may find it difficult to determine the boundaries related to this behaviour.

What response will help a child to stop a behaviour?

No response is likely to stop a behaviour forever, but it is worthwhile thinking about responses that most effectively help a child to demonstrate desirable behaviours and to reduce undesirable behaviours.

How is the child likely to be feeling – what does this situation mean for the child?

Empathy, or trying to put yourself in the child's place, often helps you figure out the most effective response

to their behaviour. Behaviours do not necessarily mean the same thing to a child as they do to an adult. Sometimes children make mistakes, sometimes they do inappropriate things with good intentions, and sometimes they react inappropriately due to their skills, abilities or the environment.

To what extent is my mood contributing to my reactions?

Children need clear messages from adults. Sometimes our reaction is an immediate emotional reaction because we are frustrated, tired or impatient. Our responses in those situations may not be constructive. Be aware of the extent to which your mood affects the way you guide children's behaviour.

The emphasis here is on behaviour guidance that teaches and shows respect. When responding to a child's behaviour it is important to make sure you are doing so in ways that do not embarrass or shame them or give them the idea that they are unworthy, naughty, stupid or not cared about.



Effective ways to help children learn to guide their behaviour

Keep in mind the power of modelling

Children learn much more from our own behaviour than they do from what we tell them about how they should behave.

Use words and actions

Sometimes words are not enough. As children may lack the willpower to do what you've asked them to do, you may need to physically help them move on or to stop doing something that is not allowed. It is important to ensure that any physical contact conveys respect to the child.

Explain

For children to learn to guide their own behaviour they need help to understand what is acceptable and what is not. For example, they may not understand why it is okay to throw a ball outside but not inside; why they have to wait to use the new toy; why they must wait for you before crossing the street;

why they cannot draw on the walls; why it is wrong to pull someone's hair to get them to move. The answers to these questions can be obvious to us but not always to children. Of course, the explanation needs to be tailored to the child's level of understanding.

Be firm when you need to be

Behaviour guidance that respects and teaches children is not a 'soft option' and is not about giving in. Children need the security that comes with knowing that there are limits and that when they need help with their behaviour they will get it. Children need adults to set reasonable boundaries and enforce them. They need clear messages about what behaviours are acceptable and what are not. They need to know when their behaviour has made you feel upset or worried and when it has pleased you.

Give choices and empower children appropriately

Support children to make some decisions about their own experiences. Behaviour problems can arise from frustration when children feel as though they have no say in their daily experiences and activities.

Avoid encouraging 'hollow' gestures

Adults often require children to say they are sorry when they have hurt another child or done something else that is not acceptable. Carers are always working to help children appreciate the effect their behaviour has on other people, and that is why you talk to a child about what they have done and how that makes others feel. We want children to eventually understand enough to feel sorry, but there is no point in getting them to say the words without the genuine feeling. For example, getting a child to say "I'm sorry" if they are too young to understand what that means or if they do not feel sorry may not help the child to develop the ability to manage their own behaviour.

Try to avoid power struggles

Even in situations where there are strong feelings and direct conflict, act in ways that let the child know that you are on their side. Try to come up with win-win situations. This may require some negotiation with the child and you may need to make some concessions.

Acknowledge desirable behaviour

Let children know when they do things that you approve of or that you want to see more of. As guiding behaviour is teaching children, it is important to help children learn what you want them to do rather than what you don't want them to do.

Try to approach guiding children's behaviour in a way that tells the child "I know this is hard for you, but I will help you. I am on your side."

How can families be involved in behaviour guidance?

It is important to inform families about your approach to guiding children's behaviour. When there are problems or issues with a particular child, you need to consider whether or not to talk to parents about them. Although open, honest communication is strongly encouraged, it is important for carers to 'own' children's behaviour that happens in the family day care home and to take responsibility for it.

When you do decide to talk to parents, be sure that you do so in ways that show that you are not trying to put blame or responsibility for the child's behaviour on them. With many behaviours it is important that families and the carer take the same approach to guidance behaviour so that the child receives a consistent message.

Of course, no parent wants to get 'bad news' about their child, so take care to pick appropriate times and situations to discuss any concerns about a child's behaviour.

Carers can play an important role in helping families guide their child's behaviour in positive and effective ways. Some families are unsure of ways to guide their children's behaviour and may benefit when carers work with and support them in this area. Most families are doing their best with what they know, so it is critical for carers to approach collaboration with families regarding their child's behaviour respectfully and supportively.

Families need support, not judgements and criticism. As with so many areas of communication and relationships, it helps to put yourself in the shoes of the family whose child is demonstrating challenging behaviour and to think how you may feel in the same situation. A professional approach means that even when you are unsure of a solution, you present a positive attitude to families, indicating that together you can solve the problem.

Occasionally you may have families asking you to respond to their child's behaviour in ways that do not meet scheme policy. It is important in this situation to talk with them about their concerns and explain the strategies that you take under the scheme's policies and the reasons for these. Carers need to work with families to implement appropriate strategies to guide children's behaviours.

When carers and families have different views regarding behaviour guidance, the carer may need to seek support from the coordination unit. Most families want the same outcomes for their child as you do, though there may be different ideas about how to achieve those outcomes. When a carer responds respectfully and discusses the child's behaviour and the scheme's policies, the relationship can be strengthened and the family may gain a broader perspective of their child's behaviour.

What role do children play in behaviour guidance?

An important part of helping children learn to guide their behaviour is giving them some responsibility. This begins with having appropriate expectations. Talk with them about their behaviour. Let them know that you trust them. Help them learn to self regulate, for example, to take themselves away from the group to have some quiet time when they need it. Encourage them to help others and remind others of rules and limits. But let them know that you are always there to help.

Especially when there are older children in care, discuss rules and limits. Ask them what they think is reasonable. Think carefully about and discuss with children issues related to having different limits and rules for children of different ages.

Creating a caring and respectful environment assists everyone to feel part of the group and to take responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

Further Information

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