

Strategies to guide children's behaviour

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Behaviour guidance

The term 'behaviour guidance' is used throughout these practice notes to reflect current thinking about the most positive and effective ways to help children gain understandings and learn skills that will help them to learn to manage their own behaviour.

Children's Services Act 1996 (Victorian Act) and Children's Services Regulations 2009 (Victorian Regulations)

Guiding children's behaviour is an important aspect of caring for or educating young children. Positive strategies need to be developed to assist children learn appropriate ways of behaving. Corporal punishment and unreasonable discipline are not permitted in children's services, not only because the child may be physically harmed, but also because it nearly always has detrimental effects on the child's self-esteem and feelings of security.

There are important obligations on children's services in relation to guiding behaviour:

- children's services must ensure no child being cared for or educated by the service is subjected to any form of corporal punishment or any discipline that is unreasonable in the circumstances (section 28)
- children's services must ensure that every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children being cared for or educated by the service from harm and any hazard likely to cause injury (section 26)
- the children's service must have a policy about behaviour management (behaviour guidance) that is available for inspection at all times the service is open (regulations 41(e) and 46(3)(b)).

The discipline of children is of such significance that it is contained within the Victorian Act and one of the heaviest penalties applies where it can be proven that a child has been subject to inappropriate discipline.

Behaviour guidance in practice

Behaviour guidance is part of the educational or recreational program in a children's service. It occurs in all interactions and communication with children, not only when children engage in challenging behaviour. The policy and strategies for behaviour guidance adopted by a children's service may impact either positively or negatively on children's behaviour. The service's approach to behaviour guidance in daily practice has a major effect on learning outcomes for children.

Research indicates that quality learning environments and sensitive, nurturing adults are essential for achieving positive learning outcomes for children. Adults must cater for the individual needs of children and respond to their interests. When staff members adopt a positive and active approach to behaviour guidance, they reduce challenging behaviours and encourage children to achieve success, develop positive self-esteem and increase competence.

A positive and active approach includes considering the reasons for children's challenging behaviour, not just dealing with the behaviour itself. This is based on the understanding that if only the behaviour itself is addressed, it may disappear but be replaced by another challenging behaviour.

Strategies for responding to ongoing challenging behaviour must comply with section 28 of the Victorian Act which requires that no child being cared for or educated by the service is subjected to any form of corporal punishment, or any discipline which is unreasonable in the circumstances. For example, it would be considered unreasonable if a child were moved to a designated part of the room that is identified as a punishment area, such as a particular chair in the corner,

or taken to another room and isolated from other children.

Guidance strategies

The educational or recreational program and behaviour guidance strategies that a children's service develops can assist in ensuring children's individual and developmental needs are met and help them develop positive behaviour.

The following suggestions provide direction for guiding children's behaviour:

Social environment

Children who play and learn in an environment which promotes positive social relationships are less likely to display inappropriate behaviours. Positive relationships are developed when staff members:

- establish positive relationships with children
- empower children to use language and other forms of non-hurtful communication to communicate their emotions
- promote positive, empathetic relationships between children assisting them to develop respectful relationships
- encourage and assist children to make decisions for themselves and provide opportunities for independence and self regulation
- provide clear and reasonable limits so that children know what is expected of them and follow through to help them abide by the limits
- model appropriate behaviours
- provide positive feedback and focus on children's strengths and achievements and build on their abilities
- be understanding and supportive – acknowledge children's emotions
- help children develop a sense of social responsibility, so that they become aware of the impact of their actions on others
- promote children's initiative and agency
- discuss guidelines, rules, limits and what is fair with children, and use their contributions in setting limits and guidelines.

Physical environment

Children who are engaged and active are less likely to display challenging behaviours. The physical environment needs to provide developmentally appropriate materials and equipment so that children do not become bored or frustrated, which is likely to result in challenging behaviour.

To make sure that children are engaged it is important to:

- provide interesting and age appropriate equipment and materials
- make sure that there are plenty of opportunities for outdoor play
- set up the environment so that children can engage according to their abilities and interests
- provide sufficient materials and equipment
- balance children's need for sameness and variety by making appropriate changes to the environment and materials and equipment in it
- model care of equipment and materials and help children learn to care for them
- limit the number of children in areas appropriately
- give children opportunities for independent and solitary play
- arrange the environment so that there is easy movement within and between areas
- set up environments that give children choices about working and playing alone, with one or two other children, or being part of a larger group and that support engagement and concentration
- make sure that there is enough space overall so that children have choices about being together.

Program structure

In planning the educational or recreational program for the children, consider the following:

- the way routines or transition times are planned so that they are relaxed and children are not rushed
- allow for flexible routines, e.g. allowing a child to eat when they are hungry
- maximise choices throughout the day. For example, if there are children who do not sleep during rest time provide them with a choice of quiet activities that they can participate in
- provide for many child initiated experiences
- organise the day into big 'chunks' of time, so that children have sufficient time to engage in experiences.

Guiding children's behaviour

Every children's service will need to have in place a range of behaviour guidance strategies that help children learn to guide their behaviour. These ways of guiding behaviour need to be used consistently by all staff members involved with the child.

The aim is for children over time to rely less on adults to guide them as they develop their own self-control and

understand what acceptable behaviour is. With this aim in mind, the following points may assist in developing behaviour guidance strategies:

- establish positive relationships, which are the foundation for building children's self-respect, self-worth and feelings of security
- observe children to identify triggers for challenging behaviours. Pay attention to the child's developmental level and any program issues that may be impacting on the behaviour
- use positive approaches to behaviour guidance. Some of these include positive acknowledgement, redirection, giving explanations, encouragement, giving help, collaborating to solve problems and helping children to understand the consequences and impact of their behaviour
- support children by providing acceptable alternative behaviours when challenging behaviour occurs
- ensure limits are consistent, carried out in a calm, firm manner, followed through and that children are helped to behave within the limits
- involve the family and the child in appropriate ways in addressing challenging behaviour
- use other professionals when necessary to help with behaviour guidance, for example, the Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) or the Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF)
- identify children's strengths and build on them
- seek support from other staff members and management

Some questions that may be helpful for staff members in responding to children's behaviour are:

- What are the possible causes for the behaviour?
- Would the behaviour be addressed by the child developing some new skills?
- Is the behaviour appropriate for the child's age or developmental level?
- What is the goal of the behaviour? e.g. What is the child trying to communicate?
- Is the environment or the program contributing to the behaviour?
- What are my expectations about appropriate behaviour? Are they suitable in the circumstances? Are my interactions contributing to the behaviour?
- Are there triggers for the child's behaviour? What happened before the behaviour occurred? Are there times or situations when the behaviour is more likely to occur?
- Is there a change in the child's life that is affecting her or his behaviour?
- Do I need to seek assistance from another professional or engage or seek external support?

- Are all staff members aware of the approach to behaviour guidance and consistent in using the approach?

Consulting and referring with other professionals

Children's services may have access to a range of existing support services. Parental consent is required where referral for intervention is requested by staff members.

When professionals from other support services become involved in assisting with a behaviour guidance program for a child, it is important that this is done in collaboration with staff members and parents. This gives everyone the opportunity for input and information about the strategies and expectations that are developed. The professional should also be made aware of the children's service's behaviour guidance policy so that the behaviour guidance strategies that are developed are consistent with the policy.

It is also important that all staff members working with the child, even if only for a short period each day, are aware that there is a specific behaviour guidance program to be followed for that child. This is necessary so that all staff members have a consistent approach to guiding children who are displaying challenging behaviour.

It is recommended that when there is an inspection of a children's service, the authorised officer is informed of the strategies in place for a particular child. Authorised officers may be contacted through Regional Offices: www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/nqf.aspx

Additional support services

After evaluating a child's behaviour, discussing the situation with parents and the child where appropriate, and trying a range of strategies, the service may wish to consider consulting with and/or engaging support professionals. Parental permission would be needed in this instance.

Some early intervention professionals who will be of assistance are:

- Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS)
- Preschool Field Officers (PSFO)
- Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISF)
- paediatric services
- other health professionals such as psychologists, speech pathologists, or occupational therapists.

Information on the above services can be found at the Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au and the Department of Education and Training at: www.education.vic.gov.au.

Related Practice Notes:

- Behaviour guidance
- Understanding children's behaviour
- Challenging behaviours
- Developing a behaviour guidance policy
- Unacceptable practices - discipline and punishment