

Understanding children's behaviour

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Behaviour guidance

The term 'behaviour guidance' is used throughout these practice notes to reflect current research and theories on the most positive and effective way to help children learn skills associated with managing their own behaviour.

Children's behaviour

Children are continuously learning how to manage their emotions and conform to the behavioural expectations of the world around them. Therefore children will sometimes express their emotions or try to achieve their goals in ways that may be challenging to others as they may lack understanding of the meaning of their expressions or the effect their actions may have on others. This is a normal part of children's growth and development and can usually be addressed through the daily behaviour guidance practice of the children's service and the adults who interact with the children.

Children display a range of behaviours that often reflect their perception of the situation they are in. These can range from passive, withdrawn or shy to uncooperative, destructive and aggressive. Staff members must consider children's developmental stages of understanding, ability to cope and skill acquisition.

Identify reasons for behaviour

When a child displays challenging behaviour, it is important to consider how frequently the behaviour occurs, and what it may be in response to, in which settings it occurs and how extreme it is. There may be times when a child displays challenging behaviour that is isolated or infrequent.

Observations need to be recorded and information collated so that the children's service can make an informed decision whether individual behaviour guidance strategies are required or whether the behaviour can be addressed through the daily behaviour guidance practice. The key to understanding children's behaviour is to aim to identify the reasons for the behaviour.

Developing a behaviour guidance policy

When behaviour disrupts the environment for children and adults, interferes with learning and is frequent and prolonged, the children's service needs to develop specific procedures and individual strategies to assist a child to develop skills in managing behaviour. (See challenging behaviours practice note for further information and descriptions of challenging behaviours).

To be able to develop a behaviour guidance policy that assists all children to manage their own behaviour and effectively meets the developmental needs, interests and experiences of children as required for the provision of educational or recreational programs, *Children's Services Act 1996* (section 26(B)), it is critical that information about the child is gathered.

This may include:

- observations of the child in the context of the educational or recreational program
- an examination of the environment to which the child is exposed
- examining the behaviour in relation to the child's age, relationships with other children and interactions with adults
- observing and recording the child's behaviour
- information from parents or guardians and staff

Factors influencing children's behaviour

There are many factors that can influence children's behaviour. It is important that the children's service is able to identify why children behave the way they do, so that they can develop strategies to assist children in managing their own behaviour.

These factors can include but are not limited to:

Factors within the service

- appropriate stimulation and equipment including room setup that is suitable for the children's age and developmental stage
- the educational or recreational program is based on the developmental needs, interests and experiences of each of the children and is sensitive to individual differences
- staff member/child relationships – when interactions between staff members and children are positive, respectful, engaging, caring and supportive, children's confidence, abilities and self-esteem are enhanced
- consider the environment – for instance, would the child's behaviour be different if they were in another room with a smaller group or a mixed age group or does the child require more targeted intervention
- consistency in care – children need reliable and consistent adults who keep them physically and emotionally safe and know their individual needs to enable them to develop the skills necessary for self-regulation such as self-esteem, confidence and trust
- adults need to consider children's behaviour in the context of their culture, their community and their family and in relation to their individual stage of development
- behaviour guidance practices need to be effective and appropriate
- staff member/adult/child ratios need to be adequate to meet the particular needs of the children at the service.

External Factors

- family relationships
- changes to family circumstances
- an event that has occurred in the community
- limited social experiences
- cultural expectations, experiences and child rearing practices
- exposure to drugs, alcohol
- the child's emotional development
- temperament.

Role of the parent/guardian

In recognition that the parent/guardian is the prime educator, it is beneficial that staff members discuss children's behaviour with them. The most effective behaviour guidance occurs when parents and the children's service work together to develop strategies to support children's behaviour at home and in the centre.

Understanding behaviour in the context of the family

Understanding each child's needs and their family circumstances is integral to this approach. A collaborative partnership between the family and the service assists staff members to have a greater understanding of the link between the service and home, and how this impacts on children's behaviour. This also provides the service with information that is critical to understanding children's behaviour and developing behaviour guidance strategies.

Adult's beliefs and children's behaviour

Children of all ages display a range of skills and characteristics. How these are interpreted is dependent on what adults believe about children's behaviour and how adults believe children's behaviour should be managed. Therefore, it is important that children's behaviour is understood in the context of one's own expectations about what is 'challenging' whilst considering children's developmental level. For instance, a child may consistently hit other children. This behaviour, although undesirable is not outside of typical development and needs to be guided accordingly.

Related practice notes

- Behaviour guidance
- Understanding children's behaviour
- Challenging behaviours
- Strategies to guide children's behaviour
- Developing a behaviour guidance policy
- Discipline of children