

Guiding Children's Behaviour

About Children's Behaviour

Developing an understanding of acceptable behaviour and being able to manage their own behaviour (self-regulation) are important aspects of a child's social and emotional development. Children's services staff play a key role in this process through guiding children's behaviour.

Guiding behaviour in young children is about helping them to learn why we behave in a certain way, rather than enforcing rules or punishment. Most children respond positively to consistent but caring guidance within the context of a warm, trusting relationship. Over time you can adapt and expand your strategies based on your knowledge of the individual child.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Social and emotional development in the early years lays the foundation for our later mental health and wellbeing. The capacity to understand and manage our feelings and behaviour is an important skill that may influence our later capacity to deal with stress, solve problems and overcome life challenges. Self-regulation also helps us to create and maintain positive relationships and support networks that contribute to social inclusion and wellbeing.

Children develop through their relationships and experiences, through observing others and through the specific guidance they receive from adults. In providing guidance, it is helpful to focus on the behaviour rather than shaming or labelling the child, so that our feedback does not have an unwanted negative impact on the child's emerging sense of self.

What should I look for?

During your daily work with children, take the time to model, praise and reinforce the behaviour that you want children to adopt. Then look for opportunities to give children direct guidance during the day, or to set up structured activities that support positive behaviour and learning.

Examples of socially inappropriate behaviour include biting or hitting people, frequent or ongoing temper tantrums, throwing things, defiance and refusal to follow instructions. When inappropriate behaviour occurs, take the time to observe and note any contributing factors leading up to the incident. It may be related to a child being sick or tired, or your observations may help you to identify ways to limit or manage similar situations in the future.

For more information about identifying emotional and behavioural difficulties in young children, refer to the handout in this series entitled *Identifying Emotional and Behavioural Problems*. All children show some of these socially unacceptable behaviours at times. However if the behaviour is no longer developmentally appropriate and it continues despite the efforts of family and staff to guide the child, then specialist assessment and intervention might be needed.

What should I do?

Behavioural expectations should be guided by a child's age and stage of development. You may like to refer to the handout entitled *Social and Emotional Development* for an overview of the behaviours that usually emerge at different stages of development.

When adults guide behaviour, the aim is to help children develop the capacity to regulate their own behaviour and behave in an acceptable way. We need to let children know about the effects of their behaviour and suggest alternatives. It is important to provide feedback in a way that shows we still care for and respect the child as a person, then to move on to other activities.



To support positive behaviour, set up the environment in a way that fosters a sense of security, promotes prosocial skills and provides opportunities for children to work together. For example:

- Establish and maintain consistent routines so children know what to expect.
- Provide sufficient resources that appeal to children's interests and learning styles, so they do not feel frustrated and are not left for long periods waiting for a turn.
- Organise play materials so that they are accessible to children, allowing children to feel empowered and in control of their learning.
- Set up a flexible timetable that allows long blocks of time for children to play out their games; children are able to revisit their play if they choose.
- Plan the space to allow for both group work and solitary play, with plenty of room to avoid overflow onto the activities of others.
- Arrange play areas so that children do not need to pass through one learning space to get to another, disrupting other children.

In giving feedback to children, provide clear and realistic expectations about their behaviour and set appropriate limits when necessary. Carers will need a range of strategies, for example:

- Have an agreed expectation of behaviour for all the children, with behaviour guidelines and staff strategies outlined in a policy that is applied consistently by all staff.
- Use distraction to stop a behaviour and direct the child's attention to something else
- Tell children what you want them to do, rather than what not to do; use simple instructions phrased in a positive way; provide the child with an alternate behaviour.
- Be calm, positive and respectful; raising your voice is an unhelpful emotional reaction.
- Move to the child, bend down to be at their level and explain why the behaviour is a problem; this will help the child understand the reasons behind your reaction.
- Involve families in discussions about guiding children's behaviour; consistency between the home and care settings will help to reinforce positive behaviours.
- When conflict arises, be firm and clear in explaining to the child why the behaviour is not appropriate; help them to understand the feelings of others.

Children need to understand that behaviour has consequences, for others and for themselves. Sometimes you have to intervene and impose a consequence as a way of stopping a behaviour. It is important that the consequences are logical for both child and adult. For example 'if you hit the other children, you will need to play alone because no one likes to be hurt'. Show children that once the situation has occurred and been dealt with, it is time to move on and start afresh.

Where can I find out more?

Child Australia. (2004). *Let's talk about behaviour. Part 2: Problem behaviour in child care*. Retrieved 29 May, 2009, from: <http://www.childdaustralia.org.au/documents/Let-s-talk-about-behaviour-Part-2.aspx>.

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Stonehouse, A. (2008). Guiding children's behaviour in positive ways. NCAC Family Day Care Fact Sheet 6. Retrieved 11 May 2009 from: <http://ncac.gov.au/factsheets/factsheet6%20.pdf>