

## Guiding Children's Behaviour in In Home Care

### What is behavior guidance and why is it important?

Guiding children's behaviour is intended to help children self-regulate as they learn appropriate and acceptable behaviour patterns. Methods of guiding behaviour are continuous. Guiding children's behaviour is something done throughout the day, not just when a child acts in a way that we might consider to be unsafe or unacceptable. It is done while appropriate behaviour is occurring, as well as before, during, and after socially unacceptable behaviour is displayed.

For example, comments such as

*"I like the way you packed away the Lego before eating lunch"* and *"thank you for using your words to ask for help"* is also behaviour guidance. Don't forget we really want to reinforce positive behaviour too!

While there are a wide variety of theories and approaches related to guiding children's behaviour, the goal remains constant – to assist children in developing respect, self-control, self-confidence and sensitivity in their interactions with others.

Is guiding children's behaviour the same as disciplining children? Why don't we use the term discipline? Does it conjure up negative connotations? What words come to mind when we hear the term discipline? Punishment, correction, strictness, order, and control.

As an educator, the term guidance is used instead of words like "discipline" or "behaviour management", which tend to have negative connotations of punishment or adult control. guidance is about promoting social competence, as opposed to behaviour management or discipline which ignore the fact that skills are developing.

To build positive relationships with others, children need to develop 'social competence' and the ability to interact with others with care, empathy and respect. Social competence is the foundation that allows children to understand and self-regulate their own emotions and negotiate their interactions with others.

You can start by observing the child and having conversations with the family to gather objective information. Guiding children's behaviour involves all caregivers (parents, educators, health professionals etc.) in adopting a positive approach toward teaching children about consequences and socially acceptable behavioural alternatives. Guiding children's behaviour is about supporting their social and emotional development.

As an educator this is a major part of your job. It is therefore appropriate that you spend the bulk of your time with children promoting social interactions, helping solve problems, and responding to intense emotions. You are promoting social and emotional development in every interaction with a child.

## Influences on behaviour

As an educator, you must understand that all behaviour has purpose. There are reasons for behaviour, and that is the most important fact to remember. Rather than focusing on problematic or challenging behaviour, and getting frustrated by it and labelling a child, we must focus on understanding what is going on for the child so we can support their learning and development in a positive way.

Here is a list of some factors that commonly impact on behaviour:

- Age
- Developmental level (I.e. language, speech)
- Health (I.e. ADD, ADHD, Autism, Developmental delays, is he/she a child who is often sick or in hospital, etc.)
- Basic needs not met e.g. child is hungry or tired
- Family crisis: (I.e. children at risk; are they experiencing parents' separation, divorce; death in the family, moving houses)
- Attention/ Boredom/ Waiting (I.e. is the environment & program reflective of the child's interest; are there distractions in the home)
- Changes in care – changing educators, people coming in and out of home
- Educators relationships (I.e. do educators take time to bond with children? Are they reactive?)
- Family dynamics (I.e. Are there siblings? Other children in the home? Older or younger?)
- Environmental factors (I.e. noise level, cluttered rooms, lack of routine)
- Presence of a disability that may impact on the child's social and emotional wellbeing
- Cultural expectations, experiences and child rearing practices

## Working with children who have experienced trauma

Trauma describes the impact of an event or a series of events during which a child feels helpless and pushed beyond their ability to cope. A range of different events might be traumatic to a child, including accidents, injuries, serious illness, natural disasters, war, terrorist attacks, assault, threats of violence, domestic violence, neglect or abuse. All Children respond to trauma differently. Trauma can negatively impact a child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development, and lead to significant changes in behaviour. This really depends on the nature and severity of the trauma.

When children are recovering from trauma and stress, they can be unable to control their emotions and behaviour. Developing strong relationships with children will ensure behaviour strategies can be implemented effectively. You may find children who have experienced trauma will initially act out and test boundaries with new carers. Allow time for trust to develop with the child and maintain stability and patience. Educators should not take initial rejection personally.

Set the foundations of positive and trusting relationships with the child, before expecting successful implementation of strategies. Give yourself and the time to settle in – go easy on yourself and them!

Tips for working with children who have experienced trauma:

1. Help children regulate their emotions
2. Remind yourself of every child's potential – model hope and optimism.
3. Ensure children are aware of their strengths and abilities.
4. Set Routines – traumatized children do not always cope with change or unpredictability, they really need consistency
5. Understand the relationship between emotions and behaviour – try to find a balance of making children accountable for their behaviour but also acknowledging the underlying emotions that are the cause
6. Create a safe environment – provide a place to be calm and engage in activities

## Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behaviour in accordance with the demands of the situation. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their own behaviour towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings. Self-regulation contributes towards children growing independence and behaving in a socially acceptable manner. Being able to consistently regulate their own feelings and behaviour is a major task for young children. This should be the main communal goal of educators and families. Part of an educator's role is to help children constructively manage their feeling & impulses. It includes being able to:

- Reflect on and regulate reactions to emotions like frustration or excitement
- delay gratification and resist temptation and peer pressure
- calm down after something exciting or upsetting
- focus on a task
- refocus attention on a new task
- control impulses
- learn behaviour that helps you get along with other people

Behaviour of children who display difficulties self-regulating can be broken down into two types:

- **Externalising behaviours:** - tantrums, reacting aggressively towards peers and staff, not following adult's directions, hitting, spitting, crying uncontrollably, swearing at peers and staff, etc. These behaviours are easy to recognise and tend to be noticed quickly. These types of behaviours are disruptive to routine and to others as it is focused at obtaining attention.
- **Internalising behaviours:** - fearful, anxious, sad, becomes easily upset, withdraws from social situations, etc. Tend to be more difficult to notice because feelings are directed inwardly by the child and do not necessarily draw attention from others.

Just like teaching children swimming or reading; we use scaffolding to teach children self-regulation skills. These strategies are commonly used:

- **Modelling:** Demonstrating appropriate responses or steps to achieve a task. Calmly show the child how a frustrating task can be achieved without being upset (i.e. provide plenty of cues to start off and allow plenty of opportunities for repetition). Make a comment that will acknowledge the difficulty and how you stayed calm. For instance: *“Wow, that was hard at first and it would’ve been harder if you didn’t stay calm. You were a good listener and accepted my help”*.
- **Talk about emotions with the children:** A wide range of resources can be used such as books, social stories, role playing, spontaneous moments during play etc. For instance, *“Did you bite because someone wasn’t listening to you? What else could you have done to get their attention?”* When the child struggles with a difficult feeling, encourage him to name the feeling and what caused it. Wait until the emotion has passed so they child can rationalise.
- **Use hints and cues:** Use simple directions, gestures, and touch (if the child allows it as some children can be oversensitive to touch); they provide young children with valuable cues about how and when to regulate their emotions, attention, and behaviour. For instance, talking in a whisper when a child is being overly loud can hint to them that they need to lower their voice, or saying something like *“I use my hands to clap”* before they strike another child. For an extremely shy child, a rub on their back can say *“I’m here with you. It’s ok to get closer to your peers”*.
- **Visual schedules:** Timers can help with transitions as they tell the child how long and when they are going to have to do an activity. Timers also allow us to pre-warn the child when a favoured activity is coming to an end. Children can anticipate what’s next or are pre-warned about a change coming. It will help them organise themselves (feelings and emotions) and plan ahead.
- **Gradually withdrawing adult support:** withdrawing direct support as children begin to demonstrate new skills. As said previously, one of the aims of being able to self-regulate is to be independent, therefore, it should prevent us becoming full time emotional coaches.
- **Acknowledgement:** As the child masters his emotions, shows self-control and follows instructions. Providing descriptive acknowledgement will tell him what he has done well. *“Thank you for sharing the Lego with Sam – that was very kind”*

## Communicating with families

It is essential that educators develop partnerships with families and feel able to discuss challenging behaviour with a parent or guardian. They can provide valuable insight about what strategies work best with their child. The child will benefit so much when the educator and carer have open and respectful relationship. Ultimately, we want to promote family-based practice – focus on the family’s strengths, promote family’s choice and collaboration.

Keep note that the types of behaviour a family accepts may differ from what is acceptable by an educator. This difference in expectations can be confusing for the child. This is where open communication is key, to come to an agreement so all parties can respond consistently.

Our role as educators is to work with families to support them in child rearing. This is done in both formal and informal methods during everyday practice. To be effective, communication must flow both ways between carers and the educator. Strong communication, particularly when dealing with

behaviour, ensures consistent approaches. With your support, the family can develop routines and you can develop programs that are in-tune with the child's individual strengths, preferences and needs.

Always take into consideration:

- An understanding of the child in the context of the family, culture, community
- Knowledge of the child's developmental stage
- Understanding of the family dynamics
- Anything unusual that may be occurring within the family or influencing the child's behaviour
- Information shared by families must be treated confidentially

It is important to have conversations with the child's family about strategies. This will ensure that you work together and consistency.

- Establish a real and respectful relationship with each child
- Provide opportunities for children to attach and develop trust with you
- Respect and reflect the feelings of each child
- Respect the culture and family of each child
- Hold realistic expectations of young children
- Use language that is appropriate to a child's understanding
- Use encouragement with each child and make a point of affirming something they have done during each day
- Avoid using sarcasm, 'putdowns' or negative language with a child

Make sure you have conversations with families around what strategies work for them, and what may cause them further challenges. Make sure they are aware that all families are unique, and that they must utilise strategies that work for them. This can avoid trial and error for both families and educators.

## Strategies for behaviour guidance

Some simple steps you and the parent/carer can follow together:

1. Tell the child your expectations and set clear boundaries

For example, instead of telling the child to *"stop being messy"*, communicate to the child, *"Please don't throw your rubbish, we put rubbish in the bin. This way we can keep our room tidy"*. This informs the child what you expect, and what is not acceptable.

2. Help children identify their emotions that may be causing their behaviour

For example – *“Jamie, I can see you kicked the table because you are feeling very frustrated you cannot do the puzzle. Would you like to have a break and take some deep breaths?”* By doing this the child will begin to recognise and identify their own emotions and learn to self-regulate their behaviours. Encourage parents/carers to regulate their behaviours too as part of role modelling.

### 3. Use simple words and calm tone when communicating

When a child is highly emotional, they cannot always think logically. Your priority is to calm the child. Give simple instruction and stay calm yourself as to not escalate the situation.

### 4. Use visuals

Visuals are a great tool to use

### 5. Teach through play

During play you can teach children fundamental behavioural skills such as patience, taking turns, positive social interactions, coping skills and emotional regulation. You can role model or use peers to demonstrate appropriate behaviour. Play is also crucial for building an attachment with a child.

### 6. Allow time for new strategies to become effective

Repetition and consistency are key. Allow a child several weeks before you assess whether a strategy is working for that child or not. If we have asked for something to be done – and we don't want to change our mind about it– then we need to make it happen.

## Strength based practice

Simply put, strengths-based practice is exactly that practice based on strengths. It is based on the belief that we all have strengths and capacities, that we can all change and grow given the right conditions and resources, and most particularly when we harness our strengths and capacities. The strength-based approach supports the perspective of children as competent and capable learners. It also supports the Early Years Learning Framework and My Time Our Place's view of each child as possessing unique qualities and abilities. It acknowledges and values children's strengths. Another way to promote positive behavior and respond to challenging behaviour is to reframe our practice.

Think about a child with challenging behaviours and respond to the following questions:

- What is a key strength the child possesses?
- How are these strengths demonstrated?
- What can stop you/others from seeing and appreciating these strengths?
- What can you do to recognise, acknowledge and utilise the child's strengths more regularly?

## Role modelling behaviour guidance

In home care educators can find it challenging to guide a child's behaviour when their parent or carer is present. The key to overcoming this challenge is open communication, boundaries and consistency. If families need support on how to respond to challenging behaviour, educators can provide professional support without judgement, with empathy and always invite collaboration.

Aim to be supportive, respectful and knowledgeable when approaching families about behaviour guidance. Remember you are a professional employee and you should remember it is a common goal. Even if you don't have a solution straight away, always present a positive attitude and work towards problem solving. Behaviour guidance should:

- Demonstrate respect for children
- Be based on knowledge of children's development and learning
- Be based on an understanding and knowledge of each child including background, culture, community and family
- Be proactive and positive
- Not use any form of corporal punishment or any discipline that is unreasonable in the circumstances
- Not involve making judgements about children and families
- Recognise the child's strengths

In Australia we celebrate a great diversity of culture within our communities, and this does mean we can see many differences in child rearing practices, developmental expectation and acceptance of different behaviour. Consider children's behaviour in the context of their culture, their community and their family in relation to their individual stage of physical and intellectual development. Behaviour guidance encourages children to reflect on their actions and the impact those actions have on themselves, others and the environment around them. We are not wanting to "punish" the child. We do not expect them to behave perfectly all the time. As educators we must accept and respect that children are learning appropriate ways to behave. Behaviour guidance based on positive and respectful relationships between educator and children is most likely to influence behaviour in constructive ways. We want to always maintain a positive relationship with the child, so they trust us and take on our learning. When negative relationships develop between adult and child, this is where we can see children demonstrate defiance. Developing positive relationships with children ensures that your behaviour strategies can work.

## Starting challenging conversations with parents about behaviour

If you need to have a conversation with the family about their child's challenging behaviour, here are some initial tips:

1. Start by having already established a positive relationship with parents



If you have already developed trust and positive interactions, it will be easier to approach the parents, and they will respect you are coming from a place of help rather than judgement. Listening to the family is key. They are the expert regarding the child, and the more you listen and value their opinion, the more you can use this when developing appropriate behaviour strategies. Try to understand their perspective and their emotional investment. Always share the positives about the child, so that when you do need to give honest information about inappropriate behaviour, it is balanced.

## 2. Stick to factual information – not your opinions or emotions

Remove any emotion or blame from the conversation, even if you are feeling frustrated, remember you are in a partnership with the family and you need to maintain this in order to have the best outcomes for the child. Be honest and open, providing accurate information of what is observed e.g. – *“Jonnie was playing well at the park, however after a few minutes he began to push the child next to him”*. Gather as much objective data on the behaviour through observation and conversation, so you have examples to refer to when approaching the family.

## 3. Approach families with solutions and support – not problems and blame!

Have solutions ready to share as this allows you to showcase your professional knowledge and experience, and so you are not just approaching the family with problems. When professionals and parents share knowledge, it has the best outcome for the child’s wellbeing and development. When you do provide suggestion, make sure you ask for parents input, and allow them to make the decision. *“How do you think we can support Mary to play well with others. Can I suggest a behaviour chart, or some social catch ups with other families... which would you prefer?”*. Be prepared when approaching families that they can become upset or stressed so think carefully how to best deliver your approach. Chose an appropriate time too – not when parents/ carers are busy, distracted, rushing etc. If a difficult behaviour persists, then we need to look for the child’s underlying motivation and the feelings behind the behaviour. For example:

- to escape or avoid unpleasant situations
- to gain attention, positive or negative
- frustration at not expressing needs properly or not having their needs fully met

Any problems should be discussed with the child’s parents/carers to help determine possible causes.

Take a problem-solving approach:

1. Identify the problem
2. Brainstorm as many solutions as possible
3. Decide on which solutions to try first and put into action
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of solution, and try others if it is not working

## Reflective questions for educators

These are questions to reflect on when faced with challenging behaviour:



- How do you expect children to behave? Are these expectations fair and appropriate?
- Are you aware of what you feel may influence the way you act?
- Are you labelling the child and expecting poor behaviour?
- Do you remain calm or are you 'losing it', raising your voice, blaming or labelling the child?
- Do you consider the child's feelings behind the behaviour?

## Inappropriate responses to behaviour

As an educator, if you observe the families/parents/carers behaviours or strategies causing harm, or making things worse for the child, please contact your service provider immediately to discuss. Children will model their own behaviour on the behaviour of people who care for them, so we need to model appropriate behaviour and maintain self-control. Demonstrate the kind of behaviour we wish the child to develop. Remember, it is the behaviour, not the child, that is inappropriate, and the child should know this. Examples of inappropriate responses to behaviour include:

- Hitting, slapping
- Isolating
- Yelling
- Humiliating or belittling
- Physically dragging the child
- Depriving the child of food or drink as punishment
- Negative labelling
- Blaming or shaming
- Making fun of or laughing at the child

## Further Support with “Be You”

What if this isn't working? There is help. Whilst we as educators have a great amount of knowledge of child development and how to promote wellbeing, we need to remember that we are not professional counsellors, psychologists or psychiatrists. There are times when children may be experiencing mental health difficulties and they need early intervention.

Beyond Blue was appointed to lead Be You by the Australian Government since June 2017. Be You builds on the success and learnings from the existing program Kids Matter, focusing on children's mental health and wellbeing in early childhood education and care. Using a prevention and early intervention framework, they provide resources and support for ECEC educators and families, while fostering partnerships with health and community organisations.

Please ensure you always speak with your service provider or support agency if you need further assistance.

## References

- “Collaborating with parents in using effective strategies to reduce children’s behaviours” – Chapter from *Young Exceptional Children*, Angel Fettig, 2013
- Raisingchildren.net.au – “Effective Communication with parents: for professionals”
- Learninglinks.org.au – “Supporting Children with ASD Early Childhood”
- Guide to the NQF 2020
- Understanding child Behaviour - Education and Training (Victoria)
- Early Childhood Australia <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au>
- Be You <http://www.beyou.edu.au>
- Raising Children Network [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)
- [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au) – “Understanding Trauma” Factsheet
- [www.emergingminds.com.au](http://www.emergingminds.com.au) – “Trauma Sensitive Behaviour management” Factsheet

*We wish you the best in your pursuit of quality education and care for children.*