

Communication as Behaviour

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Often, when we approach children who display difficult to manage behaviours, or challenging behaviours as they are often referred to, we decide to run with a range of strategic responses that we think will connect the child to a reward-based management regime. Many people will talk about the successes they have with such approaches and this is not to be underestimated.

Developing any behaviour support or guidance process in early childhood is not just about sticker charts or consequences.

We are proposing that there are three integrated domains that need to be considered and supported at the same time, in order to develop sound, long-lasting techniques that teach children to regulate and manage their own behaviours long after they have left early childhood programs.

These are:

1. Environmental design of play spaces, resources and strategies that enable and extend learning
2. The development of an effective behaviour support toolkit
3. Communication skills i.e. the child's ability to understand their environment and the language being used and their ability to express themselves.

In addition, there is a belief (or at least what is observed in practice) that these domains can operate independently of the other, as though they are not connected or affected by the other. In other words, a belief that strategies to modify behaviour should be readily applicable in any environment and the child should respond the same way at a child care centre as they would at home. However, we suggest that, with these three domains



in mind, it is important to ask the question, 'How can I support children to make sense of what's going on around them'?

When we consider how children feel about the space that they play in, then just like adults, it will guide the way they behave. In many cases early childhood environments have very similar materials to play with and familiar play spaces to play in. Sometimes this can be many small, boxy spaces where perhaps only a few children can play without getting in each other's way, or spaces that are meant for specific games and materials only. We would argue that the environment should clearly show what the children of that group are exploring, games they are playing and reflect their varying levels of skill. Further as Curtis and Carter (2003) write, children are driven by a desire to make connections with others and develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, cosy, comfortable and nurturing environments are important for supporting personal connections and positive relationship building.

To do this, we must consider that learning spaces should promote a variety of options and choices for children and not just the ones that we think are 'developmentally appropriate'. Schiller (2009) suggests that 'over-stimulating classrooms inhibit cognitive functioning' and therefore we must make careful decisions for the environment.

Children cannot show their skills if we do not give them the opportunities through environments that provide challenges, aesthetic appeal and ignites the senses.

The way in which the room provokes wonder and curiosity will assist in firing up the senses

and imagination. The smell, aesthetic look and levels of noise will then play a critical role in how adults support and guide the children's behaviour.

As educators, we should base the decisions in the environment not on what we think we should have, according to history or developmental milestones, rather base it on inspiration, intrigue and function.

To be able to inspire and intrigue children to explore their environment, we should consider what materials we are offering. Edwards and Springate (1995)



write '... young children want and need to express ideas and messages through many different expressive avenues and symbolic media'. Although there are many materials we can purchase through relevant catalogues, it can be argued that many of these materials have one main play purpose or function. The introduction of recycled or second-hand furniture and materials will start to give the learning space a closer connection to the 'home-like feel'.

The provision of environments that engage children in long-lasting play, with a more creative and open ended purpose, with materials of interest, will create a context that will minimise children's challenging behaviour.

Learning and play spaces will require negotiated communication and collaboration between children.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication skills, underpin the interaction between adults and children. Oral language competence is fundamental to the perception of “success” in our modern-day world – both the success of our interpersonal relationships and the acquisition of literacy skills (Beitchman & Brownlie, 2005). Dealing with a breakdown in interaction and play (which for young children is displayed via “challenging” behaviours) can be as much about understanding the breakdown in communication process as knowing how to deal with the “behaviour”.



Being aware of the developmental stage and skills of the children, and having access to visually based strategies that support communication, will ensure positive interactions are more likely to occur. Therefore, support and information from Speech Language Pathologists (SLP) for prevention-based strategies as well as intervention is increasingly being sought

by early childhood professionals. Examples include:-

- modelling use of visual-based routines and scaffolds for activities
- demonstrating and “teaching” effective teacher talk strategies (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002)
- supporting specific social language-based experiences that support play entry, and social skills development (turn-taking; waiting; problem-solving; negotiating; politeness rituals etc.)
- modelling screening tools, supporting early detection and liaising with parents about children’s skill development.

What binds the environments and the ways in which children learn to engage in those environments and spaces, is the way in which we, the adults, model behaviour and engage with the children.

Unfortunately, the time for “conversations” with children in busy centres can be limited. Rather, the majority of verbal exchanges are short, adult directed and initiated (Makin, 2009). Also, sometimes children are expected to answer questions that they know the teacher knows the answer to, which then can feel like testing questions, not inquiry-based questions. So verbal exchanges about behaviour need not be just about teaching them how to behave and who makes the rules (although that is important); it is more about talking with them about why we engage in particular ways and modelling how we engage in particular spaces.

We need to reframe the practice from approaching a child with strategies, to strategically approaching the child in ways that will meet his/her needs for learning.

This means that there is no one-size-fits-all and we have to consider the need of the child before we come anywhere near them with behaviour response plans. These plans must fit with the needs of that child and recognise the fluidity and dynamic and changing nature of children's behaviours.

As a starting point, almost all strategic approaches should aim to meet the following principles:

- teach – not punish. In other words, focus on proactive rather than reactive responses
- be developed for that child alone.
- be reviewed regularly and finetuned always
- not be stressful for the child or the adult
- engage families wherever possible
- take full account of how the child makes sense of the environment and how they interpret the space around them.

This paper encourages early childhood professionals to consider a holistic and integrated approach to supporting positive communication skills and behaviour in early childhood environments.

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