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“I am going to video you!”

Behavioural management in early childhood settings

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Introduction

Behaviour management or discipline can sometimes be the cause of graduate teachers leaving education. A former student teaching in a tough NSW school told me that she had accidentally hit on a new discipline tool—the mobile phone.

She was an early childhood teacher with a kindergarten class and found playground duty hard-going. One day when a six-year-old boy was deliberately non-compliant and verbally aggressive to her, she pulled out her mobile phone and pretended to video him saying, “Let’s get this accurately so we can look at it and properly talk it over later.” This had a lightning strike effect on the boy and his mates. A week later she saw them pointing at her in the playground with the sort of body language that said, “You had better watch out for her.” She telephoned me to discuss the ethics of this sort of approach and chatted generally about behaviour management. I reminded her of some of the most commonly used strategies. During the conversation, she realised that in the heat of the moment she tended to fall back on just a couple of favourite strategies, even though they may not be the most effective option.

We need to be reminded of the fact that we are only human and so, thank goodness, are the children. A good sense of humour, fun, genuine love and positive messages can work wonders.

Teachers, especially in early childhood settings, can make use of all the strategies that follow. The strategies have a variety of terms but the techniques are similar. They are given here in a general order from mild intrusion through to major intervention. Teachers should mix and match strategies according to their personal knowledge of a child, and the relationship dynamics of the child, peers and class.

Rules and cue systems

Pre-school and school are often the first time children encounter formal rules. Never assume that they really understand all the rules. Teach the rules and expectations, don’t just expect them. Rules should be made visible with each class or

group acting out the rules or breaking of them.

Digital cameras have made it easy to make a rule cue card with pictures of the current children doing the right thing. If a child has problems with rules or has difficulty interpreting the meaning of a rule, break it down into little steps and take photographs for each. You can then scaffold learning by displaying the steps on a felt or magnetic board or turning the pictures into a social story for the child to read at home or school. Children on the Autism spectrum benefit from their own illustrated and laminated booklet of rules.

Use a copy of the cue card to talk to a child who has broken the rule. The card helps to minimise conflict by providing a focus point that is between the adult and child. Adding a space where the child can draw what went wrong and how they will handle it next time encourages the child to think and talk about what happened.

Along with rules, teach the negation sign of a circle and bar. This will minimise misunderstandings like the following: A pre-schooler pointed to a *no bicycle* sign and said, “Mum, we’re not allowed to draw lines on our bikes.”

Overlooking

The child should be aware that you are aware; however, planned ignoring is suitable for minor difficulties where children may ideally sort it out between themselves. The teacher’s presence gives security and moving closer while looking pleasantly firm will have an effect. Making a comment that you “didn’t quite hear that” may give a child time for second thoughts and allow the child to regroup to a better attitude or action.

Positive affirmation

Try to give a child who has behaviour difficulties praise when they are doing something right. As Christian educators, positive affirmation should come naturally. I love the phrase, “Catch them being good.” Build up the child’s self esteem with love and attention as this will reduce the poor behaviours that often arise from a lack of self worth.

A handy tip is to praise a child sitting next to a child doing the wrong thing. The desired behaviour

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will often be taken up in an effort to elicit similar praise.

When giving a request or command, always use a child's name with a warm tone, pause for effect, smile and then deliver the request. The little pause and kind voice strengthens the direction.

Puppet power

A class puppet or favourite toy can be used as a means of giving directions to the class or an oppositional child. Children prone to argue or say "no" will often co-operate when a puppet gives an instruction or explanation. The puppet can act as a third 'person' between you and the child and provide a channel through which humour or drama can be used to diffuse the situation.

A child having a tantrum once kicked over a chair, so the class puppet began to 'howl' saying, "He's kicked over my chair", "It's not your chair" responded the teacher and implored the puppet to stop making such an awful fuss. This totally distracted the class and resulted in the class and tantrum child going into fits of laughter. Every teacher must develop their inner actor.

Puppets can also be used to role play situations such as bullying, and model ways to deal with this.

Repeat—rephrase (even sing)

Why do we raise our voice a notch and harden it when we tell a child something the second time? It is a bad habit. A more successful technique is to repeat the direction, consciously making the tone warmer and adding a "please". You can then indicate that you assume the instructions will be followed by saying, "Good, you can do that—thanks Zac", and move confidently away.

If it's needed, rephrase the direction. We often over-estimate children's receptive language abilities.

Singing instructions works well with children who have a language disorder, who are on the Autism spectrum or who are oppositional. Music is hard to resist and a happy, impromptu song like, "Let us put the toys away, Jamie is putting the toys away, Kelly's putting the toys away—everything is tidy now", will be received as non-threatening, especially if it ends with a 'thank you' chorus.

Dynamic distraction

If you can act, sing and rhyme, you should be able to distract like an expert, just add enthusiasm. Distraction works really well with very young children. I observed a teacher in a pre-school with a group of children who had coughs and runny noses and were generally out of sorts. He was making paper planes and having plane races when a child started a tantrum. Another teacher distracted the angry, stamping child by saying to the surrounding

group, "Let's all stamp. Let's help Ella stamp out her anger." This led to music being put on for stamping, then marching, with Ella leading the parade. Once the behaviour problem is redirected, you can talk to the child at a time when they are more receptive.

Offer assistance

When you are met with a confrontational manner or negativity from a child, it is often due to feelings of frustration or distress. If you can bypass the anger being expressed and show genuine empathy, you may defuse the situation. Help, offered in a genuinely caring voice, is often hard for an outraged child to resist. Help may be offered in the form of picking up the mess of a project gone wrong, gently back patting while saying nothing or offering assistance with a task.

Knowing a child well and how they normally react is the key to managing the situation and helping the child feel better.

We should acknowledge feelings more often and remember to always address the feelings, not the fight. Once the feelings and opinions have been listened to and the child's perception of the problem has been acknowledged, an offer of assistance is usually acceptable to the child.

Bail out

This option is based on prediction and reading a child's body language along with the surrounding situation. As soon as it is becoming clear that a child is 'working up to something', becoming oppositional, or about to hit out at others, quickly step in and give him or her time out.

This is a cool off opportunity before anything happens. However, it is important to acknowledge the child's feelings before giving him or her time to walk with an adult, get a drink or some other activity.

Having a cool off bean bag in a secluded spot teaches children that we all need space to get over bad feelings at times and that you are prepared to help them avoid acted out behaviour. One teacher I observed used a mini trampoline and would work out with a child how many jumps he or she would need in order to get rid of angry feelings. You could also give a child crayons to draw their feelings or the situation bothering them. Discussion can follow up on this later.

Postpone the fight or task

When a child is non-compliant to your face, you can reduce tension by partly agreeing with them. For example, to the child who insists that James took something of his the day before, say "You may have good reason to be angry with James, but I want you to have that truck back on his desk when we go in from recess."

“Help, offered in a genuinely caring voice is often hard for an outraged child to resist”

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If a child is refusing to do work, you can suggest that he has a break until he is ready to do it but it must be completed for instance by lunchtime. If there is a break in the offering, the task will often be done without a fuss, albeit at the last minute.

If a child is spoiling for a fight with you, ignore it, or after the initiation of conflict, cut it short by saying that you will sort this problem out later. This takes the power away from the child which often takes the wind out of their sails. However, be sure you do follow up with them. You set a dangerous precedent and will lose all credibility if you don't.

In order to keep track of incidents and warnings, some teachers keep a notebook on duty. One teacher I know has a mini recorder on which she records names, incidents and times whilst on duty. She says that although she smiles a lot, the children know that she takes duty supervision seriously.

Anger outlets

Isolating children seldom works. If they want to be on their own it may even be an incentive for acting up. It is much better to set up anger outlets that you are comfortable with as this will assist in teaching a child

to control their angry outbursts.

A pillow that has an angry face and a sad face on the two sides along with another that has a quiet face and a happy face is one such outlet. Teach the child to pummel the angry face, cry on the sad one and when ready, move to the happy pillow. Learning to listen to their own feelings and measure them is a valuable skill. Alternatively, take the child for a walk or run to show how exercise has a calming effect. A further suggestion is the use of a small secluded space like a little tent that an angry child can hide in and block off with a zip door. Put in some cushions and large size bubble wrap for the child to use to relieve feelings and to distract from the source of the problem.

Through all of these suggestions, there should always be an adult to act as a listener and sounding board.

Finally, remember to concentrate on the primary problem and not be distracted by subsequent events such as swearing, which can be addressed later on. Last of all, "There are no bad children, only bad behaviours." **TEACH**

“*There are no bad children, only bad behaviours*”