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Why can't they behave

PARENTS

Recently, I was asked to carry out a session for parents on behaviour. Parents were telling me that they were struggling with their children's behaviour, nothing seemed to be working to solve the problem and they were at the end of their patience with it all. I really thought about what to say in the session, I heard what the parents were saying and ask thought what are their expectations of those children?

The behaviour being displayed was clearly not acceptable to the parents and I wondered why. I decided to almost go back to basics and talk about behaviour and what is age and stage appropriate. The session was successful and those that came found it useful and so I thought I would share it here with you.

Whenever I talk about behaviour, I always start by saying that all behaviour is learnt. I think that's really important to remember. When behaviour has become challenging, it's good to know it can be changed, that new, more acceptable behaviours can be learnt.

Most behaviour stems from something your child needs - understanding and recognising those needs are really useful when dealing with behaviour. Needs and behaviours of children change due to maturity. If you can understand those needs you will be understanding your child.

Why do children display certain behaviours?

Self-preservation - instinct - behaviour that can be labelled selfish or self-centred

Independence - a drive to be in control

Attention - basic need - ensures protection and development of self esteem

Anger or frustration - very natural reaction.

Anxiety/fear - emotion can lead to immature or unacceptable behaviour

Lack of maturity - very young children - not learnt appropriate behaviour

Not knowing what to do - need to know what it is we want them to do. Tell them what you want them to do not what you don't want them to do.

There are some basic principles of behaviour which can be useful to consider. My starting point, behaviour is learnt. Behaviour can change as children start to understand what is expected of them, as they mature and their language skills develop and as they start to cope better with their emotions. Rewards work better than punishment. I don't know about you, but I would rather hear about what I've done well or how I've pleased someone rather than being told off and punished. Finally, consistency is key. If on one occasion, a certain behaviour is acceptable to you with no reaction but the next time this same behaviour is shown you react differently, getting angry etc, that is going to be extremely confusing for your young child and they will not understand.

The way we feel can impact our reaction to children's behaviour and the way children feel can cause their challenging behaviour. When children are behaving in a way that we find challenging that can arouse powerful feelings within us. Before we are really aware of it, we can be angry, shouting, perhaps totally overreacting to the situation. If we can understand what is driving a child's behaviour it can be easier to avoid reacting to our own powerful feelings which means we can respond more appropriately.

Children can find that their feelings can be strong and very overwhelming; they need to know that we understand these feelings whilst not accepting the behaviour. Responding to their behaviour, we need to ensure that we are criticising the deed and not the child.

For example: "it's OK to feel angry, but it's not ok to hit" - you are also giving words for the emotions that the child is struggling to control and name - this gives your child the language to enable them to talk about their very strong feelings another time. This way, you are supporting your child to be able to cope with their feelings and therefore, controlling behaviour.

I often think that the way we talk to children can be an issue - do we contribute to their behaviour by our use of language. Language acquisition is hard as there is a lot to learn, especially with the English language. As adults, we have forgotten just how difficult language can be as we are so used to it! Misunderstanding can occur all the time even for us. Children are just beginners. Could your child's behaviour be as a result of them misunderstanding our use of language?

Misunderstandings arise because the child:

Does not realise it is being spoken to - this may sound ridiculous to us as it is obvious that we are talking to them, but this is not so for the child. They may be busy playing and so are not recognising that you are speaking to them.

Does not understand meaning of what is being said - again, we may think that we have been perfectly clear, but the child has to hear what has been said to them and then process that information - a complicated activity.

Cannot stay tuned in to the instructions long enough to get the information.

We can support this firstly, by getting down to the child's level as this enables eye to eye contact. The child is then focused on you and the fact that you are speaking. Touching their face is also a great way to engage your child and inform them that you are speaking to them. I think it is important to mention here that if your child does not like eye contact then do not make an issue of it. Using the child's name alerts your child to the fact that the information is for them. If your child has poor auditory skills it may be useful to use an agreed visual signal to show you are talking to them and this avoids the need to raise your voice. Once you have your child's attention, pause. This gives your child the time to register that the information or instructions will be for them. Are you saying what you really mean!!??

Children's experience of language is very limited and again it's useful to think of your child as only beginners. There are so very many words that they have not yet been exposed to and so it is very easy for misunderstandings to arise. I remember when I was still training, I asked a child to go and wash their hands in the toilet. You can guess what happened!!! The child only did exactly what I had instructed - it was certainly a learning curve for me!!! If your child has not done what you asked, the first thing to do is to check for their understanding. It may well be that they are not ignoring you, they just have not understood what you were asking of them.

Three years olds and up are just learning that questions can invite a variety of answers. This is very confusing if that is not acceptable to you!

For example: "**shall we put our coat on?**" "**Would you like to**?" This may sound polite and encouraging but your child hears that there is an option and for them, that option may be no!!! Only ask those yes, no response answers if you are prepared for a no otherwise it is not fair.

When discussing behaviour, I am often asked about rewards and discipline. We all need praise as it is extremely important for our self-esteem and confidence all things we wish to nurture in our children. I think **praising** children for even the **smallest things** they do is **paramount** and gives **attention** in a very **positive way**.

Rewards should be:

- Immediate
- Small
- Praise should be specific

- Consistently delivered
- Meaningful to the child
- Varied from time to time

The most powerful reward is adult attention - remember any attention is desired even negative!

Adult attention:

- Catch them being good
- Smiling
- Eye contact
- Comments
- Hugs
- Thumbs up

Discipline:

Where possible consequences of behaviour should:

- Be as small as possible
- Be consistently delivered
- Not be emotionally or physically damaging to the child
- Make sense to the child
- Be immediate

I am also asked about setting boundaries for children. I think that is a great thing to do as it helps the child to understand how to behave and what is or is not acceptable to you. It may be useful to discuss this with your child's setting if they have one as this helps with consistency and understanding. **Keep the boundaries simple, remember too much information is confusing for your young child and again, consistency.**

“Good” behaviour is more likely to occur when:

- The child's needs are being met
- The child wishes to please the adult
- The child understands what is expected of them
- The adult expects and rewards appropriate behaviour

At the beginning of this piece I talked about expectations - are the **expectations** that you have of your child **realistic**? Are we expecting too much from our children? When you ask them to get their coats, put on their shoes, pick up their bag and do it quickly because you have to be out of the door, your child has probably only processed the first instruction and forgotten everything else - there is just too much information! It is really difficult because you know you have to be at preschool etc at a certain time or you need to be at work, and so it is crucial for you to get a task done, but for your child, it just isn't that important! Are we expecting them to behave in ways they are not developmentally able to? Sometimes, we expect our children to sit still for example, be quiet maybe and listen - if your children are 24 or 36 or 40 months old roughly, they have not been on this planet for any time at all and we are expecting them to do something that they are just not developmentally able to do! I struggle to sit still and listen without fidgeting a bit or getting distracted and I'm much older than that!!!

Challenging behaviour is just that, challenging. Hopefully this article has given you some ways to manage this. All behaviour is learnt and if you can support your child by understanding how they are feeling, having realistic expectations and using simple instructions, you can teach your child more acceptable ways to behave.

DAWN RIGBY

challenging behaviour, appropriate behaviour, realistic expectations, setting boundaries
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