

# Understanding Behaviour in the Early Years

A guide to devising effective strategies while promoting positive relationships and emotional well-being

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## Contents

<b>Early years and behavioural learning</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Thinking about emotional learning</b>	<b>39</b>
		Communicating emotions	39
<b>Thinking about behaviour as an area of learning</b>	<b>4</b>	Regulating emotions	43
Engaging with parents	6	<b>Thinking about behavioural learning</b>	<b>44</b>
Building parents' confidence, building practitioners' understanding	9	Policy and practice	44
Creating a context for parents to help each other	10	Influences on behaviour	45
		Temperament	46
<b>Research and theories about behaviour</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Using observation and analysis</b>	<b>50</b>
Attachment	16	Interpreting observations	51
Approaches to behaviour	17	Identifying the learning	52
Cultural considerations	18	Pretend play	53
Developing a setting approach to behaviour	20	Using 'can do' statements	54
Brain development	20	Special Educational Needs	58
Conditions for growth	27	<b>References</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Thinking about social learning</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>Additional sources of information</b>	<b>62</b>
Social competence	33	<b>Finding help and support</b>	<b>63</b>
Friendships	34	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>64</b>
Conflicts	37		

Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

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ISBN 978-1-907241-22-2



# Thinking about behaviour as an area of learning

Of all areas of learning, the one that raises most concern and most celebration, especially when children are very young, is behaviour. However, very quickly adults seem to think about the word 'behaviour' as a mainly negative concept. A particular focus of this book is to think in some depth about behaviour as a normal part of children's early learning and development. Perhaps the easiest way to begin this thinking is to acknowledge 'behaviour' as everything we do and everything we say. A baby's first smile, first step, giving something to another, are all behavioural milestones which should be celebrated. A baby's cry, spitting out something which tastes unpleasant, reaching for a toy held by another, are also important behavioural responses. Fundamentally, our behaviour is a means of communication and for children who are not yet verbally confident, it is their major means of giving messages about their needs and emotions. 'Behavioural learning' is a phrase which describes the learning which takes place and helps us to understand how we can change, and use our behaviour as well as the impact it can have on situations and relationships.

Generally in society, there is concern about the behaviour of children and young people. Through television, Internet, magazines and newspapers we are made very aware of child, teenage and adult behaviours which are negative. As adults we often have an interest in such information in order to highlight how 'good' our own family members are and how well they behave. However, such information can also raise anxiety, particularly for parents of young children as they set out to prevent their children developing such negative behaviours. In each of our early years settings there are likely to be individuals and groups of children whose behaviour already causes us concern. For a variety of reasons they may respond to others in ways that you do not consider to be appropriate.

Although the home learning environment has been shown to have most impact (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010), some of our young children spend up to fifty hours per week in childcare provision, so the influence we

as early educators can have on young children's behavioural learning is significant. If we can work positively with parents to support the child's developing understanding about behaviour, this influence is increased considerably. The more we can engage with parents, the more effective our support for children's learning.

We hear a lot about early intervention being effective in preventing future difficulties in all areas of learning, (Cabinet Office 2009, 2010), particularly in the context of behaviour. However, it is not always easy to work out what that 'early intervention' might look like on a daily basis in our own setting. In order to think about this constructively, it is important to reflect on what we know about how children learn to behave.

We all experience behaviour every minute of every day, we cannot avoid being influenced by the interactions we come across. Young children especially are looking to those bigger than them, both adults and children, to learn how the world works and what is important for them to know. The experiences children have help to build a picture for them of how people relate to each other. As children get older, patterns of behaviour emerge and become characteristic ways of responding. Early intervention is about providing opportunities for children to experience and learn from positive relationships and supportive adults to help them gain understanding which will enable them to establish and maintain their own positive social connections.

## Early intervention

Early intervention is not just about at an early stage in life, but also at the point that early signs are noted that may indicate emerging difficulties. We can all understand that prevention is better than a cure, and this is particularly true when supporting behavioural learning. If we invest in and create an environment that enables positive learning about behaviour, we can show children effective and appropriate ways of interacting.

# Research and theories about behaviour



Experiencing positive interactions



Finding ways to make connections

Our understanding of behaviour is influenced by our own experiences, of which society, local and family cultural norms play a major part. Understanding why individuals behave the way they do has fascinated researchers for several decades. Their findings, whether from a psychological, biological, neuro-scientific, sociological, geographical or philosophical viewpoint, gradually seep into our everyday 'folk psychology' or understanding of others and ourselves. However, it is useful to step aside and consider the traditions and research which influence us, particularly if we are involved in early years provision for our youngest children.

Beliefs and understanding about childhood and what children are have ranged from the idea of original sin and the need to beat the devil out of children, to seeing a child as a blank canvas on which carers can inscribe whatever they see fit. The parenting carers have received and their own individual

experiences will influence their views. As we grow and develop as individuals we learn about different ways to interact, how our emotions change our responses and the fact that others think differently from us. Young children are mainly in the company of others as they develop understanding of interactions and accepted patterns of behaviour (Gauvin 2001, Perez & Gauvin 2007, Rogoff 2003). So the ways in which older children and adults react to each other as well as to the individual children will influence this developing understanding.

Society, as viewed by the child's carers, underpins what they consider to be the important skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding which children will need to be able to take their place as adults in the community. However, realistically we do have to recognise that it is very difficult to predict how the demands of society may change over the lifetime of the children we are working with at the moment. One of the current

## Example: Mediating children's interactions



Deciding when and how to intervene takes practice

each Key Person used children's photographs to talk about positive attributes and skills which children possessed. Children were given cameras to take photographs of the children they liked to be with for different activities. These were used to make a display about children's thinking about friends and friendships.

### Day nursery

As practitioners in the day nursery noticed children playing successfully together, they noted the combination of children and the activity they were involved in. The practitioner joined the children and talked with them about how well they were working together and asked what they liked about the friends they were playing with. As a staff group they used short stories (some in books, others they wrote themselves) to talk about and name characteristics of friends. A central theme was that not all friends have all attributes but some have some of them some of the time. This helped children to have ways of describing their relationships in greater detail. It also triggered discussion with several children about how their emotions or being tired made it harder sometimes to be "my kind self." Another aspect of friendship which the children were interested in, but the practitioners had not previously talked with children about, was expressing the full range of

emotions. Together children and practitioners talked about getting cross but still being able to be friends. Finally, children talked about the fact that being a friend is not about being happy all the time, and that sometimes showing you understand when a friend is sad and what they are sad about is very important.

### School

Several children in a reception class seemed to be having difficulty engaging in others' games and activities appropriately. This was resulting in conflicts and "I'm not going to be your friend" situations. After a series of targeted observations the staff team felt that one of the main catalysts for the problems was children's approach to join the game was being misinterpreted by those already playing. It was felt that both those asking to join and those being asked needed some help to understand the others perspective. The staff team compiled a mini project which began with the adults collecting examples of the ways children who were successful in joining others play managed this process. They noted what was said, done (e.g., being alongside before joining in, watching and trying to make eye contact etc.) and the responses they received (e.g. a verbal invitation, ball thrown to them etc.). Small group discussions with the children added to this information and began a "play wall" outdoor display with each brick containing a suggested way to join others' play. Further, larger group discussion identified ways to invite others to join a game. An important part of this discussion was the recognition that sometimes it is appropriate to say 'no' when someone wants to join your game. The children talked about the different meanings of "no" in this situation. For example, the game was nearly finished and the new person could join the next 'round', it was a pretend play game which didn't need new characters at this point, last time the child had joined in they had spoiled the game etc. The result of this discussion was a realisation that "no" was being taken by some to mean "I never ever want to play with you again" when actually the intended message had been "I will play with you another time but I want to finish this game first." These group discussions were usually about 10 minutes and generally took place at the end or beginning of lunchtime play. The key points of the discussion were added to the play wall and the children presented their ideas to the lunchtime supervisors, using the play wall as a visual prompt. A small group of children was identified as continuing to have difficulty and the staff team used the beginning of focus activities to support these children to rehearse asking to join in and inviting others to join them. As their confidence grew through the term these children were noted to have fewer peer conflicts, particularly during the lunchtime play session.

# Thinking about emotional learning



I can...



...and I can too!

There are strong links between our emotions and the way we respond to situations. The emotions we experience change how we look and sound as well as how we interpret what we see and hear. Watching an event when we are feeling relaxed and calm will trigger a different set of responses than if we see the same event when feeling stressed and anxious. In this sense our emotions change our behaviour.

It is important that we think carefully about what we mean by the word “behaviour”. A narrow, negative definition limits our thinking. If we only think of the word ‘behaviour’ as meaning something negative or inappropriate we miss the point that behaviour is a response and a means of communication. If we only think of the narrow negative interpretation, we also reduce our ability to support children’s behavioural learning. By accepting the wider perspective that behaviour is everything we say and everything we do, this takes into account the whole

range of both the positive and negative aspects of behaviour. Further, if we recognise that everyone will have individual differences in experience and characteristics which influence their understanding of behaviour, then we can begin to see just how complex the topic of behaviour can be.

## Communicating emotions

The role played by emotions in young children’s understanding of social interactions has been the subject of much recent research (Halberstadt, Denham & Dunsmore, 2001). Firstly, the importance of facial expressions as an indication of emotional states. Secondly, the ability of young children to use a range of skills to recognise and respond appropriately to clues about their own and others’ emotional state. Halberstadt and colleagues, for example, suggest that sending, receiving and