

## **A parent's guide to promoting positive behaviour**

### **Introduction**

Being a parent is a wonderful experience; however, it is not always easy. There are many high points but also many challenges, and supporting young children's behaviour can be a challenge and sometimes a difficult and stressful time. All parents will have differing experiences of challenging behaviour with their children. Some children may exhibit more challenging behaviour than others, but as parents you may feel like your child is the only one who is behaving in this way. This is not the case.

This factsheet has been developed to offer some tips to promote and support positive behaviour, some of the typical behaviours that your child may display and ways in which you can work with your child's nursery to help you combat these behaviours with strategies and to ensure consistency to enable you and your child to have a more settled time at home and nursery. We will also share how the Golden Rule books can be used to promote positive behaviour and how to access this valuable resource to use at home with your children.

### **Promoting positive behaviour**

Relationships are built on meeting the emotional needs that we all have for attention, acceptance, approval, comfort, security, encouragement, support, respect and affection. When our needs are met we feel happy and secure. When they are not met we can feel anxious, insecure and unhappy. Young children can often display unwanted behaviour because they are tired or hungry or require something that someone else has. This may also be seen when they feel they can't communicate what they want, or that the adult doesn't understand what they want.

Young children's understanding of concepts such as 'later', keeping safe or possessions belonging to someone else are still early in the development stage. Your child might hear what you are saying, but may not yet have the knowledge or language skills to fully understand what you are saying, what this means or be able to negotiate with you. This can sometimes result in tears and/or anger. It is unlikely that your child has planned this. It is more a response to pent-up frustration.

### **Thinking time**

Think about a time when you were starting a new job or going through a stressful time. How did this make you feel?

Usually as adults we can talk about how we feel and gain support from family and friends. Young children usually display their frustration through their behaviour as this can be the only way they know.

Providing a positive safe environment and meeting primary needs will support positive behaviour traits.

Each child is an individual who develops at their own pace. Some children will pass through development stages with ease, whereas some children may need a little more support. As children go through a range of new and different experiences they begin to explore and test out boundaries. Young children may go through shorter periods of challenging behaviour where some behaviours may continue and may be due to other undiagnosed needs where further long term support is required.

Positive behaviour management is about using a positive rather than negative approach to encourage children to understand their behaviours, implications and the impact they may have on themselves and those around them. This encourages you to focus on the positive areas and praise these rather than always focusing on the negative elements. There will be times when you will

have to stop negative behaviour, but preventing this behaviour in the first place through praising, rewarding and giving attention for good instead of inappropriate behaviour, can encourage this rather than children 'playing up' in order to gain attention.

#### **Top tips to encourage positive behaviour:**

- **Be consistent** – Try to adopt a consistent approach to behaviour so children can quickly develop their understanding of what is expected. Roll this out to other family members such as grandparents too so children don't become confused as to what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable, e.g. if you expect your child to sit down to drink their milk, then ensure those around them do the same
- **Provide positive role models** - Children learn from those around them. It is important for them to have positive role models who follow the rules and boundaries themselves and model effective practice, such as paying attention, listening when someone else is speaking, taking turns, saying please and thank you and using positive body language
- **Have clear and realistic expectations** - Rules or boundaries that are just and fair are an important part of daily life. These may include walking safely inside, looking after toys and keeping their hands to themselves. The Golden Rules (see below) provide more information about appropriate rules for young children.

#### **As children get older try to involve them in developing the rules too!**

- **Positive reinforcement** - Positive feedback is the best and most effective way to promote positive behaviour and minimise unwanted behaviour. This encourages the development of self-confidence and self-esteem in young children, which are vital life skills to enable children to be active learners

and confident as they grow and develop. Children need to know when they are getting it right through your positive and warm body language, tone of voice, physical touch, praise and compliments, encouragement, attention, treats, rewards and privileges. Children also need praise and encouragement for the process of tasks as well as when they complete a task. They need to know that this is just as important as the result and sometimes more important, e.g. giving praise to your child for starting to put their coat on, even though you may need to help them with the final part is just as important as praising your child for putting their coat on all by themselves.

**Top tip: 'Remember that the most powerful reward of all is a smile and kind word' (Cowley 2011).**

- **Pre-planning** - Children often misbehave when their routine is altered and they feel insecure, even if the routine is being altered because of something exciting or novel. Try to prepare your child wherever possible about any changes, so for example, if you need to change your plans on a Saturday because of a late party invitation, explain this to your child and tell them about the different kind of fun they will have at the party
- **Distraction** - Many young children can be diverted from inappropriate behaviour by giving them focused attention or simply turning their attention to something else. This can often be successful when diverting them to something that they are particularly interested in or a particular favourite toy or resource, e.g. if your child is starting to become agitated in the supermarket because they want a chocolate bar, try distracting them by giving them responsibility for finding a specific item on your shopping list that relates to them, e.g. fruit juice or cereal. Make it exciting like a treasure hunt. This will then hopefully distract them away from the cause of their unwanted behaviour

- **Choices** - Offering choices can be used to take conflict out of the situation. If you would like your child to sit down at the dinner table (and they are refusing) offer them a choice, e.g. 'you can either sit down here on that chair or on the big chair next to me, which one are you going to choose?'
- **Problem solving** - you can begin to support your child in developing the necessary skills they need for later life. As your child rushes over to you and tells you what their problem is, do not rush in to give them a solution. Repeat back what they have told you, acknowledge how they feel about the situation and then ask them, 'how are we going to solve this?' This will encourage them to begin to solve problems for themselves, rather than always running to an adult for support. E.g. When it comes to sharing toys, your child may run over to you and tell you they want the toy their friend or sibling has. Encourage them to think about how they can share this or come to a compromise
- **1, 2, 3 magic** - When asking your child to do something say: 'I will count to three and then...' Give an offer of a positive reward or alternatively a boundary, and ensure you follow through for consistency or this approach will soon become redundant
- **Structures and routines** - Young children find routines safe and reassuring and are more likely to behave appropriately within structures they feel comfortable with. These need to be flexible and appropriate to the age of the child, for example not expecting your child to sit at the table for too long, as this can sometimes result in them displaying unwanted behaviour when they may just be bored or frustrated.

### **Typical behaviours in young children**

There can be a range of underlying reasons as to why a child is behaving in a certain way and unfortunately for you as parents there is no single answer to 'fixing' any of these. There is a great spectrum of behaviours: some may be due to changes in the child's life, for example, a new sibling, loss of a family member

or pet or your child may have needs that have not been identified yet, e.g. underlying educational or physical needs/disability, e.g. a hearing impairment.

Many children have repeated patterns of behaviour that the Early Years world refers to as '*schemas*'. Often these can appear to be negative behaviour by adults but they are just part of your child's development. Examples of these that you may have observed in your child may include:

- Your child repeatedly dropping items from their high chair. This is known as a trajectory schema
- Repeatedly filling and emptying boxes, bins and bags. This may result in you losing important items in your home such as car keys or the television remote. This is known as an enveloping and containing schema.

There are many others too. NDNA have produced a table with further information and support about how you can support your child's repeated behaviour patterns to support their learning. This can also be found on the parents' area of the website.

Some of the most common reasons for challenging behaviour may be your child trying to tell you something but not being able to use the correct words yet, or may not be able to communicate at all. This can lead to challenging behaviour due to frustration, fear, hyperactivity, discomfort, a lack of understanding by the child or adult, or a lack of attention your child needs at that moment in time.

## **Sharing**

The development stage for 'learning to share' can be a complex one and takes time. Some children will understand this concept earlier than others and this can cause additional conflict. Having positive role models that support and encourage sharing is important as well as supporting children to take turns in play and conversation.

During the earlier stages, your child may have a favourite toy that they do not want to share. Role modeling and encouraging them to share and praising others who are sharing are positive ways to encourage this. It will not happen over night and sometimes if this toy is also a comforter for your child, it may not be appropriate for the child to share this particular toy, but instead share another..

As children get older they begin to understand what sharing is. Sand timers or timers on your phone are useful to support them in understanding when it is their turn or when they need to give someone else a turn. This can help with arguments between your children about sharing toys, games or books.

## **Biting**

Biting other children and adults can be quite common in young children as many children pass through this stage as part of their development. This can occur out of frustration because they want or think they need something that another child has or because they are teething.

Biting incidents can be a difficult time for parents. Your child may bite a sibling, a friend's child or other children at nursery or your child may also be bitten by another child. Often there is no known cause as to why the child is biting and in some cases particular children will continue to bite for an extended period of time.

If your child bites it is important to redirect the attention to the child who has been bitten first and give them comfort and support so that the biter can see that they do not receive the attention for biting. You should then speak to your child who has bitten afterwards (in terms that they understand) that you cannot let them hurt their friend/sibling and it makes the child who has been bitten and you really sad.

If your child is bitten while at nursery this can be upsetting, as no one wants to hear that their child has been injured, especially by another child, and sometimes

the bite marks can be quite deep. Nurseries will have behaviour policies that should include biting incidents so you can ask to see them and ask what the nursery are doing to support both children and to minimize this happening again.

If your child is the one who is biting other children at nursery, the nursery team should invite you to talk about how you can work together to minimize it happening. They shouldn't make you feel that it is yours or your child's fault. Identifying triggers, e.g. when your child is tired or hungry, are helpful to gain an understanding of when and why they may bite. Strategies to support your child could include having biting rings, picture routines (photographs showing the sequence of events in your day), relaxing and sensory time, reiterating the importance of positive role models, encouraging all children to be kind to one another and praising positive behaviour.

## **Bullying**

Young children may display inappropriate behaviour but usually with the right support and strategies these do not lead into anything more serious. The word bully and bullying is usually a bigger concern during primary and secondary school.

There are many definitions of bullying but most have three things in common.

These are:

- Deliberately hurting behaviour
- Repeated over time
- An imbalance of power, which makes it hard for those who are being bullied to defend themselves.

Behaviours with young children are very unlikely to include children deliberately hurting others time and time again. They are usually due to young children testing out boundaries or exhibiting their frustrations.



A safe environment with appropriate and consistent boundaries provides children with the right foundations for the future. Getting this right for children in the earliest years is so important because it will enable children to develop the understanding of right from wrong and begin to have empathy for others. Embedding this lays the foundations needed so your children do not go on to bully others in the future during their school or working life.

### **Inappropriate language**

Children's vocabulary is extended through direct experience. If children hear inappropriate language more than once then they may imitate them. Children could hear this from familiar adults, other children or even others in their local surroundings.

If the inappropriate language incident is a one-off you may choose to ignore it and instead reinforce what has been said with an alternative word.

Lindon (2011) suggests, for example, replacing 'what a \*\*\*\*\* big beetle' with 'that is one enormous beetle' or 'Hey! Olivia's found a giant beetle!'

Where the inappropriate language becomes a repeated behaviour you need to acknowledge the words rather than ignore them, as this is unlikely to be effective. Children need to know that that the words are not kind or that we don't use those words, and give an alternative example.

Children need positive role models. If you accidentally stub your toe you may be tempted to use inappropriate language. You need to be aware of how you respond to these situations and use alternatives because, as we know, children will copy. If you do use inappropriate language, then you do need to explain to your children, if they copy you, that this is not the right word to use and that you

were also wrong when you said this and you will try not to say this word again. Positive role modelling does not stop at the behaviours and language you use as it also includes admitting when you are in the wrong and correcting your own behaviour if you need to.

### **Working in partnership with your child's nursery**

Nurseries should have a designated key person assigned to your child. The role of the key person is to initially settle your child and share information as well as inform you about your child's day and what they have been doing. If your child displays any unwanted behaviour the key person should inform you of this in private and depending on the issue you may be asked to sign an incident form.

All nurseries in England have a duty to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This includes all the legal requirements that early years providers must meet and are inspected by Ofsted on. The EYFS states that providers must have and implement a behaviour management policy and procedures. Nurseries should share this with you when you start or have them on display so you can see how the nursery promotes positive behaviour and approaches unwanted or inappropriate behaviour.

They are also required to have a named member of staff who is responsible for behaviour management. The designated person must have the necessary skills to advise other nursery team members on behaviour issues and be able to access expert advice if necessary. If you have any concerns it is recommended that you talk to your child's key person and/or the designated member of staff or manager. Together you can look at consistent strategies for the home and nursery to help your child move forward in their development.

Nursery staff must not give corporal punishment to a child and must take all reasonable steps to ensure that corporate punishment is not given by any person who cares for or is in regular contact with a child.

### **Additional needs**

Children who have additional needs may have greater frustrations, especially if they do not have the words or signs to express themselves. This can sometimes result in tantrums, screaming, hurting others, breaking things, feeding problems and lack of sleep.

If you are worried about your child's behaviour you should seek further support. You should try to record any incidents so you have a log of how often these occur and any potential triggers. These can then be shared with health visitors and doctors who may be involved in the referral process.

If your child attends nursery it is important that you work together and share information with the nursery, especially your child's key person. The nursery will carry out observations that will also identify any triggers or times of the day that may be affecting your child's behaviour. Supporting children's behaviour is easier when everyone works together and implements the same strategies, as this provides consistency for your child and makes any strategy easier to implement at home as your child is used to this approach.

### **Golden Rules books**

NDNA and Positive Press Publishers have developed Golden Rules stories for babies and very young children.

This beautifully designed box set includes the following 6 books:

- Well done, Zelda Zebra you are gentle
- Well done, Louis Lion you are honest
- Well done, Mona Monkey you listen well
- Well done, Gino Giraffe you look after things
- Well done, Elsa Elephant you try hard
- Well done, Alfred Alligator you are kind and helpful

The board books are built on the already phenomenally successful Golden Rules series by Jenny Mosely that are widely used in primary schools. Jenny is well known for her work around promoting children's moral values and positive behaviour through rules, stories, puppets and Quality Circle Time. Schools use these to improve behaviour and deliver calmer, happier classrooms.

### **What are the Golden Rules?**

Jenny developed the universal values that are known as The Golden Rules. These are:

- We listen to people, we don't interrupt
- We are honest, we don't cover up the truth
- We are kind and helpful, we don't hurt anybody's feelings
- We are gentle, we don't hurt others
- We try to work hard, we don't waste time
- We look after property, we don't waste or damage things

The rules purposely include the opposites to support children's learning, as each concept's opposite enhances its definition or knowledge of itself.

You will notice how the rules above have been incorporated in to the board book stories in an age-stage appropriate and fun way.

Jenny describes the rules as: *'The moral values that we learn as children are part of the wider process of socialisation. Our sense of morality is grounded in our growing understanding that we must build bonds with other people to ensure our mutual well-being in a community. A consensus about the values that should underpin and guide our behaviour towards each other is the code of conduct that ensures that we can live in social harmony by taking care of one another.'* (Mosley 2005, p8)

## **The benefits of using the Golden Rules books**

The board books have been designed for parents and practitioners to share with babies and very young children to promote positive values and, like school children, begin to adopt the rules and learn to love them.

The picture books and simple text will support children's communication. Young children will enjoy listening to the stories, they will soon learn to recognise the friendly characters and learn their names.

The books will also offer children opportunities to identify and verbalise/express their feelings, which will support them to manage their own behaviours and give them opportunities to solve problematic situations that occur. The Golden Rule books can be used as prompts for the types of behaviour that should be being used.

The Golden Rules stories should be available for babies and young children to access freely. Babies and young children often have favourite books that they will want you to read. The lovable characters will soon become a popular addition to your home. Children will enjoy looking at the pictures, sharing the books, turning the pages and joining in with the key words. This will support them in understanding that books carry meaning and in English this is read from left to right and top to bottom.

## **Further information and support**

Department for Education (2012) The Early Years Foundation Stage London: DfE

<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/e/eyfs%20statutory%20framework%20march%202012.pdf>

NSPCC: (last accessed 19.2.13) Encouraging better behaviour  
[www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents-and-carers/guides-for-parents/better-behaviour/better-behaviour-pdf\\_wdf90719.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents-and-carers/guides-for-parents/better-behaviour/better-behaviour-pdf_wdf90719.pdf)

Parenting NI (last accessed 19.2.13) Top Tips for parents: your guide to positive parenting. [www.parentingni.org/usefullinks/documents/tipsforparents.pdf](http://www.parentingni.org/usefullinks/documents/tipsforparents.pdf)

Young Minds is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.  
[www.youngminds.org.uk/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/)

Further information about Jenny Mosley's resources and training can be found at  
[www.circle-time.co.uk](http://www.circle-time.co.uk)