Supporting behaviour in early childhood education

Setting the scene

Children’s experiences in the early years lay the foundation for their social relationships and learning for the rest of their life.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is often children’s first formal, group-based social experience outside the family. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework asserts that educators promote children’s identity, resilience, and agency when they “provide children with strategies to make informed choices about their actions, interactions and behaviours”. This tip sheet provides strategies for ‘setting the scene’.

Providing stable foundations

Providing stable emotional environments and consistency of educators are important for establishing positive behaviours.

Children who experience changes in educators can display more challenging behaviour. Providing stable emotional environments for children is a protective factor that can reduce challenging behaviours.

Evidence shows that when educators feel stressed, they are more likely to experience challenging behaviours in ECEC. Creating stable environments involves reducing stress and increasing the emotional stability for everyone.

Consider the emotional temperature of your ECEC environment:
• Is it stable?
• Is it predictable?
• When does it change?
• How am I feeling?
• Do I know how the children are feeling?

The power of positive relationships

Did you know that spending as little as 5–15 minutes daily one-on-one with a child displaying challenging behaviours can lead to better quality interactions between educator and child? This approach is often known as banking time. Key elements of this approach involve the child choosing and leading an activity.

Experiment with banking time
• Observe the child’s behaviours and emotions
• Narrate their own and the child’s actions (e.g., “You’ve chosen to build a train”)
• Label the child’s feelings (e.g., “I see you’re feeling frustrated with that train wheel. It looks tricky.”)
• Prioritise educator-child relationship (e.g., “How can I help?”)
• Actively engage with the child and their activity (e.g., “Where would you like me to put this wheel?”)
• Use questions to support the child’s engagement (see Curious about Questions?)
• Use mirroring (e.g., copy the child’s play)
• Allow the child to lead, rather than controlling the activity
• Don’t focus on correcting behaviours

Educators provide opportunities for children to experience positive relationships and learn to practice critical skills for life-long success, including:

- **Emotional regulation** - communicating emotions and needs in safe and productive ways
- **Social regulation** - understanding feelings and perspectives of others
- **Cognitive regulation** - problem solving when faced with a challenge
Supporting behaviour: Setting the scene

Empowering children with skills and knowledge

When children are provided with practical strategies to communicate their own emotional and physical needs and preferences, and are supported to problem solve solutions to conflict, they are better equipped to manage challenging situations.

The evidence is still emerging on how to equip children with these practical strategies. However, some small studies have shown that strategies such as the turtle technique, visual stimuli, social stories, and stories with an emotional focus are helpful in increasing positive behaviours (e.g., sharing, empathy, helping, and comforting others) or decreasing negative behaviours (e.g., non-compliance, grabbing toys or peers, physical/verbal outbursts).

**Strategies to try**

**Visual stimulated conversations**

Videos or pictures of the child engaged in a targeted positive behaviour can be used to prompt for conversation about positive behaviours. A child’s choice has been shown to be important when using this approach, so give them the option to select their preference of video or picture representation.

**Story prompted conversations**

Story prompted conversations focus on a character’s feelings, needs and pro-social actions. This approach has been shown to increase empathy, sharing, helping, and comforting others.

**Social stories**

Social stories are short, simple stories, written from the perspective of a child, that delivers instruction on appropriate social behaviours.

- "I like painting."
- "Sometimes others are using the paints I want to use."
- "I can ask nicely and wait my turn."
- "Asking nicely makes my friends feel good."

**Turtle technique (4 steps)**

1. Stop: The child stops behaviour or interaction and holds up palm of hand
2. Go into shell: The child puts head down, places hands/arms across chest or holds hands or arms, curls into ball and/or crouches
3. Deep breath: The child takes deep breaths until they feel calm
4. Calm: The child (with support) thinks of multiple solutions to try

The gift of communicating expectations

Communicating expectations is a key component underpinning many of the strategies identified for responding to challenging behaviours in ECEC. It is difficult for a child to align with expectations if they’re unsure of what those expectations are.

**Questions to consider:**

- How do you make your expectations clear and explicit?
- How do you test whether your expectations are reasonable?
- Are there modifications that need to be made for all children and/or an individual child?
- Are there reminders or prompts you can use to support children?
- Have you checked that the child/children understand?

Tools not rules... The behaviour support approaches identified in these tip sheets are not intended to be a formula or a ‘one-size fits all’ approach, rather they are possible tools that can inform decision making.

Key references


