Supporting behaviour in early childhood education

In the moment

Educators face a range of challenging situations in their everyday practices as they support children to learn and positively interact with others. Challenging behaviours are a common occurrence and researchers have identified a range of effective strategies that can help educators to respond in the moment.

This tip sheet describes strategies to direct, re-direct, praise and reward positive behaviour, and resolve challenges or conflicts. It is part of a set of tip sheets that provide strategies to support educators to proactively anticipate and avert challenging behaviours in ECEC settings for children aged between 2-5 years. It has been developed from findings of a systematic review of the best available Australian and international research.

Strategies used in the moment aim to support children to:
1. Comply with instructions or directions through directing and re-directing strategies
2. Engage in positive behaviours through praising and rewarding positive behaviour strategies
3. Stop or reduce challenging behaviours during classroom interactions through ‘resolving’ strategies

1. Directing and re-directing

Educators are often tasked with directing and re-directing children’s behaviour as it occurs. Directing refers to guiding children towards a desired action or behaviour, whereas redirecting is guiding children away from an undesired action or behaviour. Directing and re-directing can be achieved through educators’ verbal or non-verbal directions or a combination of both. Different approaches may be more effective in different situations.

Verbal directions

Research shows that educators typically use four types of verbal instruction to guide children’s behaviour:

More effective
- Instructing and specifying the action to be completed or stopped (e.g., “Put your hat on for outdoor play” or “Please keep your hands to yourself”)
- Embedding an action in an activity (e.g., “Let’s hop like frogs to the outdoor play area”)

Less effective
- Instructing but not specifying the action to be completed or stopped (e.g., “Do the right thing” or “Stop that”)
- Phrasing the instruction as a question (e.g., “Are you ready for outdoor play?” or “Would you like to keep your hands to yourself?”)

Research has shown that specifying an action and embedding an action in an activity are more effective for achieving compliance compared with educator instructions that are not specified or are phrased as a question.
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Do Commands

Do commands specify a desired action (e.g., "Walk").
Don’t commands specify the termination of an undesired action (e.g., "Don’t run"). Research tells us that Do commands are more likely to result in a child following a direction than Don’t commands.

What’s in a name

Using a child’s name can help gain their attention prior to issuing a direction or re-direction. Research shows that children who either stop their action OR look at the educator following their name being said are more likely to comply with an instruction.

Non-verbal directions

Not all directions provided to children need to be verbal. Non-verbal directions, including gestures and physical prompts, are also used by educators to direct and re-direct children’s behaviour.

Evidence has shown that non-verbal prompts can be useful in reducing reliance on verbal instructions and guide a child towards a desired behaviour. For example, if a child interrupts when an educator is talking with another child, the educator may gently hold the interrupting child’s hand, to indicate that they are aware of the child, but they need to wait a moment.

Experimenting with directions

Experiment and reflect on your own use of different types of verbal and non-verbal directing and redirecting strategies:

• What types do you use the most?
• In what situations do you use these?
• How do individual children respond?
• See what happens when you use a ‘do’ or ‘don’t’ command
• Observe how different children in your class show that they are listening to a direction

Are you getting the child’s attention?

It is not necessary for a child to both stop and look to demonstrate attention.

Evidence shows that stopping or looking is equally as effective for a child to communicate they are attending to instructions, so there is no need to insist on both. Different children will indicate they are listening in different ways.

2. Praising and rewarding positive behaviour

Educators use both verbal and physical actions to reinforce or encourage desired behaviours in ECEC.

Praising

The use of praise is a common approach used by many educators, however not all praise is the same.

• General praise refers to statements that indicate approval of an action or behaviour but do not specify the specific behaviour (e.g., "Well done")
• Specific praise indicates approval of an action or behaviour and names the specific behaviour (e.g., "Thanks for putting away the books")

Specific praise has been shown to be more effective in reinforcing positive behaviour and discouraging negative behaviour than general praise.

Rewarding

Material or activity-based rewards have also been examined in research studies as a strategy for rewarding desired behaviours.

Rewards can be for a group or an individual child and may be a known reward or a mystery (e.g., an activity card is randomly selected).

Evidence for effectiveness of rewards is mixed. Research shows that rewards are not effective for all children and may increase negative behaviours in some.
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3. Resolving

Challenging situations provide important opportunities to model, learn, and practice different ways to problem-solve and to deal with big emotions. Educators can support children to brainstorm a range of different solutions to resolve challenges or conflicts.

Educators also play a role in helping children to identify and respond to their emotions. Current evidence suggests a range of educator strategies to support children during situations that challenge.

**Strategies to try**

- **Mirror a child’s feelings** – (e.g., looks at the child with empathy)
- **Validate emotions** – “I can see why that would make you feel sad”
- **Label emotions** – “I can see you’re really frustrated”
- **Discuss** – “I wonder what it is that’s making you sad?”
- **Distract** – “Would you like to pick something fun to do together?”
- **Provide an alternative view on the situation**
- **Soothe** child in ways that are responsive to their needs
- **Support** problem solving
- **Remind** children of expectations

**Key references**


**Experiment with involving children in the solution**

Did you know that when an educator dictates a solution, children are less likely to adopt the proposed solution? Children are more likely to adopt a solution when they were involved in brain-storming potential strategies to try.

**Avoiding reprimands and punishments**

There is currently no evidence that reprimands or punishments are effective strategies to respond to challenging behaviours in ECEC.

The use of reprimands or punishments has been found to be associated with more severe negative behaviours and may not be consistent with the National Quality Standard.

**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.