

INTO
Guidance
on
Managing Challenging
Behaviour
in Schools

What is challenging behaviour?

Challenging behaviour, in the school context, encompasses behaviour that:

- Interferes with the pupil's own and/or other pupils' learning;
- Disrupts the day to day functioning of the school;
- Jeopardizes the right of staff and pupils to a safe and orderly environment;
- Has a duration, frequency, intensity or persistence that is beyond the normal range that schools tolerate; and
- Is less likely to be responsive to the usual range of interventions used by the school to address pupil misbehaviour.

A perusal of the behaviour records of most primary schools will provide clear examples of different types of challenging behaviour displayed by children.

These include:

- Aggressive behaviour, including pushing, punching, kicking, biting, scratching, threatening behaviour and verbal abuse;
- Disruptive behaviour, including screaming, tantrums, non co-operation, running away;
- Destructive behaviour, including destruction of property and the environment;
- Withdrawn behaviour, including refusal to respond, such as elective mutism;
- Stereotypical behaviour, particularly in children with learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders, which can include rocking, repetitive vocalisations, ritualistic hand movements; and
- Self-injurious behaviour, including head banging, scratching and poking.

Why / In what context, does challenging behaviour occur?

There are many reasons why children behave in a challenging manner.

Therefore, identifying why they do so can be the key to finding a solution to the problems caused by the behaviour. This analysis must include a consideration of the behaviour and the context in which it occurs.

Children with **communication difficulties** may engage in challenging behaviour. If a child is unable to express his/her needs or wants because of a lack of understanding or ability to use language, inappropriate behaviour may be used to express those needs. In such cases, teaching a child to use acceptable ways to communicate his/her needs may form part of the solution.

Environmental factors may contribute to the problem. Children may react negatively to noise, heat and cold or to invasion of their space. Some children, particularly children with autistic spectrum disorders, may be over sensitive to certain stimuli such as noise, and may therefore react by displaying challenging behaviour.

Attention-seeking is often identified as a cause of challenging behaviour. This begs the question as to why the child needs to seek attention in this way. Some children may be unable to manage a particular task and may be frustrated or bored. However, attention-seeking behaviour can also be a learned behaviour which has been effective in the past in ensuring that children get what they want. Even negative attention can be motivating for some children, especially if they feel that this is the only attention they receive.

Factors associated with **socio-economic disadvantage** also influence the prevalence of challenging behaviour. Poor social skills and language development, associated with poor parenting skills may lead to a child exhibiting challenging behaviour. This behaviour may be used as a survival technique in the child's environment.

Challenging behaviour may have an underlying **medical cause or reason**, such as pain, illness or sensory difficulties. Some forms of challenging behaviour are particularly associated with certain conditions and disabilities such as repeated and involuntary body movements (tics) and uncontrollable vocal sounds (Tourette's Syndrome) or ritualistic or obsessive behaviour (Autistic Spectrum Disorders).

Strategies for Promoting Positive Behaviour

The most effective method adopted by teachers when attempting to manage challenging behaviour is to prevent it occurring in the first place. To this end, many schools have developed strategies to promote positive behaviour. This is based on the assumption that most behaviour patterns (negative and positive) are learned, and therefore, that acceptable behaviour can also be learned. It is also based on the belief that behaviour is contextual, so children can be taught to behave in a certain way in the school context. Acceptable behaviour is then reinforced in a school and classroom climate which is supportive of positive behaviour.

Mainstream schools are becoming increasingly inclusive, and therefore regularly encounter a situation where they meet children with challenging behaviour as an aspect of special education. A positive approach to the promotion of good behaviour benefits all children, including those with special educational needs. However, approaches must be modified to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate to the child with special educational needs.

Promoting Positive Behaviour in the Classroom

Children have an inherent need for a safe and secure environment. The classroom, in many instances, may be the only stable element in the life of a child not experiencing such security in other parts of his/ her life. Teachers model

positive behaviour by treating children and adults with respect and building up a positive relationship with pupils.

Children react well to routines and boundaries. There is, of course, a natural tendency to try and push out boundaries that are set and to test their limits. Establishing and maintaining rules and routines in the classroom requires a good deal of effort from teachers, but it has been shown to promote positive behaviour.

The following strategies have been found to be effective in promoting positive behaviour in classrooms, when implemented appropriately.

Develop clear and simple **classroom rules** in discussion with the children. These can be displayed in the classroom, perhaps with pictorial clues for non-readers. About three to five rules, stated in terms of observable behaviours is sufficient for most classes. Positive statements such as "*We put our hands up when we want to speak*" are preferable to negative statements such as "*No shouting out in class*". Rules can be taught and practised through role-play, and reinforced by praise or reward. It is important that there are positive consequences for children who keep the rules. There must also be consequences for those who do not.

All children respond to attention and therefore a focus on positive behaviour will reinforce positive behaviour. Many teachers make a point of trying to **catch children being good** and praise or reward them for this, placing the focus of attention in the classroom on the majority of children who behave appropriately. In many classrooms, teachers have adopted a formalised approach to rewards and praise, where children earn tokens, points or stickers for positive behaviour.

Gordon(1996) gives the following advice on the **use of rewards**:

- Reward appropriate behaviour as soon as possible;
- Make the pay-offs small, and attainable;
- Make the rewards cumulative;
- Make the pay-offs co-operative (i.e. encouraging the class to work together for a reward);
- Never take back a reward; and
- Use the element of surprise (e.g. by giving a double reward unexpectedly).

Many disruptive behaviours occur at transition times, for example when children are moving from one activity to another. It is therefore essential to **plan for routines and transitions**. Transitions can be flagged by the teacher e.g "In five minutes, we will finish this activity and eat our lunch". A child with a specific learning difficulty may, for example, find organising books and equipment a particular challenge. A verbal or visual clue about what will happen next can therefore help with management of classroom life.

Giving clear instructions to children about what is required of them is part of everyday life in the classroom. Teachers give an enormous number of commands during the school day with some research indicating an average number of thirty-five in a half-hour period. This has been shown to rise to sixty where children have more behaviour problems (Webster-Stratton, 1999).

Webster-Stratton describes children as being caught in a “command storm”. In order to make teachers’ instructions more effective she suggests that commands should be:

- Delivered after the teacher has sought and gained attention;
- Short, clear and specific;
- Expressed in positive terms;
- Followed by time for children to comply;
- Followed up by positive reinforcement of children who have followed the commands; and
- Reinforced by giving further signals to non-compliant children such as by standing close, using eye-contact and using their name.

Children must be aware that misbehaviour has **clear, consistent consequences**, and that failure to keep rules or to behave well will incur consequences. These can be presented to a child as a choice, where a teacher might say “I have asked you twice to work quietly. If you continue to talk, you will have to work at another table.” This is a way of holding children accountable for their behaviour. Consequences should be consistent, promptly applied, reasonable and related to the behaviour concerned.

A Whole-School Approach

A shared **ethos** for the school, which emphasises care, respect and responsibility, can be both a starting point and a result of an emphasis on positive behaviour. Practical manifestations of such an ethos include school assemblies where success is celebrated, a welcoming attitude to parents, ‘buddying’ of younger children or children with special education needs, a sharing of responsibility with students and the use of children’s first names. The cornerstone of such an approach is that it is shared by the whole school community, including staff, children, parents and the Board of Governors. The approach taken by the school must also be appropriate to the context in which the school operates, including factors related to the broader community and the legislation governing this area.

Article 19 of the Education and Library Boards (NI) Order 2003, School Discipline: Measures to Prevent Bullying, states:

- The Board of Governors must consult with registered pupils on the general principles which will be reflected in the school’s Discipline Policy; and

- The Principal, when deciding on measures which will be used to encourage good behaviour in the school, must specifically include measures to prevent bullying among pupils; and
- The Principal, before deciding on measures to encourage good behaviour, must consult with pupils registered at the school and their parents.

The **role of parents** in an approach to positive behaviour is extremely important. Teachers have also found that parental involvement in acknowledging positive behaviour, through the use of a note in the homework journal, or in making reports to parents, is very useful. Research has shown that children regard a positive note home as the best reward, while a negative note home was seen as the worst sanction.

A whole-school approach to the promotion of positive behaviour also enables **staff to support each other**. Collaboration involves staff in discussions about behaviour, without the danger that individuals may feel that their classroom management skills are being questioned. Staff support has also been identified as one of the major factors in coping effectively with incidents relating to challenging behaviour. In schools where there are particular problems, staff may have a system of calling on the principal or designated member of staff to assist by removing a pupil, or class group, where necessary, to calm a difficult situation.

Finally, a sense of common purpose in the promotion of positive behaviour is very effective in **dealing with behaviour in public areas**, such as corridors, assembly areas and the playground/yard. A shared understanding of what constitutes acceptable behaviour in these spaces, a willingness by all staff to deal with all children, and facilitating other members of staff to become involved in situations, leads to a cohesive approach to behaviour which is more easily accepted by children. Children will test the limits of every system, and so it is particularly important that a school's induction policy ensures that new or substitute teachers are given a clear understanding of procedures relating to behaviour.

The key to success of any system is that the procedures are fully discussed, understood and agreed by all staff, including ancillary staff.

Managing Challenging Behaviour

Steps taken to promote positive behaviour impact positively on the general climate in the school and the classroom, and minimise the occurrence of negative behaviour. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of schools to develop shared approaches that promote positive behaviour, it is likely that all teachers and schools will encounter situations of challenging behaviour.

ABC - Antecedent, Behaviour and Consequence

An analysis of the **antecedent** can help to identify the reason for the behaviour. The antecedent is what went on before the onset of the problematic behaviour. The pupil may have been faced with a task that he/she was unable to complete, reacted to something said by another pupil, or be distressed by something that has happened outside of school. It may be possible to identify a pattern of behaviour such as a child beginning to fidget after a certain period of time.

An analysis of the **behaviour** of the student can help in attempting to prevent a reoccurrence of the behaviour. Analysis can also help to break down the behaviour so that it can be tackled in small steps. For example, tackling outbursts which include among other things, bad language, might focus on dealing with the bad language, before tackling other elements.

An analysis of the **consequences** of behaviour may give clues as to how a situation occurs or develops. An extreme example might be that following a particularly bad outburst a child is sent home, which may have been the child's desired outcome. Attention seeking behaviour may be considered successful by a child in that it attracts negative attention from the teacher, or other pupils. Sometimes, the initial response to misbehaviour can serve to escalate a situation. A common example of this is where an aggressive response to behaviour may provoke further aggression from a child.

Responding to Challenging Behaviour

An appropriate response to challenging behaviour depends on the type of behaviour being exhibited by the child. Any response to challenging behaviour should be consistent, fair and be the least disruptive response necessary to manage the behaviour. A considered, proactive response is likely to be more effective than one which is merely reactive, and which may be influenced by an emotional response to the incident.

One response to particular forms of challenging behaviour is to **ignore** them. This strategy can be effective in dealing with annoying behaviours such as whining, pouting, screaming and tantrums. These behaviours are generally aimed at getting something, such as an object or attention. Initially, the behaviour may worsen, as the child tries harder to get attention. By ignoring the behaviour consistently, the child will come to realise that the behaviour is not effective. However, this approach must be combined with positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviour. Ignoring is not appropriate for behaviours that are abusive, or destructive, or behaviours such as lying, stealing or non-compliance.

It is important that teachers do not ignore children who are inattentive, or who are withdrawn. Teachers need a range of strategies for **redirecting** such children,

without drawing attention to the student's behaviour, or disrupting the work of the class. Teachers use strategies such as moving closer to a child, making eye contact, or using visual clues such as pictures or hand movements to remind children of appropriate behaviour. They also use firm, direct and specific statements to remind children of rules or the consequences of breaking them. If children comply with the direction, their behaviour can then be acknowledged positively.

More serious outbursts of misbehaviour, where the child chooses to act inappropriately must be met with **consequences** which are clear and logical. For example, if children fight in the playground/yard, it is a logical consequence that they will have to leave the playground/yard. If children distract others in class they will have to work away from others. It is important that the consequences are fairly immediate, implementable, and appropriate. Consequences should never be physically or psychologically harmful or humiliating. A school's Discipline Policy should outline the sanctions which are used in the school.

Another strategy which may be useful in the case of a serious incident of misbehaviour, or to prevent the escalation of an incident is providing for **time out**. In such circumstances a child goes to a particular place in the classroom, designated as the time out or cool down area. Time outs should be for designated misbehaviours only, and be part of a planned hierarchy of response. The time out area should be away from the other students, but in the view of the teacher. This approach should be for a limited, specified period, and it should be borne in mind that research has shown that **five minutes** is an optimal time frame. Children will test the limits of such an intervention, but if it is followed through consistently, it has proven to be an effective way to manage misbehaviour.

Exiting a child from the classroom may be necessary where the classroom is significantly disrupted. It is the most intrusive action that the teacher can take and should therefore be a planned intervention. This should include the steps to be tried prior to exiting, where the child will go and how they will be supervised. How the child will return to the class should also be considered in advance. Exiting needs to be planned on a whole school basis, taking account of the particular needs of the school. Teachers may agree, for example, to allow a child from another class to have a time out in their room, in return for a reciprocal arrangement. However, repeated exiting of a child can place an unfair burden on a particular member of staff and may give the children the message that the teacher is unable to manage the child.

It is also important that when the child returns from a time-out, or having been exited that they are assisted in re-establishing a working relationship with the teacher and the class.

Children with particularly challenging behaviour may benefit from the drawing up of a **behaviour plan**. Such a plan might set out the attainment of a particular

behaviour target over a short period of time such as a day or a week. Plans should focus on one behaviour at a time and the achievement of the targets should be reinforced positively. Children should be involved in the setting of targets. If a child is receiving assistance from a special needs teacher on the basis of their behavioural needs, the special needs teacher may be in a position to discuss the plans, or set targets, in consultation with the child and the class teacher. However, continually placing the child on a behaviour plan will reduce its effectiveness and add to the bureaucratic workload of teachers.

Managing Aggressive or Violent Misbehaviour

Aggressive and violent misbehaviour is not a regular occurrence in most schools. However, when such incidents occur, they are serious and cause a great deal of stress for those involved. When faced with a potentially violent situation the following steps may prove useful in de-escalating the situation. Schools should develop a system where a teacher can call for assistance if faced with a potentially dangerous situation.

- Where possible the child should be isolated. This may involve the child being exited from the classroom, perhaps with a special needs assistant, or with the assistance of another teacher. An alternative is that the rest of the class is removed from a potentially violent situation.
- The child should be spoken to calmly, assertively and respectfully.
- The teacher should stay at a safe distance.
- It should be made clear that you are listening to the child. In this way it may be possible to find out how the situation has developed, or how it may be resolved.
- The child should be asked to consider possible positive outcomes and behaviours.
- The child should be given space and time to cool off and to respond to requests.

It is important that any violent incident is recorded. It may also be analysed using the Antecedent - Behaviour – Consequences approach (see previous).

The most serious form of misbehaviour is assault, whether it is an assault on a teacher or another pupil. The guidance issued in INTO Leaflet No. 9 'Assaults on Teachers' should be followed in the case of an assault by a pupil.

Physical Containment / Restraint

The question of whether a child should be physically restrained or contained if they pose a danger to themselves or to others is clearly defined in the **DE Circular 1999/9 Pastoral Care: Guidance on the Use of Reasonable Force to Restrain or Control Pupils**.

"Article 4 of the 1998 Order authorises teachers to use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances to prevent a pupil from:

- Committing an offence;
- Causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including the pupil himself); or
- Engaging in any behaviour prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any of its pupils whether during a teaching session or otherwise.”

It must be emphasised that the vast majority of pupil misbehaviour can be managed without any use of containment / restraint. The interventions might include holding back a child who runs out in to traffic or intervening between two children fighting. The following principles must be borne in mind when considering any use of physical restraint:

- Physical intervention carries the possibility of being interpreted as an assault;
- Physical intervention may carry the risk of injury to the child or to the adult involved;
- Any consideration of the use of restraint or containment should only occur, as a last resort, where no other intervention is feasible or effective; and
- The intention of any physical intervention must be clear.

In short, teachers should only intervene physically to restrain or contain a child:

- Where there is a clear danger to the child or others;
- Where all other interventions have failed or are not feasible;
- With the clear intention of removing the child from danger; and
- With the minimum force required to ensure the child's safety.

In some special schools, the use of physical restraint may be part of the school's policy on challenging behaviour. In such cases, staff should be trained in the use of physical restraint as part of an overall behaviour intervention strategy. Where such a policy exists in the school, teachers will normally be required to undertake training in the use of restraint. However, it is important to keep in mind that only a minority of pupils will need to be restrained.

Conclusion

All children are entitled to an education free from frequent disruptions in a safe secure environment. Boards of Governors have a duty to ensure that schools are safe and healthy workplaces for teachers and others. The promotion of positive behaviour in the school and in the classroom is necessary if these outcomes are to be achieved. Schools also need to have a clear policy on how incidences of misbehaviour are handled. Experience has shown that the effort required in setting up a systematic approach to the promotion of positive behaviour pays dividends for all staff and students.