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# BEHAVIOUR BARRIERS AND BEYOND

Practical Strategies to  
Help All Pupils Thrive

A **Speechmark** Book



ROUTLEDGE  


# Chapter 1

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## Behaviour is communication

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Throughout this book, the key message is that behaviour is a form of communication. It is essential to see beyond the behaviour to its underlying function (such as anxiety, stress, tiredness, hunger, adversity, trauma, a basic need, sensory overload, communication difficulties, or a lack of understanding or skill). Be curious as to why the pupil is behaving in a certain way. A useful, popular analogy is to picture behaviour as an iceberg. The behaviours observed are just the tip of that iceberg (the symptom of the problem rather than the underlying problem); what lies beneath is a range of thoughts, emotions and triggers driving those behaviours. Once the behavioural function is understood, then support can be provided for any fear or anxiety beneath the behaviour and necessary skills can be taught.

Relationship and connection are of fundamental importance in understanding the person behind their behaviours, supporting empathically and giving pupils the skills needed to regulate their emotions and communicate their needs more effectively.

Let's look at *challenging behaviours* by *challenging* typical or traditional views of those behaviours. By reframing negative language and perceptions around behaviour, the ethos becomes more positive, enabling children to get their needs met more readily with empathy and understanding. Let's view 'challenging behaviour' as 'distressed behaviour' or a 'stress response' or as 'anxious' or 'overwhelmed behaviour' instead. The perception changes to one where a child is not

deliberately being 'difficult'; they are 'dysregulated' or 'stressed' and are communicating that dysregulation or stress. By changing the language used, adults often have more capacity to be compassionate and empathic, understanding that pupils are not deliberately behaving in a certain way but are communicating that something is very wrong.

Behaviour is an attempt to meet a need. As well as looking at the communicative function of behaviours, it is important to be aware of the needs the pupil is meeting by their actions, for example, are they anxious, afraid, gaining adult time and attention (positive or negative, it is still attention), avoiding a task, lacking a skill or seeking co-regulation? Can adults support pupils to ensure they get those needs met in a more appropriate way? Their behaviour will not change if that behaviour is meeting a need unless they are given an alternative means to get that need met. 'Children's behaviour is not good or bad. It's just how they show us their emotional and developmental needs' (Evans, 2018).

Below is a range of strategies that have been tried and tested and found to support pupils who communicate through different behaviours in school. There is a checklist at the end of this chapter.

### ***A strength-based approach***

- Value difference and neurodiversity. Focusing on what each pupil can do, their strengths, achievements and successes, is essential in preventing pupils from getting into a negative spiral, in building self-esteem and changing the way adults view and respond to them. Encourage pupils to share, develop and build on strengths, interests and knowledge and offer roles and responsibilities around these to boost self-esteem.
- Reframing language around behaviour into positives helps adults effectively support pupils compassionately and empathically and helps pupils to view themselves much more positively. 'If we learn to focus on what's right with a person rather than what's wrong we will make leaps forward in creating thriving people and flexible environments in which everyone can bring their talents to bear and positively contribute to their classroom, family, future employer, and community' (Peters, 2015). As discussed, 'challenging behaviour' can be reframed as 'stressed' or 'distressed' behaviour, 'inappropriate behaviour' may be 'dysregulated behaviour'. 'Hard to reach' can be reframed as 'that child who I've been unable to build a relationship with yet' and 'difficult to engage' becomes 'I haven't found a way to ignite their spark yet?' (Finnis, 2021, p.66).

In further language reframes 'won't' becomes 'can't yet', 'meltdowns' are seen as 'panic-attacks' or 'crisis points', 'attention-seeking' becomes 'connection-seeking' or 'attachment-needing', 'stubborn' could be 'determined', 'always calling out' is 'enthusiastic', 'can't sit still' is 'energetic'. See Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) chapter for more examples of specific behaviour reframes.

## ***Relationships and communication***

The most important resource available in school is a nurturing, empathic relationship with a trusted adult. 'The latest neuroscience findings underscore and evidence what we've really always known: we are designed to function best in relationship' (Bombèr, 2020).

- Build genuine, understanding, trusting, engaged relationships with the pupils, attuning to their needs to develop their sense of self-worth and feelings of belonging. As Finnis (2021, p.26) advocates: 'remember their birthday ... brag about them outrageously to others ... be their biggest cheerleader ... believe in them'. Regular check-ins and positive interactions between staff and pupils support children to feel safe, learn and have their needs met appropriately, thus improving behaviour. 'When students feel liked, respected and trusted by their teachers, they find more success in school, academically and behaviourally' (Finnis, 2021, p.20). See p.65 for more information on relationships and the PACE approach.
- Relationships within the school, among school staff, are important for staff and pupil wellbeing. Through adult modelling of positive relationships and interactions, pupils learn about positive relationships and interactions. The way staff communicate to and about others is essential and can create a positive atmosphere which is reflected through the whole school. This is not only through our language, but our entire way of being. Finnis (2021, p.18) discusses how the mindset of pupils and the wider school community is affected by 'the look on our faces, the way we greet each other, our tone of voice and our body language, as much as through the things we actually say. It's about how we talk among ourselves, how we are there for each other. It's about the weather we create around us.'
- Relationships extend beyond the school. Form a positive partnership with caregivers to work collaboratively. Aim for genuine, trusting, reciprocal connections. Regularly share the pupil's successes and strengths and build rapport before discussing

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concerns or strategies and open up channels of conversation for shared problem-solving.

- Involve the pupil in the planning process and in finding solutions, where appropriate, so that they feel involved and included and can communicate their concerns and suggestions.
- Use direct (unambiguous), positive language, focusing on moving the pupil on (rather than on the negative behaviours). State the behaviours that you would like to see, instead of those that you don't; for example, say 'put your feet on the floor' rather than 'take your feet off the chair' or 'put the ball on the floor' rather than 'don't throw the ball'.

### **Personal case example:**

I will always remember taking my class of excited Year 1s on a school trip. As I stated, 'don't all push to the back of the bus', I could almost see light dawn as they all thought 'oh, yes, let's get a seat at the back, quick', and my lovely calm line of children rapidly descended into chaos. Ever since then, I simply state, 'fill up the seats from the front first'. I tell them what I do want, rather than what I don't want!

- Pick your battles. Avoid confrontations, negotiations and power struggles. Dix (2017, p.112) advises remaining focused on the expected behaviours to avoid getting drawn into '*secondary behaviours*' intended to provoke a reaction. For example, if a pupil is asked to take their hat off and they do so, with grunting, groaning and moaning, they have still taken their hat off (complied with the request); aim not to get drawn into a downward spiral about the groaning, but thank them for following the instruction and move on. Secondary behaviours can always be addressed later, if necessary, but might be better tactically ignored altogether.
- 'You will get more of the behaviour you notice the most' (Dix, 2021, p.2). Focus on positive behaviour and 'catch the pupil being good', praising the small steps towards success. For example, if a student is sitting down, shouting across the class to their friend, an appropriate response might be, 'Meera, fabulous, you are sitting in your space and ready to learn, now eyes on me and use your indoor voice, thanks'.

- Alternatively, start with a positive, before giving an instruction, such as, 'Chris, lovely shiny shoes today, very smart, now tuck your shirt in too, thank you'. (*Thank you* suggests you expect compliance rather than *please*, which can imply that there is an element of choice.) Pupils are more likely to comply and less likely to come back with a negative or aggressive response when faced with a positive comment first.
- Positive feedback produces dopamine in the brain, making a person feel positive and motivated to repeat the experience (Kaufman, 2020). A study at De Montfort University developed the *5 Praises a Day* initiative, finding that children praised at least five times a day by caregivers were better behaved, appeared calmer, could concentrate for longer and listen more carefully than those who did not receive the same levels of praise. From personal observation, these results appear to be reflected in the classroom situation. Be specific and tell pupils what they have done well instead of a vague 'well done'. Praise for things that they have control over, such as effort, kindness, manners and behaviours for learning, rather than test results or correct answers. Focus on the small steps towards success: 'Jade, fabulous, I can see your pencil is in your hand ready to start the first question, let's get those ideas down on paper now' rather than 'Jade, why haven't you started your writing yet?'
- The importance of positive relationships is summarised by Treisman (2017), who states 'every interaction is an intervention'. Aim for ten positive interactions or comments for every (perceived) negative.
- Offer two or three clear positive choices to increase a pupil's feeling of control; for example, 'what are you going to use to do your writing task, your favourite handwriting pencil, my special pen or the pencil with the yellow pencil grip?' Include choices around where they will work, who with, which equipment to use, which paper to use or how the task or learning objective will be carried out. It is within the teacher's parameters but allows flexibility and ownership for the pupil.
- Avoid inadvertently reinforcing cycles of negative or inappropriate behaviour and support pupils to find an alternative means of getting their needs met. Explore what the pupil is gaining (sensory break, adult time, support for a task or developing a skill) and be creative in providing this for them proactively and positively before they need to escalate their behaviours. Avoid the pupil needing to escalate behaviour to gain attention. Go over to them when they are making the right choices (or taking steps towards the right choices).

**Case study:**

Kelly-Anne was a Year 2 pupil. Her class were regularly being evacuated as she was throwing equipment and turning over tables daily. Each time this happened, the SENDCO (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator), deputy head and often the headteacher would support her. It often took well over an hour for her to calm down with the senior staff members, only for it to happen again later or the next day. The most effective calming strategy seemed to be for her to go outside on the scooter, although it was often difficult to get her back inside again.

*What needs were being met by Kelly-Anne's behaviours and how could staff support her?*

Having observed Kelly-Anne, it was necessary to establish what needs were being met by her behaviour – an awful lot of adult time and a lovely play outside on the scooter. In discussion with the senior staff, we decided we needed to flip this. Time with one of the senior leaders was planned in each morning, including 15 minutes on the scooter outside or her choice of game (from a limited selection). This was included on her personal visual timetable, along with a photo of the adult and her choice of activity.

Over time, as Kelly-Anne trusted that she would get this relational time with adults, she no longer threw the tables and chairs and was much calmer. Alongside this, the adults set up a safe space for her to go if she needed it. They modelled and used the place and she took photos of it. Instead of throwing things, she was taught to go to her safe space if she felt distressed or overwhelmed.

**Case example:**

Kai was a Year 2 pupil who quickly became heightened. Each time his behaviours escalated, he could go outside and run around the playground to calm down. This worked and he then was able to engage in his learning. Having observed him, in discussion with the teacher, we decided to flip the situation. Each morning, Kai was invited outside for a run before sitting and learning before his behaviours escalated. He no longer needed to escalate his behaviours to meet his needs.

- Help children to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. 'Establish classroom rituals that help build connections and a sense of belonging, such as providing greetings and goodbyes, complimenting students and initiating traditions and celebrations' (Henson, 2020). Show genuine interest in what pupils have been doing and achieving or are interested in outside of school, welcome them in and ensure that they feel a valued member of the class.
- Actively listen by giving time and attention, showing an interest and asking open-ended questions. Convey that you understand what they are saying by clarifying and repeating key phrases back.

### ***Supporting to repair and restore relationships***

- Apologise when things go wrong or you make a mistake. Model a sincere apology, including acknowledging the pupils' feelings and suggesting how you will aim to learn from the experience and get it right should a similar situation arise in the future.
- After an incident, encourage pupils to problem-solve alongside a trusted adult, looking at alternative responses and means of behaving next time. Teach, model and support how to repair relationships if something has gone wrong. 'Random acts of kindness', 'paying back time' (such as tidying up, sweeping the floor, helping the site manager) and visuals such as sorry cards (Bombèr, 2020, pp.253–254) can work well for pupils who need to put something right yet struggle to reflect or see the consequences of their actions.
- Support pupils to reflect after an incident, once they are calm. Dix (2017, p.126) suggests 'walking and talking', playing with Lego™ or playdough, stacking books or gardening with pupils to enable authentic conversations. Further suggestions include drawing whilst talking or playing a simple game (such as Uno, Jenga or throwing and catching a ball), or having a hot chocolate together. Any such shared activity will often enable a pupil to talk more freely and feel less pressured than when just talking with an adult. Display and model empathy when talking about incidents. ('I can see that you were very frustrated. I understand why you felt that way.')
- 'Punishment doesn't teach better behaviour, restorative conversations do' (Dix, 2017, p.125). Restorative conversations focus on relationships. They enable pupils to explore the effect of their actions on others, resolve conflict, repair, and move on with empathy, understanding and kindness in a way that is non-shaming

and helps them to make better choices, should a similar situation arise in the future. Two key questions: 'who else has been affected?' and 'what can we do to make things right?' (Dix, 2017, p.131) make an effective starting point for adults wishing to engage in restorative conversations with pupils. 'Restorative practice describes a way of being, an underpinning ethos, which enables us to build and maintain healthy relationships' (Finnis, 2021, p.10).

- Help pupils begin to see the perspective of others. Comic Strip Conversations™ (Gray, 1994), the *Hand of Options* (Bombèr, 2011, p.186) or puppets, role play, story or video clips can be used to help pupils to explore alternative scenarios and other perspectives and to begin to understand how others have been affected by an incident.
- Avoid asking 'why' after an incident. Even with the best of intentions, it can often sound accusatory and a pupil will often not know or be able to articulate why they have presented with certain behaviours.

### ***Teaching and learning***

- Chunk work into simple, individual steps and make tasks appear less daunting by asking pupils to complete one or two steps or questions at a time, before having a quick movement break (sharpening the pencils, having a drink of water or giving out the books). Providing a visible structure will reduce stress and encourage involvement. Provide a checklist (see p.249–50) so that pupils can tick off each step as they achieve it (use a picture/symbol format for younger pupils). This helps focus their attention on the task and enables them to see the progress which they are making towards completion. To make it more tactile, Velcro™ each step on so the pupil can remove it as each step is achieved. Alternatively, put a lump of playdough in the tick box and the pupil presses this down like a button when they have completed the step (leaving an indentation to show it is complete) or press an actual button into the playdough to show that the stage is completed. A smiley face or word of praise from an adult as they complete each step adds positive feedback and encouragement to continue.
- Writing is often a trigger; being faced with a blank page can be particularly daunting, and children often fear making mistakes. Alleviate anxieties around written tasks by breaking them down

into smaller chunks, giving sentence starters or cloze procedures, using posters, writing captions for pictures, or writing in smaller boxes or speech bubbles or on shaped paper or sticky notes. Offer visual cues such as phonics or vocabulary mats and story maps. Be aware that anxiety can be increased by the internal pressure of having to have 'perfect' handwriting or for pupils who struggle with fine motor control. At times, offer alternative ways of recording or demonstrating knowledge, such as creating posters, diagrams, using the computer, taking pictures or recording video or sound clips.

- Introduce legitimate movement breaks such as running errands, giving out equipment or getting a drink of water and include whole class movement breaks (see the 'Self-regulation' chapter). Where possible, include an active, multisensory element to learning.
- Provide safe, predictable (yet flexible) routines. Visual cues support all pupils by providing consistent structure and helping to lessen anxiety. They are permanent, easier to process and reduce the load on working memory. They can focus attention towards a task or activity, help pupils to feel in control and more organised and are also non-confrontational and can reduce negotiation. Have clear expectations and present rules and routines visually by using visual timetables and photographs of pupils engaged in the 'expected behaviours' as a non-verbal reminder.
- Model and rehearse behaviour expectations regularly, or as Finnis (2021, p.21) puts it, 'So, the behaviours you want? You've got to give them to get them.'
- Present instructions clearly and simply and one step at a time, reinforced with visual cues (such as symbols, photographs, posters, checklists or flow charts), where possible. Allow processing time before expecting a response and repeat keywords as necessary.
- Ensure tasks are carefully scaffolded and communication is differentiated to account for social and emotional developmental level rather than chronological age.
- Be aware that copying (from the board or paper) can be time-consuming and challenging for many pupils, so limit this and avoid where possible. Instead, give printed notes to annotate or highlight. Print or scribe dates, learning objectives and questions so that the pupil can focus their energy and time on the learning task rather than copying text.

## ***Supporting executive function***

Executive functions are the set of intrinsic mental skills needed to manage behaviours and to function effectively in many areas of life. They are required for organising and prioritising, focusing and maintaining attention, time management and transitioning between tasks, information and language processing, self-control and regulating emotions, impulse control, planning and forward-thinking, working memory and recall, information-filtering and motivation. Children need to be enabled and supported to develop these skills that may be delayed.

Executive function decreases in times of distress; therefore, difficulties become more noticeable and symptoms may increase with increased anxiety, pressure and as more demands are placed on pupils.

- By lowering anxiety levels, the behaviour improves, as the part of the brain responsible for logical thought and reasoning comes back online (see the 'Anxiety' chapter). Provide support and help alleviate stress, particularly at times when symptoms appear worse than usual. Learn to spot (and help the pupil to spot) their triggers and behaviour patterns. Plan to avoid these or provide appropriate support and strategies to lessen anxieties, particularly around transitions, unstructured times and starting a task. Look for times when things are going particularly well, as well as when the pupil is struggling, to try and establish a pattern of what works well and is supportive for the pupil.
- Support pupils with **organisational** strategies by ensuring all resources are easily accessible ahead of a task. Provide resource checklists (including pictures or photographs as appropriate), showing visually the order in which the tasks or activities need to be carried out or the sequences of events. Keep work areas clear and free of distractions.
- Help with **planning**. Teach pupils to put 'to do' lists in order of priority and model how to use them. 'Remember to keep instructions simple and short, and use the same key words or phrases for particular tasks' (NHS Ayrshire & Arran, 2019). Use mind maps and create plans together for writing tasks and projects.
- Support pupils to **prioritise**, **sequence** and **organise** their thoughts logically, for example, cutting out and sequencing stories or instructions, describing everyday events by giving step-by-step instructions (such as cleaning teeth or making a sandwich) or asking them to describe something in order, with a beginning,

middle and end (a book, sports match or favourite film), following directions or programming a robotic toy to get from one place to another or following a simple recipe together.

- Pupils with delayed executive function may lack flexibility of thought and have very polarised thinking. A pupil may need reminding that one bad moment does not mean that they have had an awful day, but it was just a part of the day which was negative. Support **flexible thinking** by showing that there are alternative ways of doing and saying things. Use 'activities that involve multiple-meaning words, word categories and number puzzles' exploring language ambiguity through 'visualizing and discussing jokes, riddles, puns and multiple-meaning words' and exploring different approaches to problem-solving (Kusnyer & Stanberry, 2013). Kerstein (2019) shares some ideas for increasing flexibility at home and school, such as playing games and changing the rules, having a backwards day or moving the seating plan around.
- Teach regulation strategies (see the 'Self-regulation' chapter).
- Use movement and exercise as much as possible. 'Exercise turns on the attention system, the so-called executive functions – sequencing, working memory, prioritizing, inhibiting, and sustaining attention ... On a practical level, it causes kids to be less impulsive, which makes them more primed to learn' (Ratey, 2020).
- Support pupils to shift attention and prepare them for **transitions and change** by giving plenty of warning and using timers. Pupils may need a bespoke *Now and Then* board in addition to the visual timetable to alleviate anxieties around transitions, for example, 'now we are doing our Maths, then it will be time for reading'. Use photographs of the activities and as Maths finishes, the card is removed, the reading picture becomes 'now' and the next activity is put on the 'then' space. Where appropriate, make transitions sensory and fun, such as by marching, striding, walking tall or spotting as many items beginning with a certain letter, or of a particular colour, as you can on the way. If a pupil struggles to move from a preferred activity to another task, giving them a photograph as a reminder that they can return to it later can be helpful (for example, when their turn on a favourite trike or with the sand has finished, swap the task for a photograph of the trike or sand).
- A *Stop, Breathe and Think* card can be an effective visual reminder to support impulse control. Rehearse using it, playfully, when the pupil is calm.

## ***Supporting working memory***

- Pupils who have difficulties with working memory may struggle to follow a series of instructions, appear not to listen, struggle to complete tasks and lose sight of goals or objectives, appear to be daydreaming, frequently forget what they were going to say and struggle to reflect on and correct their work (Kusnyer & Stanberry, 2013). Be aware of difficulties with working memory and spot signs of memory overload. Reduce demands and the amount of information that needs to be stored and processed (Gathercole & Packiam Alloway, 2007). Where possible, use visual cues to support processing.
- Pre-teaching and over-learning vocabulary and key concepts will help pupils feel confident and engage in their learning. Be prepared to repeat key concepts and vocabulary regularly.
- Scaffold and model each step of the task for the pupil to complete before moving on to the next step, thus reducing the need to remember large chunks of information.
- Shorten tasks or instructions and make each step very clear and reinforce with visual supports.
- Aim to draw on and link to previous skills, knowledge or understanding and build on existing learning. Give visual prompts alongside verbal cues and be willing to repeat as necessary. Teach strategies to help pupils connect and recall key information such as posters, visual maps, colour coding, flow charts, memory prompts, mnemonics and flashcards.
- Encourage pupils to 'read single sentences or small chunks of text, and then check for understanding'. In written work or Maths tasks, ask pupils to 'review their most common errors and, from there, create a personalized list of errors to watch out for' (Kusnyer & Stanberry, 2013).
- Ensure students know who, when and how to ask for support when key information has been forgotten (Gathercole & Packiam Alloway, 2007). Help cards with photos of key adults or a buddy card with photos of carefully chosen peers can be helpful.
- Teach pupils positive self-talk to create greater understanding and encourage 'reflection and greater awareness of one's learning and performing process' (Kusnyer & Stanberry, 2013). Pupils need this modelled to them and to have opportunities to practise. It is useful to reinforce with visual supports such as posters, sticky notes, postcards or pebbles with key phrases on them.
- Allow plenty of processing time.
- Play memory games such as matching pairs, *Kim's Game* (show a range of items then cover them up, remove one and the child has

to say which one is missing (could be topic-related), *I went to the shop and I bought...*, or put five (again, possibly topic-related) items in a sequence, pupil looks at them for a period of time, then they are covered up, and the pupil copies the sequence from memory; build a brick tower, cover it and the pupil copies the tower; and play observation games (adult leaves the circle and the others need to remember what they were wearing, or watch video clips and answer questions based on observations).

- Repeat dance or musical sequences to support memory and sequencing.

### ***Environmental considerations***

- Pay careful attention to the seating plan to ensure pupils feel comfortable, safe and able to learn. Understanding what works for each child is important, and if unsure, talk to them. One pupil may do better at the front of the class in order to focus on the teacher and whiteboard with no one walking around in front of them. Some pupils may be better away from distractions such as direct sunlight, noisy projectors or fans. One pupil may be distracted looking out of the window, for another, this may be positive at times, reducing less appropriate behaviours. Some pupils may need to sit away from busy areas, such as the drawers or books, since people moving past will cause a distraction and frustrations can arise for those with sensory sensitivities if they are getting knocked or disturbed regularly. Those who are hypervigilant may need to be near a wall or at the back with a view of the whole room to increase feelings of safety. Pupils with an exit strategy may need to be near the door or their safe space. Access to a quieter work station may be a supportive option at times.
- Offer and encourage access to a quiet, calm space for pupils to use if they feel overwhelmed (see p.42).

### ***Unstructured times***

- Have a predictable routine for PE, break and lunchtimes (including wet playtime routines), with clear rules and expectations presented visually.
- Carefully manage unstructured times, ensuring pupils can access a key adult and a safe space if they are feeling overwhelmed, anxious or frustrated. Use a photograph as a visual reminder and practise when the pupil is calm. Introduce clubs and smaller, quieter zones at times.

- Teach, model and practise structured games, team-building, turn-taking and social skills. Provide a range of interesting equipment in sufficient quantities for the pupils to enjoy and explain and model how to use it. Keep the novelty factor by introducing different themes or equipment throughout the year.

### ***Rewards and consequences***

Unfortunately, school behaviour policies and traditional systems of sanctions, such as isolation and exclusion, tend to be least effective and can even be damaging and shaming for our most troubled or distressed pupils. De Thierry (2019, p.29) describes the 'negative impact and consequences of such a deeply painful method of encouraging conformity', explaining that 'shame will never elicit positive emotions and outcomes – it will only cause the child who experiences it to create methods of coping which are mostly counter-productive, subconscious and toxic'.

In a conversation in 2021 with Rachel Tomlinson, Headteacher at Barrowford School (Lancashire, UK), she described to me her sanction and reward-free environment, stating, 'We shape our school and our provision around the needs of our children'. It is 'child-centred, with the children at the heart of everything'. It works (and has worked and evolved over the last 12 years) by focusing on safe and trusting relationships, with repair and practical consequences as an extension of these relationships. Staff reflect on what is really important in order to avoid unnecessary conflict, asking themselves, 'are the children safe, happy and can they learn?' With exclusion not being an option, staff are creative in how they respond to the pupils' needs, with relationship always at the heart of this. It is based on trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches and powerfully effective nurture; an ethos running through all of the classrooms. It is based on open communication and unconditional positive regard for children, staff and caregivers. In describing the reward-free element, she states, 'reward-free does not mean unvalued and unrecognised; actually, it means the opposite. It means that we value achievement for the effort it has taken at that stage in the process. It is personal recognition on a very individual level' (Tomlinson, 2020).

- If the current system of rewards and sanctions isn't working for a particular pupil, they need an alternative or adjusted system. Reasonable adjustments need to be made for behaviours as well as for learning needs; one size does not fit all and requires a 'differentiated discipline' (Bombèr, 2020, p.63). 'When you plant

lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce' (Thich Nhat Hanh, undated). Pupils do not need blame or punishment when they get it wrong; they need to be taught skills and how to regulate and calm, taking account of their developmental age and needs, within a supportive adult–pupil relationship. They need co-regulation to calm in the moment (see p.34).

- Pupils need compassion and 'connection' rather than 'correction'. They need adults to model and connect with understanding and kindness to help them achieve success. Siegel and Payne Bryson (2012, p.48) suggest that adults 'engage, don't enrage', calming their 'downstairs brain' and helping them to regulate before engaging the 'upstairs brain' to problem-solve and find an alternative means of behaving or reacting (see p.40). Knightsmith (2020) recommends adults 'be curious, not furious'. It is essential to understand why a pupil is behaving in a certain way, to support them in learning the skills and strategies to behave differently next time and respond with calmness and curiosity. 'When we are calm (and in turn help a child to calm), and we become curious about what the child is experiencing, we begin the process of making sustainable change for that child and helping them build the skills, understanding and neural pathways that will help them to thrive at school and in life' (Knightsmith, 2020).
- Understand the communicative function of the behaviours and the needs that are being met by those behaviours, in order to offer effective support. Differences in behaviour could be signifying overwhelm, confusion or frustration, sensory overload, anxiety and stress, lack of understanding or a lack of skill, that the young person has experienced adversity, is not feeling well, is hungry, thirsty, tired, or has had a bad morning. Listen to and translate what the behaviour is communicating and then provide support. Pupils need boundaries but within a deeply nurturing context. 'Boundaries, structures and rules should underpin a much more relationships-based approach. If we only see the behaviour they display then we don't see the child. There is a purpose to that behaviour, if we understand what it is we can change it' (Chatterley, 2020).
- Pupils learn best from consistent regulatory and relational approaches, with adults understanding, accepting and responding to their needs. 'If a pupil is distressed and is communicating this through their behaviour, then surely it would be more ethical

to attempt to attune to and translate what they might be trying to say?' (Bombèr, 2020, p.39).

- Pupils need logical, practical consequences, and they need to learn the effect their behaviour has on others. This needs to be achieved by problem-solving with the pupil. It needs to be within relationship, alongside trusted, caring, empathic adults, not further inducing shame by being based on punishment, isolation and exclusion. 'When punishment is replaced with therapy, mentoring, coaching and love, the children change. In short, when the adults change, everything changes' (Dix, 2017, p.114).
- Support pupils to repair and restore relationships (see p.11). Comic Strip Conversations™ (Gray, 1994) or similar can be used creatively to explain how other people may be feeling and are useful to explore and problem-solve alternative actions visually, should a similar situation arise in the future.
- In establishing their *School Without Sanctions*, Baker and Simpson (2020) focused on rewarding the positive behaviour they wanted to see and removing all sanctions; 'We didn't waste a second thinking about the behaviours we didn't want to see – the days of focusing on negatives were behind us'. Focus on the positives, achievements and successes. When using rewards, keep them 'fresh', fun and interesting and keep the novelty factor – a whole class dance-off, a 'bring your teddy to school' day, a hot chocolate and a game of Jenga. The possibilities are endless and just need a bit of creativity. Ensure the rewards are what the pupils actually would like, include them; they often come up with some fantastic ideas. Try to make individual rewards as immediate as possible. Failing to gain a reward may induce shame and lead to rejection of the system. Accumulative systems, where pupils have control over the rewards and collect them over time (rather than ones where rewards are taken away if not earned) are often more effective.
- Foster intrinsic motivation by developing a love of learning, a sense of curiosity, enjoyment, satisfaction in achieving and introducing student-led learning and personal choices and autonomy, rather than relying on extrinsic motivators (rewards).
- The focus needs to be on pupils feeling safe enough to learn and to thrive. 'Where did we get the crazy ideas that in order to make children – or indeed anyone – do better, we first have to make them feel worse?' (Finnis, 2021, p.28). Many schools are increasingly becoming more aware of the importance of relationships within their setting and adopting relationship policies, either instead of or alongside behaviour or discipline policies. 'Establish policies

that ensure a safe place for learning. Real safety, however, comes from fostering and maintaining caring relationships' (Finnis, 2021, p.49). Bombèr (2020, pp.275–283) and Trauma-Informed Schools have examples of relationship policies that can be adapted or adopted in schools. 'Incentive or threat-based strategies are not powerful enough to stop deep-rooted behaviour that has served as protection in the past ... Mercifully schools are beginning to replace "discipline" policies with "relationship" policies' (Miles, 2019).

- Avoid whole class sanctions; they are ineffective, unfair and give inappropriate control to the pupil making inappropriate choices. Dix (2017, p.170) makes the point that punishing the whole class 'for the behaviour of the wobbly few is quite obviously ridiculous ... The children who have been the trigger for everyone having to stay in are always at the top of the hierarchy. The mass detention for the class on their behalf is further confirmation of this.'

### Case example:

Elsa didn't want to go to school in the morning and started crying. The previous day, she (and the whole class) had been kept in again because three pupils continued talking after the teacher had asked them to stop. Elsa expressed that she felt guilty even though she knew deep down that she had done nothing wrong. She kept saying how bad the whole class were, and none of them could ever do anything right. She was also struck by the unfairness that her break times were determined by three pupils when she hadn't done anything wrong. One of the three told his friends, with a smile, that it was better for him if the whole class stayed in, as then he wasn't missing out on anything; he didn't want them having fun if he couldn't.

- Avoid consequences for things the pupil cannot control, such as symptoms and behaviour presentations related to anxiety, a medical condition, diagnosis or executive function delays and focus on teaching skills and strategies to support.
- Avoid consequences being carried over to the next day, wherever possible, and start each day with a clean slate.
- Flip the dialogue within the classroom and focus on the positive, expected behaviours and notice these with abundance. Dix (2017, p.24) suggests *recognition boards* to focus on all the great

behaviour within the classroom, suggesting that adults 'routinely advertise the behaviour you do want'. Names are written on the board for all the pupils who present with fabulous behaviour, rather than names and ticks for the minority who don't.

Ultimately the only behaviour it is possible to change and have complete control over is our own. Adults can change how they communicate, react and respond. They can change the environment but they should not attempt to change the child. Teach regulation skills and offer support and understanding and the behaviour will improve.

### ***Activities to support with attention, concentration and executive function***

- Play a range of physical games (outdoors where possible), such as catch (gradually increase the difficulty by using both hands, using differently sized and shaped balls, stand further apart) to increase focus and organisational skills, sequencing and timing as well as improve hand-eye coordination and attention. Try a range of activities to develop balance and coordination, such as wobble boards, standing on one leg, hopping, badminton or riding a bike.
- Play name games such as saying someone's name before rolling a ball to them.
- Play a range of games to teach turn-taking, winning and losing and the following of rules, such as *Uno*, *Operation*, *Hedbanz*, *Pictionary*, *Articulate for Kids*, *Mexican Train Dominoes*, *Mapominoes*, *Kerplunk*, *Dobble*, *Buckaroo* and *Pick Up Sticks*. Gradually build up the time spent on them (start with less complicated games to avoid frustration and ensure they are successful more often than they are not). *Labyrinth* has been found useful in teaching children that things change. Giant outdoor versions of *Snakes and Ladders*, *Jenga*, *Connect Four*, *Draughts* and *Chess* allow pupils to be outside and move around more, whilst playing.
- Develop impulse control by playing *Simon Says*, *What's the Time Mr Wolf?* or *Traffic Lights* (move around in a variety of ways and when the adult says and holds up 'green' it means go, 'amber' means go slowly and 'red' means freeze).
- Building activities using a variety of construction kits, copy each other's models or follow their instructions (visual and verbal).
- Make dens together or design and create their own safe space.
- Jigsaw puzzles and word searches, crosswords, pencil mazes, *Spot the Difference* and *Where's Wally*-type activities.

- Listening to music can help maintain focus and activates all areas of the brain. Learning an instrument can focus attention, improve executive function (including working memory), lower stress levels, increase self-regulation, give a sense of control and build self-esteem. Drumming can help with calming and regulation. Woodwind and brass instruments help pupils focus on and control their breathing. Singing can be calming.

### ***Activities to develop listening skills***

- Sound walks
- Repeating rhythms by clapping or using instruments
- *Musical Statues*
- Storytelling – each person says a sentence to build up a story
- *Find the Thimble* – someone silently thinks of a place to ‘hide the thimble’ (e.g. on the moon, in Africa, under the desk), the rest of the group ask questions, to which the ‘hider’ may only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’
- *What am I?* – someone silently thinks of an item or animal, the rest of the group ask questions, to which they may only answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’
- *Do as I Say Not as I Do* (e.g. say put your hands on your head, but put your hands on your shoulders, the pupil has to do as you say and not copy your actions)
- *Don’t Clap This One Back* (clap rhythm patterns for the pupil to copy, if you clap the rhythm pattern of the words *don’t clap this one back* the pupils remain silent and don’t clap)
- Listen to a video clip or news clip and answer questions afterwards

### ***Activities to teach cause and effect***

**Cause-and-effect play** can show pupils that their actions have an effect and increase feelings of control.

- ‘Teach cause and effect with the use of three-dimensional tactile resources, such as pop-up toys, scented bubbles, jigsaws and books with sound effects’ (Blackburn et al., 2012).
- Use toys and games in which an action produces a desired result, such as musical instruments, cause and effect cards, *Kerplunk*, *Pick Up Sticks*, marble runs and remote-control toys. Encourage computer programming activities such as *Scratch*.

### ***Activities to support pupils to feel a sense of control***

Offer pupils a sense of control and the chance to laugh and engage in fun, playful activities within relationships by playing power reversal games where the pupil is given control and allowed to take the lead within a safe environment.

- Engage in role play, being led by the pupil's interest. Try some role reversal, such as they can be the teacher and you become the pupil.
- Give the child a 'magic wand' which they can use to transform you into an object, animal or person of their choice.
- Let them set a timer and give you a challenge to do within the time (write your name or complete as many Maths questions or star jumps as you can within the time).
- Play games where the pupil takes the lead, such as *Follow the Leader* and *Simon Says*.
- If a child can't follow an instruction, rather than reprimand, be playful. For example, say, 'OK, I will have to do it then' and do the Maths task wrong, in a funny exaggerated way (to induce laughter), such as by having your worksheet upside down or trying to write with the eraser.
- If transitions are difficult, for example, at the end of break time, suggest it is time to go back to the classroom and then turn and walk the wrong way, do a funny walk or go into the PE shed. Allow the child to laugh along with you and then help you to find the right way.
- Play opposite games such as you say stand up and they sit down.

### **Resources, further information and 'tool kits'**

#### ***Books for adults***

*After the Adults Change: Achievable Behaviour Nirvana* by Paul Dix

*Building Positive Behaviour: Returning to Learning Using a Sequential Approach* by Graham Chatterley

*Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice: Building Relationships, Improving Behaviour and Creating Stronger Communities* by Mark Finnis – an amazing book about building relationships and restorative practice and so much more

*Learn to Love, Love to Learn* by Rachel Tomlinson (to be published) – if the conversation with Rachel is anything to go by, this book will be amazing

*The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook: Practical Tips, Ideas, Action Plans and Worksheets for Making Meaningful Change* by Pooky Knightsmith

*Restorative Practices at School: An Educator's Guided Workbook to Nurture Professional Wellness, Support Student Growth, and Build Engaged Classroom Communities* by Becky McCammon

*A School Without Sanctions* by Steven Baker and Mick Simpson

*When the Adults Change Everything Changes: Seismic Shifts in School Behaviour* by Paul Dix – a fabulous book which all school staff really should read

*The Whole-Brain Child – 12 Proven Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson

### **Books to share with pupils**

*Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids* by Carol McCloud

*Kindness Is My Superpower: A Children's Book about Empathy, Kindness and Compassion* by Alicia Ortego

### **Websites**

[https://www.corc.uk.net/media/1506/primary-school-measures\\_310317\\_forweb.pdf](https://www.corc.uk.net/media/1506/primary-school-measures_310317_forweb.pdf) Anna Freud wellbeing framework for primary schools

[https://www.corc.uk.net/media/1517/blf17\\_20-second-school-measuresbl-17-03-17b.pdf](https://www.corc.uk.net/media/1517/blf17_20-second-school-measuresbl-17-03-17b.pdf) Anna Freud wellbeing framework for secondary schools

### **Podcasts**

<https://www.pookyknightsmith.com/podcast>

<https://www.thesendcast.com/sendcast-episodes/>

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## Checklist to support pupils who are communicating through behaviour

STRATEGY	COMMENTS
<b>Please also refer to the 'Self-regulation' chapter</b>	
<b>A strength-based approach</b>	
Value difference and focus on strengths, achievements and successes	
Reframe language around behaviour into positives when talking to and about pupils	
<b>Relationships and communication</b>	
Build positive relationships based on the PACE approach (see p.65)	
Model positive relationships and interactions within school	
Work collaboratively with the caregivers and share successes as well as concerns	
Involve the pupil in the planning process and in finding solutions	
Use direct language and focus on positive behaviours and moving the pupil on	
Avoid confrontations, negotiations and power struggles	
Focus on positive behaviour and praise small steps to success	
Ten positives for each negative	
Offer positive choices	
Avoid inadvertently reinforcing cycles of negative or inappropriate behaviour by meeting needs proactively	
Help build a sense of belonging and connectedness	
Actively listen	
<b>Supporting to repair and restore relationships</b>	
Apologise when things go wrong or you make a mistake	
Support pupils to reflect after an incident	
Restorative conversations	
Help pupils begin to see the perspective of others and to repair relationships	
Avoid asking 'why' after an incident	

<i>STRATEGY</i>	<i>COMMENTS</i>
<b>Teaching and learning</b>	
Tasks broken down into simple steps, presented in a checklist	
Alleviate anxieties around written tasks	
Regular movement breaks and a multisensory element to learning tasks	
Use visual cues and model and communicate behaviour expectations	
Single-step instructions with visual reminders	
Take account of social and emotional development level	
Avoid copying and provide print-outs or scribe dates, learning objectives and questions	
<b>Supporting executive function</b>	
Spot triggers and patterns and provide support or alleviate anxieties	
Equipment checklists, resources accessible to support organisation	
Help with planning and teach pupils to create and use 'to do' lists	
Support pupils to prioritise, sequence and organise their thoughts logically	
Support flexible thinking	
Teach regulation strategies	
Use movement and exercise	
Support pupils to switch attention and prepare them for transitions and change – warnings, timers, <i>Now and Then</i> boards	
<b>Supporting working memory</b>	
Be aware of working memory difficulties, reduce demands and information, use visual cues	
Pre-teaching, over-learning and repetition of key vocabulary and concepts	
Scaffold and model each step of a task	
Shorten tasks or instructions and use visuals	

(Continued)



## Continued

<i>STRATEGY</i>	<i>COMMENTS</i>
Draw on existing skills and knowledge as a starting point	
Ensure pupils know who, when and how to ask for help	
Allow processing time	
Play a range of memory games, repeat dance or music sequences	
<b>Environmental considerations</b>	
Seating plan to ensure pupils feel comfortable, safe and able to learn	
Safe space to calm	
<b>Unstructured times</b>	
Predictable routine for PE, break and lunchtimes with clear rules and expectations presented visually	
Carefully manage unstructured times – provide quieter areas/clubs and key adult and safe space	
Teach structured games, team-building, turn-taking and social skills	
<b>Rewards and consequences</b>	
'Differentiated Discipline' (Bombèr, 2020). Teach regulation skills and take account of developmental age	
View behaviour as communication and translate what the pupil needs with compassion and kindness	
Logical, practical consequences, problem-solving with the pupil	
Support pupils to repair relationships	
Focus on success, strengths and achievements rather than negative behaviours	
Adopt a relationship policy instead of or alongside a behaviour policy	
Avoid whole class sanctions	
Avoid consequences for symptoms and behaviour presentations related to anxiety, a medical condition or executive function delays	

<i>STRATEGY</i>	<i>COMMENTS</i>
Flip the dialogue and recognise all those pupils behaving beautifully	
<b>A range of activities and games to support attention, concentration, executive function, listening, understanding cause and effect and feel a sense of control</b>	