

In the acts

In an extract from her book on understanding children's behaviour, *Cath Hunter* explains some of the underlying reasons behind difficult behaviour and how it can best be managed by adults

Every child wants to be seen, known, valued and understood but, sadly, for some children their behaviour can result in them getting the opposite of what they need. If a child is being disruptive, being unco-operative and challenging school staff, or if a child is constantly trying to please other people, they are very clearly trying to communicate something to the adults around them.

Most adults use language to express their needs and how they feel to other people. Most children, however, do not have the same language skills as adults and use behaviour to communicate their feelings. They need help from sensitive adults to help them work out and express what they feel.

Every behaviour is trying to tell us something; for example, a child who is disruptive and challenging to school staff may be ensuring that he gets noticed and is not forgotten or overlooked. It is the adult's role to try to understand what the child may be trying to tell them and then to respond accordingly.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Scenario 1 You are a Reception class teacher and arrived at school late and unprepared after an argument with your partner.

Scenario 2 You are a five-year-old and arrived at school late and without your reading book after your mum was cross with you.

- How easy would you find it to settle in to class and perform well?
- What would you be thinking and feeling?
- What could you do about this?
- How could you communicate your feelings and get support?

Sometimes, as adults, we can forget that we have the benefit of experience, developed language skills and the ability to articulate our thoughts and feelings if we choose to. We are able to rationalise experiences and know that we will survive them.



We have strategies to solve difficult situations and the benefit of life experiences to know that things usually pass and life does not stay challenging forever. We can choose to talk to people and get support, if and when we need it. How difficult are any of these for a five-year-old or even younger child to do? Is it therefore surprising that they communicate their feelings and need for support through their behaviour?

As adults, the more understanding we can have of what a child may be trying to communicate to us through their behaviour, the greater the chance of the child being understood and being able to make sense of their thoughts and feelings, and the more compassion adults can have for them.

INTERNAL DIALOGUE

Some children may have learned to respond in a defensive way as a coping mechanism to manage the feelings of anxiety and fear that situations evoke in them. The child may

present as feeling the opposite of this; for example, not scared and not bothered, but he may have learned to do this as a way of not feeling pain: 'If I pretend I don't care, then I can't be hurt or feel pain.'

For this child, the silent pain of feeling unwanted or unloved can result in them feeling isolated, confused, frightened and alone. They may feel that everything that happens is their fault and have an internal dialogue that asks, 'Am I a bad person? Am I unlovable? Why do I get it wrong all the time? Why can't I do anything right?' When children have this internal belief system and are convinced that they do not deserve anything good, they may go to extreme lengths to prove it.

The combination of their feelings of low self-worth, along with a negative internal dialogue, may not surprisingly result in challenging and disruptive behaviour as the child tries to bury their feelings and silence their internal voice. ➤

The silent pain of feeling unwanted or unloved can result in them feeling isolated, confused, frightened and alone

They may also actively try to sabotage situations to recreate the feelings and experiences that are familiar to them. Children who have a negative internal dialogue may believe that adults do not like them when they reprimand them. These children may find it difficult to hold on to positive thoughts about themselves, as they do not have an internal view of themselves as a good person. School staff can play an essential role in helping to rewrite their internal scripts into a positive dialogue. For example, 'If Mrs Hawkins thinks I'm a kind person, maybe I am.' It is crucial that we focus on the positives for these children, no matter how hard this may be to implement and sustain.

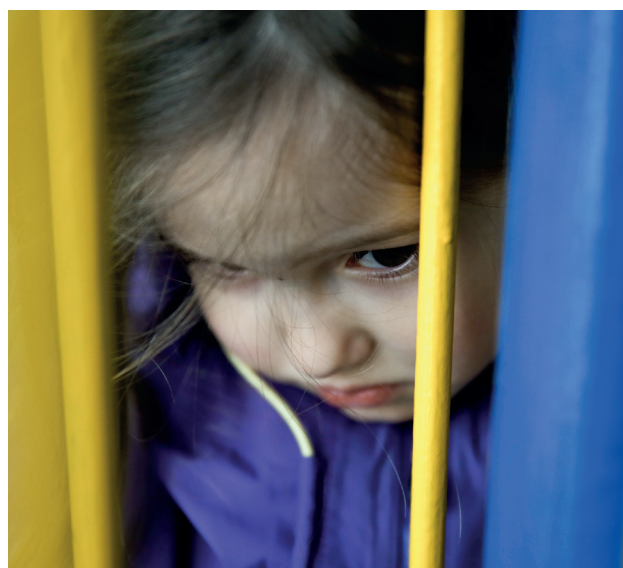
RESPONDING TO BEHAVIOUR

Children do not want negative comments or attention for challenging behaviour, but some children may have learned that any attention is better than no attention and therefore may evoke negative reactions.

Children who seek attention in the form of disapproval because they believe they will not gain attention in the form of approval may be showing us they have low self-esteem and may believe that other people are unable to see the good in them. For example, a child that constantly calls out in class may be doing this to ensure that they stay noticed. It is a guaranteed way of ensuring that they receive attention and are remembered. This may tell us about the child's experiences outside school: Why do they need to ensure that they are noticed and remembered at school? Do they have a different experience at home? When children are happy and settled they do not need to ensure that adults notice and remember them; if they do this it is an indication that they need additional help and support.

It can be hard for some children to tolerate their feelings and this can result in them trying to get rid of them rather than accepting and trying to understand and process them. For example, a child who is unable to manage feeling angry may hit another child or throw something as a way of trying to get rid of that feeling.

Children need help and support from adults to realise that it is natural to have feelings and that they can be helped to understand how to recognise and express them. It can be useful to talk about feelings regularly



throughout the day and make appropriate references to them; for example, 'It can make us feel sad when it's raining and we can't play outside.' This validates their experiences and normalises how children may be feeling.

Some children have little resilience to cope with their feelings, and events that can happen during the course of a school day can feel too difficult for them to manage, such as waiting to have a turn on a bike or not being at the front of the line.

Experiences such as these can be interpreted by children to mean that they are special, important and good enough. For children who have a fragile sense of themselves it can feel overwhelming to imagine someone else being chosen to do something instead of them. This is particularly difficult for three- and four-year-olds (and also some five-year-olds), where developmentally they may still be finding it hard to co-operate and share; it is useful if they are able to have some preparation for this.

CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

When children show us their feelings through their behaviour, it is important that we not only try to understand what they may be feeling and trying to communicate to us, but also that we provide them with an emotional vocabulary to help them to talk about their experiences.

For example, when a child says they do not want to do something, they may be telling us they are scared or anxious. How often as adults may we decide we don't want to do something when the real reason may be

It can be useful to talk about feelings regularly throughout the day and make appropriate references to them

that we are scared? It can be useful to respond by saying, 'I know you are saying that you don't want to do that, but sometimes it can feel a bit frightening to try new things.'

If a child uses a baby voice to talk to us, they may be telling us they are feeling small and vulnerable. It can be helpful to consider what the emotional age of the child is and whether it would be useful to respond as you would with a younger child.

When a child fidgets, rocks on their chair, taps things or wriggles on the carpet, they may be they are telling us they feel worried, anxious or stressed. A response such as, 'I can see you are finding it hard to stay still at the moment' can be enough to help a child relax, as it communicates that you have noticed them without reprimanding them.

Young children have not been using verbal language for very long, and as a result of this and their cognitive understanding they may find it very difficult to be able to put their feelings into words. Therefore, it is crucial that they are provided with regular opportunities during the school day to help them to link the feelings with the appropriate language to describe it. ■

This is an edited extract from Understanding and Managing Children's Behaviour through Group Work Ages 3-5 by Cath Hunter (Routledge). Her website is www.therapeuticfamilyinterventions.co.uk

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING

Understanding and Managing Children's Behaviour through Group Work Ages 3-5 by Cath Hunter (David Fulton – Routledge, £25) provides an insight into children's emotional well-being and helps the reader to understand what and how children communicate and how to respond in a way that provides positive messages, increases their emotional vocabulary and encourages them to change their behaviour.

It provides an alternative and effective child-centred way of managing children's

behaviour by introducing the concept of reflective language and other tools, equipping staff with new skills transferable across a setting in any role.

A 20 per cent discount* is available to *Nursery World* readers. To order, visit <https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138961098> and use code NWO16.

**Discount only valid on print books bought via www.routledge.com before 31 December 2016, and cannot be combined with other offers or discounts.*