

Taking a fresh view

A training programme tackling nursery exclusions is giving some practitioners a new understanding of behaviour. By *Annette Rawstrone*

A number of exclusions from early years settings in Birmingham because of children's poor behaviour – ranging from extreme emotional swings, to temper tantrums, children lashing out at their carers, tearing down displays and 'ruling the room' – led to the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) being drafted in to deliver additional training to childcare practitioners.

The behaviour issues were not only negatively affecting the individual children, but other children in the settings, their parents, and practitioners' morale. Birmingham City

Council hoped the training would support practitioners to develop new strategies in order to respond to any further behaviour management concerns more effectively.

NDNA early years advisor Anne Parker says, 'The programme was developed to help practitioners to support children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and to ultimately improve children's outcomes.' It aims to extend practitioners' knowledge, practice and understanding of behaviour along with assisting them to support and encourage children's positive behaviour. In the 18 months since the training started, there have been no

Rather than focusing on changing a child's actions, look to find out what they need



exclusions from the city's nurseries. The NDNA's contract has been extended for another 18 months, and it hopes to take the project to other local authorities.

CASE STUDY: WILLOWS DAY NURSERY

'The behaviour training came at a good time for our setting because we were coping with five pre-school boys who were displaying challenging behaviour – climbing on furniture, not listening and being defiant,' says Helen Regan, manager of Willows Day Nursery in Kings Norton, Birmingham.

'We chose to attend evening sessions so that our 12-strong staff team was able to go together. It enabled us to all look at the issues with the same insight and re-evaluate our practice. The training covered areas such as child development, how children learn, reading body language and thinking about

situations from the child's perspective. Personally, it gave me the chance to turn some of my previous thinking and expectations around.

'As a result of the training we've removed chairs from tables so table-top activities are more accessible to those who want to be moving. We've moved more activities onto the floor and outside and enhanced our outdoor area, including a builders yard with real bricks and big pipes. We're more tuned in to children's body language and discussing emotions.

'We have reduced the length of circle time so that children are not expected to sit for as long and changed some of our story sessions to make them

interactive. We've also introduced more activities that involve gross motor skills and active learning.

'The training also made us consider what may be making children behave in a certain way. For the boys we were having issues with we looked at their individual circumstances – some were in nursery for long days, one had parents on night shifts so they spent nights at grandma's house and were perhaps not sleeping well, and if they had a developmental problem.

'We were pleased to host a follow-up "Brave Boys"



workshop with local settings and childminders invited. It built on what we'd already learned and looked at how boys are different from girls.

'I feel that as a setting we're more tuned in to children as individuals. We don't have any ongoing behaviour issues as the moment, which is an amazing thing to say, but we have more strategies in place for if issues do arise.'



EMOTIONAL NEEDS

A total of 652 childcare workers have already attended 44 events held throughout the city. Ms Parker says that the training helps practitioners to look at the whole of their setting with 'fresh eyes' – to think about what could be done differently and what could be improved to help support the children's emotional needs.

The starting point of the training is for practitioners to understand why children are behaving in a particular way and to have the tools ready to support children's needs properly.

'It's not about trying to alter the way a child acts,' says Ms Parker. 'It's more about understanding children and interpreting behaviour to find out what they need. Every child is different in personality and experience. The root cause of negative behaviour could be an underlying medical condition that needs to be diagnosed, emotional instability of some kind, or even a safeguarding issue. It could be born from the differences between male and female brains and the lack of true understanding that practitioners and parents have of this.'

The training involves two core sessions held four weeks apart, separated by a 'gap task', which is when

practitioners scrutinise their own settings and practice. They can then attend up to eight half-day workshops on more specific areas relevant to them, including attachment and the key person, schematic behaviour, and working with boys.

AS INDIVIDUALS

A key challenge for practitioners during the training has been to start considering children as individuals, rather than as part of a group, and thinking about each child's emotional well-being, says Ms Parker.

'It's understanding that behaviour is an output and thinking about the cause,' she explains. 'If you encounter behaviour issues with a child in the two-year-old room and change the environment or the way you do things to improve the situation, this must go with that child when they transition to the three-year-old room.'

The training has resulted in practitioners assessing and adapting their environments, resources and key person policies to deliver the right support for particular children. 'They have been proactive in implementing their knowledge to review routines and the way they respond to certain behaviours, changing room layouts



More information on the training can be found at www.ndna.org.uk/training

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and revising their own expectations of children in their care,' she says. 'Practitioners are now more willing to look at individual needs rather than seeing a challenging child.' Follow-up visits have been offered to some nurseries to help embed learning.

Practitioners have reported that children in their care are calmer and more confident as a result of the training. Strategies that have been particularly successful include calming cuddles at the onset of a tantrum and rearranging physical environments. They also felt their settings benefited from staff being consistent in their responses to children and setting clear boundaries. Addressing behavioural issues for individual children has had an additional positive impact on their peers, staff and parents. It has also built experience, knowledge and confidence among practitioners, enabling them to be better equipped to act effectively the next time a particular issue arises.

HABITS AND ROUTINES

Ms Parker believes that a lack of understanding among practitioners about behaviour is a problem across the sector, not just in Birmingham. 'We concentrate on children's milestones, like them writing their name, and not necessarily enough on emotional well-being,' she suggests. 'It's easy to get stuck in habits at work. For example, some settings don't change their environments from year to year and often routines are developed to suit adults' needs not children's.'

She also identifies a lack of confidence among practitioners in supporting parents to address children's well-being or continue learning at home. It is hoped that the course will assist settings in Birmingham in forging stronger links with families and provide a better understanding of child behaviour among parents.

The NDNA has considered feedback from the initial 18-month project and as a result has added some new training modules for the extended contract, along with more evening sessions. New elements, such as training to help practitioners support children through traumatic situations, live online learning sessions and one-to-one mentoring for the key person, have also been introduced. It has been noted that more childminders are now signing up to the project and settings with specific behaviour problems within Birmingham are being routinely referred to them. ■