

An essential guide to... interactions

Marjorie Ouvry explains 'The 6 As of behaviour management and interaction', her guide to getting the most out of interactions with young children



Good interactions with the adults around them are critical to children's emotional development and early learning

Children's behaviour and learning hinge on high-quality interactions with adults, and the revised Ofsted inspection framework, with its new judgements of 'Behaviour and dispositions' and 'Quality of education', makes this an ideal time to reflect on our interactions with children.

Any successful interaction depends on body language as well as words. Are our arms crossed defensively, our facial muscles relaxed, our tone of voice judgmental? Are we at approximately the same height as the other person and making eye contact?

Most people are good at unconsciously reading signs of acceptance or rejection. So too are children, though their young age means that they may sometimes misinterpret our intentions, leading to behavioural problems. As adults, we have to make

allowances for their mistakes and assume that their intentions are good. As Froebel reminds us, 'Behind every bad act is a good intention.'

The success, or failure, of an interaction also depends on our personal responses to children and situations. Why can children seem so unco-operative? Why would we rather spend time with one child rather than another?

We need strategies to help us analyse our interactions and I have devised an aide-memoire, 'The 6 As of behaviour management and interaction'. The main points can be copied onto a card and posted around the nursery.

AGENDA Children's needs and desires

As practitioners, we need always to look beyond the obvious to establish what a child really wants, and respond to it. Take a crying

baby. The practitioner needs to ask: Are they hungry or teething, in need of reassurance, a cuddle or their nappy changed? In the case of a baby or toddler, the adult response needs to be immediate.

With older children, we don't always have to respond immediately. The child may understand that the adult's agenda has sometimes to take priority ('I just need to talk to Harry's mum') and recognise the mutual contract between adult and child – I can wait this time, as you will give my need top priority later or next time. However, this does not mean that a child will understand why an adult interrupts their absorbing play or activity – building a castle, making a Mother's Day card – and they may be surly or unco-operative as a result. We store up trouble for ourselves if we fail to try to understand the child's agenda.

Our golden rule must be: follow the

child's interest. That actually applies to children of all ages, abilities and disabilities, but most especially it applies to children from birth to six and seven years.

Some practitioners may have the unshakable opinion that children must learn to do as an adult tells them. But if we are to be professional in our approach, we can learn to accommodate our behaviour, the organisation of our resources and our routines to the child's agenda, customising our response to their stage of development and current needs.

This is not 'spoiling' the child; rather it is teaching and modelling a respect for the child who will in turn respect others' wishes. It will aid their maturity in being part of a group.

For example, children at one nursery school sat in small groups at lunchtime and served themselves as food was passed round. However, one boy, Wayne, was always hungry and often had to be stopped from taking more than his fair share. The adult would respond by saying, 'Is there enough left for Harry and Mark?' One day, when Wayne was tempted to take all the remaining jelly, he paused and said, 'See... I've left some for others.' It takes time and patience for a child's understanding and behaviour to fall into place.

Understanding the child's agenda requires close observation of their play – especially when the child is expected to shift to fulfilling the adult agenda. What child wants to leave their 'submarine' of blocks to carry out an adult-directed task? It should come as no surprise when they complete the task as quickly and carelessly as possible in order to get back to the important imaginative play.

By observing the play and delaying the activity, the adult could have developed the scenario, leading potentially to wonderful storying, meaningful maths and extensions in the child's science learning.

I used to replay such observations in my mind assuming I was speaking to another adult. The chances were that I would assume that the adult was busy, decide not to

interrupt them and wait for a better moment to speak to them. We should do the same with the children.

When children see that their needs are being met, they respond more willingly to adults' instructions when they know they are necessary – for example, 'Soon it will be time for lunch and so we must start to return our playthings.'

ATTENTION Identifying children's needs

When visiting a setting and noticing a distressed child, I was told by a practitioner, 'Oh, ignore him. He's just wanting attention!' What does that tell us about the adult's misunderstanding of the concept of attention offered to children in that setting? Ignoring an altercation between two children but monitoring how they resolve the problem is quite different from ignoring a child who is not coping and is becoming distressed.

Children will go out of their way to interact with an adult who they know will give them the quality of attention they need. They will not be satisfied with dismissive words such as 'very good', 'what a clever girl'. Giving a child our full attention means stopping what we are doing and being genuinely interested, perhaps commenting on the colours chosen in the painting, the height of the block construction, or asking technical questions about a ('junk') model.

With such an approach, children begin to know that we value what they want to share with us. It also means that they won't seek superficial praise; rather they will get their reward from the self-chosen task itself (intrinsic motivation) and won't need outside rewards (extrinsic motivation) to feel they have achieved something.

Smiley face stickers, (behaviour charts – even, dare I say, bankers' bonuses – and superficial interactions can cause much dissatisfaction. Stanford professor of psychology Carol Dweck has underlined the dangers of giving children too much superficial praise and attention. Warm and full attention is highly motivating to children.

Here is an example of three typical responses to a child who wants to engage with an adult and brings her sand cakes made in the sand pit outside (adapted from *Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge* by Helen Tovey, 2007):

- The first response is dismissive.
- The second shows how the adult's agenda (transmitting the knowledge-based curriculum) fails to engage the child.
- The third demonstrates how imagination, communication and language flourish when a child receives a genuine and sincere response.

Child Here's your cup of tea and here's your cake.

Adult I'm full up now; put it there and I'll eat



Responses to children's interests must be genuine and sincere

it later with my cup of tea. Oh, another cake. I'll get fat. (*Child leaves*)

Child Here's your cup of tea and here's your cake.

Adult Oh, a cake. Lovely. Did you make it? What did you put in it? Flour, how many spoonfuls of sugar? (*Child nods*) Did you bake it? Where? In the oven? Oh, lovely, you are clever. Does it need some icing sugar on the top now? (*Child leaves*)

Child Here's your cup of tea and here's your cake.

Adult Oh, a cup of tea, thank you.
Adult (pretending to sip) Ouch, it's hot!
Child (laughing) Then blow on it.
Adult (blowing and taking another pretend sip) Mmm... delicious. Oh dear, now I've spilt it all down me.
Child (pretending to mop up, laughing and scolding) Look what you've done. You've spilt your tea! Now eat your cake. Ginger one.
Adult Mmm... ginger cake. I love ginger cake. I'm going to eat it all up. Not a crumb left! (*The conversation continues*)

Working with young children is relentlessly demanding but endlessly creative when we follow children's interests. First-hand experiences are the hooks on which children hang their play and understanding of their world. When we pay attention to the children's play agendas, we see where we can

efficiently and effectively extend their learning. When we, with skill and humility, look for the child's agenda and accommodate our own priorities within it, then we significantly help the child to mature into a thoughtful and compassionate adult who cares for others and the world.

ACKNOWLEDGE Recognising and responding to children's feelings

Children's feelings are real and strong. In fact, they are much stronger because the frontal lobes where self-regulation happens are not yet mature. So, a child will dissolve into inconsolable tears or take a bite out of another child's arm with unrestrained ferocity if they see life to be unfair. Thoughtlessly ignoring or dismissing these strong feelings – 'Don't cry', 'Come on, it's not that bad', 'That was very naughty' – can be detrimental to a child's mental health. So, it is vital that we make remarks that acknowledge the depth of a child's emotions: 'I know that you're feeling angry because you can't get the bike, but let's talk to Jack and ask him to give you a turn when he's finished', or 'I'll sit with you until you're feeling better'.

Acknowledging how children feel helps them to deal with, rather than suppress, their emotions. We have to acknowledge that while children may be immature, their feelings are undeniable and powerful.

Adults who work with young children need

to model kindness, compassion and thoughtfulness in the manner in which they interact with each other in their team.

We have to be 'worthy of imitation' (Steiner). Children unconsciously notice when staff get on well and are full of humour and lightness.

The physical environment too must acknowledge that children need little spaces to be alone with their strong feelings, as well as big spaces in which to experience exuberance – yes, to 'let off steam'. Above all, children need lots of time to play. There are studies that indicate that children become more self-regulated adults if they are given lots of play in childhood.

Estonian neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp says, 'I would say the only thing we can be sure about is the kind of physical play that animals enjoy. And, of course, we are animals, so our play is very similar. There is no ambiguity among young children; they instinctively know what play is. Academics get confused, parents get confused – calling what their children are doing "naughty", "aggressive", "being bad" – but kids are having fun, so we know that there is that one play system in the brain.'

In our work with young children, we need to acknowledge their need for attention, to feel special, competent and liked. The more we can acknowledge these needs in our own relationships within the team and in the environment we offer the children, the

more we will see the children grow in emotional maturity.

ADULT Having maturity, skill and specialised knowledge

Our life experience – being so much greater than that of children – means that sometimes we have to take charge in a situation. However, we must not abuse our power, or display immature behaviour ourselves.

We have to recognise that children's emotions can stir up strong reactions in us – joyous and painful. Some behaviours that children exhibit are difficult for us to deal with, as they make us feel out of control and stir up feelings from our past. So, we need to know ourselves and aim to give children choice and the appropriate amount of power within the give and take of our authority. Early years teams need to be clear about what behaviour they want to encourage and discourage, and have flexible responses.

Adults, of course, include parents and carers, and the more we can acknowledge and share each other's expertise, the fewer problems we are likely to face. However, the rising number of children being excluded from school or nursery for 'bad behaviour' illustrates the extent to which the needs of a setting is taking priority of that of the child. One size does not fit all, and the younger the child, the more customised the adult response has to be to the child's needs.



Attention and acknowledgement are also vital

Children lack the analytical ability to articulate their problems. So, they show in their behaviour that things are right, or not right. Tantrums, lethargy, fighting or bedwetting can all be evidence that the routines, systems and practitioner approach within a school or nursery are failing to meet a child's needs. And while addressing all of a child's problems may be impossible, we must aim to seek out the best-researched solutions and keep trying to resolve the problems.

This also requires us to take seriously the importance of our jobs, to not rely on instinct but instead to demand the best and appropriate training and adequate funding. We are shaping how children view themselves as learners, companions, employers and employees, partners, mothers and fathers.

ASK

Giving children a role in finding solutions

From quite an early age we can ask the child to help resolve a problem – 'How do you think we can make things better?' Their responses can be a wonderful window into their ability to make sense of the situation.

There are three commonly used methods in solving problems:

Adult authority is direct, sometimes punishing, and leaves the adult in charge of resolving problems – 'You threw the sand at Jason, so go inside.'

'World order' rules assume general or institutional rulings about what children should and shouldn't do and that these rules must be kept – 'Big children don't spill drinks' or 'Reception children go to assembly.'

Give-and-take approach places the child in the junior partner or apprentice role, with rights, responsibilities and opportunities to work out the rules for themselves. For example, 'Oh, what's happened here? What can we do about it? If you hold your beaker this way you probably won't spill it again.'

Enabling children to be part of the solution helps them to feel in control of the situation and gives them confidence, feeding the assurance that the world is not a hostile place and that things don't happen haphazardly and can be rectified.

APPROPRIATE

Knowing and acting on our knowledge of child development

Developmentally appropriate practice is critical to children's learning, both in the immediate and longer term. So many people think that teaching young children is just watering down the formal methods used for older children – that is, providing a diet of whole-class teaching and adult-directed tasks.

They are under the illusion that 'knowledge' can be poured into young children where it will stay and be used as needed. However, knowledge doesn't stick unless it is offered to young children in a meaningful context – through first-hand experience and in a play-based environment.

Being 'taught formally' at the wrong age can kill a child's motivation and erode their belief in themselves as learners. Children learn to 'read' but don't become readers; they can be heard to say, 'I'm no good at maths' or 'I can't draw'. As academic and author Lillian Katz reminds us, 'What is the point of teaching a skill if we have destroyed the disposition to use it?' (*Talks with Teachers*, 1995). Practitioners who know about child development see, understand and celebrate each sign of progress that a young child makes – and every nuance within that stage.

Expecting a child to share when they are too young to understand the concept will only lead to frustration on both sides. I giggle at the *New Yorker* cartoon where a three-year-old is seen in her bedroom clasp all her toys awkwardly to herself while saying to another child, 'I would share but I'm not developmentally there yet.'

Likewise, drilling young children until they can correctly recite information such as the alphabet or one to 20 does not mean that they understand the concepts of letter and number. For young children to truly understand and remember what they have learned, the information must be meaningful to the child and appropriate to their stage of development and experience.

Meaningful contexts are vital not just to learning, but also to motivation. If learning is relevant for children, they are more likely to concentrate and persist with a task. A four-year-old was heard to say to her mother after school, 'I hate spelling!' Why would a teacher vex children with spelling before allowing them to wallow in the joys of

language, unless that teacher knew nothing of child development? There are countless similar examples of adults being innocently insensitive to children's needs and learning because of their lack of knowledge

of developmentally appropriate practice and child development.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs – Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, edited by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, is a particularly authoritative book and one to recommend to managers or head teachers unfamiliar with appropriate early years practice.

It juxtaposes convincing examples of inappropriate and appropriate practice – for example:



MORE INFORMATION

- **'Body Language and the Brain: How We Read the Unspoken Signs?'** by Viatcheslav Wlassoff, www.brainblogger.com/2018/01/17/body-language-and-brain-how-we-read-the-unspoken-signs
- **'The Importance of Play: An Interview with Dr. Jaak Panksepp'**, <https://brainworldmagazine.com/the-importance-of-play-an-interview-with-dr-jaak-panksepp>
- **'Caution – Praise can be dangerous'** by Carol Dweck, www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/PraiseSpring99.pdf
- **'Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs – Serving Children from Birth through Age 8'** edited by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp (National Association for the Education of Young Children), <http://bit.ly/2ZhmDTV>

Group times

Inappropriate Adults expecting three-year-olds to participate in whole-group activities. They read a story to all the children at once, expecting the children all to sit and listen quietly. They do not allow children to leave the large group activity.

Appropriate Adults recognise that three-year-olds are not comfortable with much whole-group participation. Adults read a story or play music with small groups and allow children to enter and leave the group at will.

Lunchtimes

Inappropriate Adults serve all the children with the same amount of food and expect the children to eat it all. They might even put pressure on the children or threaten them with censure if they don't eat it.

Appropriate Practitioners who know about child development realise that growth rates may slow down and appetites decrease, and therefore they encourage children just to 'taste' in small portions with the possibility of more servings.

A non-threatening test for adults in your setting could be to ask, 'Which examples are most like what we do here?' ■

*Marjorie Oury is a retired early years consultant and author of **Exercising Muscles and Minds: Outdoor play and the early years curriculum and Sounds Like Playing: Music and the early years curriculum**. The second edition of **Exercising Muscles and Minds** is out in November.*