

Power balance

Aggression between children can be a concern, but how to teach positive behaviour? Practitioners' own conduct, realistic expectations and effective communication are crucial, says **Kay Mathieson**

Q In our setting we are seeing an increase in aggressive behaviour between the children, especially among the two- to three-year-olds, and parents are complaining that their children are being bullied. What should we say to parents and how can we reduce this aggressive behaviour?

A Any aggressive behaviour is worrying for both practitioners and parents, so it is important that communication between adults is clear and helpful. This should begin with detailed information about setting approaches to supporting children's learning about relationships and positive behaviour.

POLICIES AND PRACTICE

The way adults relate to each other gives children powerful messages about how disagreements, mistakes and problems are dealt with and resolved. If we do not review our practice regularly, it can gradually slide to an increasingly negative focus. This is often indicated by more practitioner responses relating to problems rather than highlighting positive interactions.

Ideally, setting policies will give guidance for practitioners and parents about using differences of views between children as an opportunity for learning about listening to each other, understanding another's perspective and finding suitable resolutions. None of these skills are easy and even as adults we can struggle sometimes.

Help children by demonstrating and engaging them in the process in a developmentally appropriate way. The way adults take time to resolve conflicts, with children gradually engaged more in the resolution process, should be outlined in the policy. This must also be a recognisable element of daily practice, with parents receiving feedback on children's



progress as part of Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED).

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

For children in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), it is developmentally appropriate that there will be conflicts on a daily, if not hourly, basis as children explore how to engage with each other, negotiate rules over use of toys and time with adults, and gain independence.

If adults respond by taking over, making all the decisions and imposing their solutions in every situation, the messages are very different from valuing children's involvement in the process. The learning that happens through these experiences underpins children's understanding of how relationships and conflicts work.

BULLIES AND VICTIMS

Bullying is a very emotive word and a serious concern that needs thoughtful consideration. When linked to describing young children's responses, it can sometimes be used in a reactionary rather than thoughtful way. In the EYFS, children are still developing their understanding of themselves and behaviour of others. In particular, their social understanding and peer relationships are at a rudimentary stage. So the way we

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MORE INFORMATION

- *Children's Friendships: the beginnings of intimacy*, by J Dunn, (2004). Blackwell Publishing
- Research briefing *School Bullying*, by A James (2010), NSPCC, available from www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

intervene in children's disagreements can be a strong influence.

A first step may be to consider what makes bullying different from other day-to-day conflicts. An NSPCC research briefing paper (2010) identifies some specific components, including the intention to harm, the inequality of power in the relationship and repetition of the behaviour.

In the majority of cases, hitting and hurting between young children is a means to resolve conflict about a toy, a direction of play or attention from an adult. Although children may hurt each other, the intention remains getting a desired outcome, and the power balance remains relatively equal.

However, practitioners do need to ensure that children experience a balance of outcomes rather than a pattern of one child regularly being seen as the 'winner' or the 'loser'. Helping all children to value different views leading to solutions that demonstrate compromise and acknowledgement of both perspectives in the process is a key role for adults.

Research involving older children suggests that there are common characteristics that are apparent in many who bully. These can include poor progress in learning, lack of self-worth and being bullied themselves in other contexts. Importantly, there are similar common elements for those who are victims, including sensitivity, being unaccustomed to dealing with conflict, anxiety, lack of assertive responses (Dunn, 2004). Someone who is at ease and confident in a situation does not need to use characteristic bullying behaviours.

As adults, we show children how the world works. If they are learning from us that the way to respond when things do not go our way is to escalate your behaviour and ensure that 'louder and bigger' gets the toy, our practice can reinforce the message that bullying techniques are desirable.

In reflecting on the current relationships between children, it is

useful for practitioners to identify specific skills that are demonstrated. These would include the strategies they are developing to make contact, negotiate, say 'no' appropriately, express their own views and engage in a range of ways with the majority of the children in the setting.

Recognising children's individual characteristics of effective learning and tuning into their current understanding of how relationships work both contribute to the effectiveness of adults in supporting positive behaviours in the setting.

In communication with parents, concerns about social interactions should also be related directly to the progress children are making in PSED. By tracking and monitoring all children's progress in PSED, practitioners can look for children who are showing particular skill and understanding or are needing further support from adults to build confidence in their social interactions.

In addition, linking the progress in PSED with that in Communication and Language (CL) gives specific insights about use of particular types of language such as questioning, negotiating and engaging. This adds to adult understanding of how best to help each child gain confidence and skill in their social interactions.

POSITIVE APPROACHES

Parents are constantly interested and concerned about social connections and friendships. This allows practitioners to be proactive in building positive communication about the actions they are taking to support children's behavioural learning. Being explicit when articulating how the general positive approaches support individual children's learning will give parents confidence.

To feel confident in such discussions, whether with parents or Ofsted, practitioners need to have the opportunity to discuss, challenge, problem-solve and understand the thinking that underpins the agreed approaches to behaviour in the setting.

From this secure position, recognising individual children's strengths and areas for development is more straightforward. Practitioners who are confident in their understanding of the skills and abilities they are encouraging in young children's social understanding are also more likely to create a positive emotional environment to nurture children's relationships. ■

WORKING MUM

I cried and she cried

What does early years education and childcare look like through the eyes of a typical working mother? In the first of a new series, WorkingMum explains how settling her second daughter into nursery was as hard as first time around

I cried when I visited my daughter's nursery before she started. I didn't care about the fantastic activities, nappy changing policy or observations.

All I wanted was reassurance that my 12-month-old would get cuddles.

I thought settling DD2 (Dear Daughter 2) into nursery would be easy. I'd been through it all with her big sister, DD1 (Dear Daughter 1), who already attended the setting. I was wrong. Leaving my youngest to return to work was equally heart-wrenching and filled with guilt, but the staff were wonderful.

The nursery staff told me that DD2 would get plenty of cuddles and the warmth of their actions towards us was also reassuring. They didn't laugh at my tears but told me how normal it was – I even got a hug.

A PROUD BIG SISTER

When it came to DD2's settling-in week she was already familiar with many of the staff and the surroundings from taking her sister there. All the staff, not just those in the baby room, addressed DD2 by name. I liked that they encouraged me to play with her rather than sneak off while she was distracted – as a friend at another setting was advised.

It was also reassuring to know that DD1 was nearby. Staff from the baby room and pre-school room agreed that DD1 could visit her sister whenever she chose and that they'd bring them together if DD2 got particularly upset.

DD1 is a proud big sister and thrived on the responsibility this brought her. The time DD2 spent at nursery gradually increased through the week, but unfortunately she would cry and cling to me when I kissed her goodbye.

As I left, I'd peep through the window to catch a glimpse of her snuggled against her key worker. I was

jealous of a friend who could stay in the nursery and watch her child on a monitor during her settling-in period.

For the first few weeks, DD2 cried when I left her and cried again when she saw me in the evening. It would have been nice to actually see her being happy in the setting, rather than just being told that she did stop crying soon after I left.

Staff told me that I could phone as many times as I wanted to check

how DD2 was doing. Perhaps strangely, I didn't want to. I trusted that they would call me if necessary, but it was nice to have the option.

At the end of my first week back at work, DD1 excitedly gave me a card. On the front was

a photo of the sisters hugging each other and grinning with a message from DD2's key worker saying that they were happy. It was such a thoughtful gesture and remains on our kitchen wall.

One morning instead of clinging to me, DD2 put her arms out to be held by a practitioner. That she was happy to be left at last was a huge breakthrough. She didn't cry that day. But I did.

The photo of the sisters hugging each other was such a thoughtful gesture and remains on our kitchen wall

