

Ideas for Anger and Conflict

The following information is based on the work of Raymond Simpson (Educational Psychologist)

Introduction

Educational Psychologists receive many requests for behaviour management techniques and strategies. Basic principles have been developed and refined over many years' use in classrooms. They have formed the basis of many In-Services and presentations and are reiterated in many of the recommendations that Psychologists make about individual children with additional support needs. Every year it seems a new and more attractive package emerges with a different acronym embracing the same set of principles.

The Challenge

Despite the fact that these principles are well-proven and self-evidently good advice, they are not easy to implement. In response to giving this information we are often told:

"Yes I know that/do that/haven't got time to do that/tried it and it doesn't work"

All these statements are true.

We may have a good idea of what we want to do but situations conspire to make it difficult for us to do it. Even when we do, there may be no immediate effect and we may need to persist over a long period of time. We often wish "if only" there was some thing else we could do which would be better, more immediate, more effective. We may resort to negative, expedient strategies which seem more effective or satisfying in the short term. We get tired, stressed, upset and ill. Emotive situations affect us at a personal level and it's difficult to find the energy/conviction to keep going/be consistent/follow through.

A Starting Point for Understanding and Responding

The following principles are a reminder for when the going gets tough. They are only a starting point. We all need training, rehearsal and consistent support in order that, like any other skill or technique, we can use them in the most adverse circumstances without having to think, "What am I going to do now"? or react in ways we don't feel good about later.

We also need to build an understanding of how children develop and learn particularly how they develop and learn emotionally. We, by our actions and how we talk to children and young people, can help them to learn about feelings and how to deal with them helpfully.

This subject is less amenable to direct teaching than other parts of the curriculum; it is more complex than morality and justice; it does not fit neatly into one lesson plan or project. It also needs a lot of revision and differentiation at each stage of education.

The following notes therefore offer some ideas about how to set up systems for modelling how we deal with feelings and behaviour. They also suggest ways of communicating with children about their feelings and conflicts which, if regularly used, will create a continuum of experiential learning.

Following Through

Training and rehearsal can be offered through In-Service. However, for these principles to take root and grow in a robust and healthy way in schools, you need to receive consistent acknowledgement and support for what you are doing. You also need regular opportunities to tell and have someone listen to some of the feelings that your difficult job engenders. This is something which you will

need to discuss and create as a staff group within your own school i.e. creating staff structures to support, rescue and problem-solve difficult classroom situations through:

- planning and procedures
- discussion in groups and individual support for teachers on a regular basis

It may help to prioritise the understanding and management of behaviour and emotions as **the** curricular issue rather than something that gets in the way of delivering the curriculum.

This is why these approaches need to be:

- Used consistently throughout the school so that once established they do not have to be re-invented each year
- Part of a responsive system of procedures.

Communicating with Children

Sometimes communicating with children, particularly children in trouble or under stress, is difficult. It can result in the adult doing most of the talking and the child becoming increasingly uncomfortable and monosyllabic. It may help to create a quiet, secure situation and allow them to talk about anything, this helps you to gain their trust and shows them that you can listen and be interested in what they have to say. Only then will they be receptive to what you have to say later.

It is not what you say that will open up or improve communication but how you listen to and receive what they say. It helps to:

- be attentive
- regulate eye contact
- maintain a pleasant interested expression
- show you are listening by verbal and non verbal responses, nodding, "Mm, I see, Ah ha"
- punctuate their story by repeating phrases, summarising, clarifying and gently asking them to respond to what you are saying. Wait, receive any responses....wait some more

N.B. Stories can be fantastic, illogical, convoluted, fabricated. They are however, how the child chooses to represent him/herself at that point in time and should be respected as such. It may be helpful to name this e.g. 'You are telling me...' or 'This is how you see things'.

When you start to speak, be careful how you say things. Maintain a genuine curiosity and avoid signalling the answer you expect by your tone of voice.

- Gently check inconsistencies with genuine curiosity
- Name what they see as the problem
- Give them words for the feelings they express or display
- Wait, tolerate silences
- Ask "Is that all? Is there anything else? Is there anything else?"
- Ask them to describe how they see problems develop, feelings rise. Help them to make connections, recognise patterns using their words
- Ask what they can do about the situation, or what you can do together or what they now would like you to do, wait for a response wait some more...

'It's not what you do but how you do it.'

Be acutely aware of the power balance in your relationship. The more power you display, the more opportunities you give them to challenge. Know how and when to lower the power.

Be flexible in your response to any behaviour; try at all times to pre-empt or anticipate negativity or challenge. This is by far the most important thing to do and necessitates sensitive observation and knowing when and how to make demands.

You may need to set boundaries to create a sense of security: time, place or expectations. Do this as gently, supportively and interestingly as you can and try not to vary this too much.

Principles of Managing Challenging Behaviour

(N.B. while the general principles may be the same, suggestions may be more or less appropriate depending on the age of the child.)

Step 1

Attempt to reduce the noise or conflict by:

- 1) Staying calm, lowering your voice and its tone, and avoiding threatening eye contact. Lowering your hands.
- 2) Moving close to anyone who needs to be protected/comforted and provide that as reassuringly as possible. This is your priority so take as long as it needs. (It may be necessary to send someone for help in extreme circumstances).

Step 2

Take charge and contain the behaviour or feelings physically and emotionally by:

- 1) Trying to separate the angry child from the situation or the situation from the child, whichever is easiest
- 2) Creating a space around the child and getting down to their level, trying to make non-threatening eye contact
- 3) Naming what is happening, the behaviour and the feelings eg "Jane is hurt, crying, very unhappy", "John is so angry, what can be the matter?"

Step 3

Attempt to defuse the anger or tension by:

- 1) Asking what is wrong; what it is he/she wants to happen or simply asking very calmly to stop doing whatever they are doing so you can listen to them
- 2) Listening to, then repeating what they are saying so that they know you hear them. Name their feelings and talk to their feelings rather than trying to reason. As soon as possible suggest a "cooling off" period or activity
- 3) Making a neutral suggestion or distraction
- 4) Backing off but isolating and keep the child under observation till he/she calms down

Step 4

Follow up by:

- 1) Invite the child when you judge the time is right to talk about the incident (c.f. communicating with children and anger management techniques)
- 2) Finding someone to talk to yourself
- 3) Asking the child to self monitor his anger/distress and use anger management strategies if they are old enough

Crisis Management

If despite your best efforts the child attacks you, the room or another child, the following is a range of suggestions that may or may not be appropriate in different situations. Always remember you, like the children, have choices about how to respond; these are some of the choices you have

- If another child is being hurt, your first task is to protect, reassure and comfort the injured child. By doing this, you are also avoiding reinforcing the challenging behaviour in any way and you are providing a sympathetic model
- If you feel the behaviour is minor or you are in some way reinforcing it, ignore it; this may mean turning your back to the child or busying yourself with someone else
- Calmly say to them what you positively want them to do. If you ask them to stop doing something, follow up by saying what you do want them to do.
- Name the behaviour or feeling behind the behaviour - e.g. "J is hammering. J looks angry." Say how you feel when you see that behaviour.
- Mirror the behaviour or communication e.g. "We've done enough" (whilst pushing the work or activity aside)
- Distinguish your feelings about the behaviour from your feeling about the child
- Talk gently or reassuringly to lessen the intensity of the behaviour or challenge i.e. do not meet aggression - lower the power. Occasionally being powerful can stop a child in their tracks but it invariably raises anxiety. In some cases you may even gratify the child and reinforce the cycle of aggressive interaction in future
- Give a distraction
- Give choices
- Find time to discuss the incident with the child after a 'cooling off' period

N.B. Remember that to stay in overall control of the situation you may have to relinquish control of one aspect. Try not to be constrained by principles such as justice or morality that may not be appropriate to the child's level of development or understanding. Do not be too rigid but do be consistent. It does help when you create a range of routines and responses that the child can predict.

N.B. Be aware that the child may not enjoy these confrontations any more than you do!

The End of the Line - Restraint

E.g. holding with your arms and without using your hands, from behind and down at the child's level.

- Be pro-active
 - have a professional policy on this
 - know when and how to use it
 - consider when you, the child or another child are at risk, for example
- Remain calm and reassuring, at all times name what you are doing for the child
- Be aware that you may need time yourself to rebuild trust and confidence in your

relationship with the child

- Seek help and someone to talk to about it afterwards

All action taken should be in line with Dundee Policy Guidelines. Please refer to Supporting Learning in Dundee Policy Guidelines, section 4.7, Better behaviour, Physical intervention guidelines.

Principles of Conflict Resolution

Teachers or assistants cannot always be on hand to resolve conflicts between children and paradoxically the more they take responsibility for this, at playtimes/lunch times the more frequently they are called upon to do so.

This 6 step model of conflict resolution can be taught and modelled in the classroom as a routine intervention, a social education lesson or as a whole school project, e.g. problems in the playground. The model is relatively simple. When a conflict arises in the classroom treat it as an opportunity to model and teach the following strategy

1) Calm the conflict.

Approach in a non-threatening and interested manner, keeping your voice quiet, soft and interested

2) Avoid taking sides immediately.

Try to elicit both sides of the story, give even turns to each speaker. Actively listen by looking, clarifying, repeating, summarising and checking out (e.g. "Is that right? Is this what you are saying?") with an interested and encouraging tone

3) Name the conflict.

Simply describe the respective positions of 'both children' and in what ways they are incompatible or disagree/have different feelings. Again ask if this is how they see it

4) Ask them for any suggestions as to how to resolve the conflict.

Negotiate compromise, shift their positions so as to create a win/win situation i.e. no losers

5) Select a solution.

Talk it through with them. If it is viable ask them to agree on it

6) Follow through by checking up later how they got on.

Observing Behaviour

The strategies so far described can be effective across a wide range of behavioural issues. If difficulties continue, it can be useful to observe the problem behaviour more closely by doing an ABC record. Divide a sheet of paper into four columns. The first is headed date/time. The three other columns are headed

- Antecedents - what was the situation leading up to a behaviour
- Behaviour - what you observed the behaviour to be
- Consequences - what happened to the child as a result

The record should run for long enough to get a good sample of incidents. If a pattern is spotted in the behaviour you try to think of a way of altering either the antecedents or the consequences or both.