

# 5

## THINKING ABOUT BEHAVIOUR

### Chapter objectives



- To reflect on what it means to be a 'good' student
- To explore alternative ways to think about behaviour
- To examine conceptualisations of students whose behaviour is challenging
- To think about how pro-social behaviour develops
- To appreciate that some students need help to learn behaviours expected in school.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE 'GOOD'?

When new parents describe their baby as a 'good baby' they usually mean she sleeps most of the time and doesn't make too many demands. This has little to do with being 'good' in the moral sense but is about being easy on caregivers. When infants reach the 2-year-old stage marked by independence, defiance and tantrums, this may be conceptualised as 'bad behaviour' rather than a necessary part of development. Children need to take account of others as they grow, but learning to stand up for themselves is also important.

Similar issues apply to school behaviour. It is difficult to be 'good' when:

- You might not know what that means
- The learning you have outside school does not fit with what you are supposed to do in school (e.g. 'hit 'em back')
- You have to be compliant and do as you are told by those in authority but also take responsibility for your own behaviour
- You have to fit in but also take risks with learning.

MacLure and Jones (2009) found that teachers usually want to develop cohesive classes where everyone knows and responds to the formal and informal rules. This is an understandable aim but can lead to low tolerance of diversity if those on the margins of the group are not actively included. Children who do not know how to perform 'the good student', or lack the skills to do so, may be publicly disciplined and

become labelled as naughty. Others then marginalise them as 'outside' the norm, which has implications for their future.

*Once a child's reputation has begun to circulate in the staffroom, dining hall and amongst other parents, it may be very difficult for her behaviour not to be interpreted as a 'sign' of such imputed character traits. Children who have acquired a strong reputation may therefore find it harder to be recognised as good (MacLure & Jones, 2009, p. 5).*

## WHAT BEHAVIOUR DO WE WANT IN SCHOOL?

Here is a list of possibilities:

- Understand and obey the rules.
- Listen carefully.
- Respond positively and quickly to adult direction.
- Be considerate to others.
- Follow school routines.
- Move about the building 'appropriately'.
- Deal with conflict in 'mature' ways – i.e. without resorting to verbal abuse or punch-ups.
- Be polite and courteous.
- Do your best at all times.
- Keep things tidy.
- Be careful.
- Work with others when required.
- Work independently when required.
- Keep hands and feet to yourself.
- Sit on chairs 'properly'.
- Speak at 'appropriate' times.
- Do not argue.
- Share teacher attention.
- Try before asking.
- Ask when not sure.
- Do not interrupt or clamour for attention.
- Have what you need in school.
- Give things in on time.
- Respect authority.
- Be 'sensible'.
- Be on time.

And do we also want students to ... ?

- Think about what they are being taught
- Ask challenging questions
- Take risks and learn from mistakes

- Be creative
- Take initiative
- Be confident
- Be sensitive to others
- Be positive
- Have energy and enthusiasm
- Be friendly and inclusive
- Be honest and trustworthy
- Be fair
- Have pro-social values.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

What do you notice about these expectations?

Do they fit with your experience in schools?

How many behaviours are personal, how many social and how many related to the routine and regulation of schools?

The following case study demonstrates that being a traditionally 'good' student is not necessarily the best training for success in life.



### Case study

Kiara had achieved high grades in school and was now working as an intern in an overseas aid agency. All her school reports had commended Kiara for her cooperative behaviour and diligent work. She was a traditionally 'good student' in all respects, especially in her desire to please others. What Kiara had not learnt however was genuine self-confidence, to risk making a mistake, deal with ambiguity or manage conflict when things were not going well. The busy agency needed her to work independently and quickly. Kiara only felt comfortable working on specific tasks for which she was given clear direction. When offered more open-ended suggestions in which she needed to use her initiative, Kiara would check every hour or so for the next step. Within a few weeks the agency began to look for someone who could be given an idea and run with it.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

In which ways did your education encourage or discourage your self-confidence?

What three school practices might have helped Kiara increase her competencies in this work situation?

## BEHAVIOUR IS CONTEXT DEPENDENT

Behaviour can be construed as good or bad according to the context in which it appears. Children not only have to learn what adults want from them, they also have to learn what is acceptable when, where and with whom. Shouting in a library is frowned upon: shouting at a football match is what you do! If you have ever been out of your comfort zone in a social situation you will realise that it is not always easy to pick up what is expected. You also realise how complex social behaviour is when faced with a young person on the autistic spectrum who says and does things regardless of place and audience. We therefore need to provide children with many clues and every chance to learn what is 'appropriate' school behaviour. Students need clear direction, good models, lots of practice and reminders before reprimands. Although this is particularly true for younger pupils, teenage students also get confused about appropriate behaviour. They may, for instance, become over-familiar with a teacher and not be aware they have overstepped the mark.

Expected behaviour at school may be at variance from what students do outside. This can be around behaviours such as finishing a task, tidying up, social interaction and what is considered 'good manners'. This requires direct teaching.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

Do you have to behave in certain ways to be thought of as a 'good teacher' in the eyes of authority?

Are there any conflicts for you here?

What parallels can you see with students?

## THINKING ABOUT STUDENTS WHOSE BEHAVIOUR IS CHALLENGING

As there are many ways of thinking about behaviour itself there are also different conceptualisations of students who present with challenges. Each way of positioning a student impacts not only on what we feel about that student but also on how we position ourselves in relation to that young person. This then influences what we do.

### The 'bad' child in need of discipline

Conversations in staffrooms and in the media can focus on 'discipline' where young people are positioned as 'bad', 'out of control', 'refusing to learn', and 'needing a firm hand'. Their behaviour may be seen as deliberate, wilful and stemming from an innate lack of positive qualities. This model says that problems exist within the student and it

is the student who must see the error of their ways and change their behaviour. When you position a pupil in this way you position yourself as the person who must ensure that control is maintained. You see yourself as the keeper of the peace – a police officer in the classroom.

*Once I knew a bit more about this boy from the things he said in our Circle, I stopped imagining that he was just spending time thinking up ways to make my life a misery. I had believed his behaviour was a deliberate attack on me and it wasn't. It was everything that was happening in his life. Once I began to see him differently I could relate to him differently and things between us got much better (teacher).*

### The 'mad' or 'abnormal' child with something wrong with them

This way of thinking is known as the 'medical' or 'within-child' model. It has been discouraged in the past in the UK, where an interactive model for special educational needs has been encapsulated in legislation and guidance since 1981. Language changed to reflect this. Schools for 'maladjusted children' for instance, were renamed schools for 'children with emotional and behavioural difficulties'. The difference may seem trivial but is highly significant, as the words we use determine how we see things.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR: APA, 2000) has been highly influential around the world in promoting a 'mental illness' model of difficulty. In many educational jurisdictions, schools cannot get funding for additional help for students whose behaviour is hard to manage unless they have been diagnosed with a disorder. There is increasing disquiet about this for many reasons. Crucially, it implies something wrong with the person rather than with their circumstances: 'oppositional defiant disorder' (ODD) for instance, is diagnosed for young people who are not complying with authority and being uncooperative and disobedient generally. They may have their own good reasons for behaving in this way – it does not mean they are 'abnormal'.

Some labels are grounded in genetic, pervasive conditions such as autistic spectrum disorder. Autism requires long-term specific intervention and diagnosis is often helpful. Other 'disorders', however, are not so clear-cut. Once a cluster of behaviours has been named a 'disorder' a drug can be developed to 'treat' it, and the involvement of pharmaceutical companies with the DSM has been brought into question. There is also a concern about the potential for misdiagnosis and over-diagnosis. The number of children being prescribed drugs for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has increased dramatically in the last 15 years. A recent longitudinal study, however, shows little evidence for the efficacy of medication on behaviour and indications of some long-term educational and health risks (Smith et al., 2010).

When you position a young person as having a 'disorder' they are then seen as outside your sphere of influence. You can position yourself as not responsible – they can't help it and neither can you. Many in education then say they do not have the skills or resources needed and the child should therefore be somewhere else.

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

Why do you think that 'within-child' models of behaviour have developed?

What are the disadvantages of this way of thinking in a classroom?

### The 'sad' child in need of a different history

The family is usually seen as 'the problem' but sometimes it is traumatic experiences, such as exposure to violence or displacement, which have been damaging. The student is positioned as 'sad' rather than bad: perhaps disadvantaged, neglected or indulged. As a teacher all you can do is sympathise. In this model, you position yourself as caring but helpless. The person who is seen as responsible for intervention is the counsellor/therapist who helps the young person learn to cope with their experiences and the fall-out from these.

It is increasingly common for teachers to blame parents for permissive and over-protective parenting. They see problems in school as emanating from a lack of boundaries and low expectations. Children learn to consider no one but themselves, so become demanding and uncooperative. Blaming parents is understandable but does not move the world forward. It can undermine any chance of working well together. Miller (1994) found that of 24 primary school teachers all but three cited home factors as being implicated in student behaviour difficulties. When the same teachers were asked why they felt student behaviour had improved all mentioned factors within their control, especially positive attention to the child followed by selecting work at an appropriate level of interest.

### FROM HELPLESSNESS TO ACTION

Whatever a child or young person brings with them to school is either exacerbated by what happens there or modified. Schools can and do make a difference.

The following approaches are more hopeful. They explore behaviour as the outcome of the interaction between the student and the school environment.

### Ecological systems approaches

Systems theory looks at what it is possible to change, rather than what is outside your sphere of influence. You cannot do anything about a student's family, background, history, past experiences or personality – so putting time and energy trying to change what you cannot just makes you feel worse. As with all ecologies everything is interconnected so although you only pay attention to what *you* can do to make a difference, the outcomes can be more far-reaching than you might imagine. An individual teacher has influence on the following:

- Relationships at all levels
- The emotional climate of the classroom
- Expectations
- The learning opportunities presented
- Pedagogical approaches
- Provision for individual needs
- The ways students are spoken to and about
- Support networks
- The physical environment – how rooms are set out and what is on the walls.

In matters of human behaviour there is rarely a straight line between cause and effect. Outcomes are the result of what builds up interactively over time. This spiral can either be in a positive or negative direction. Here are examples of both for the same student.

#### Case study

Poppy, aged 6, was in trouble in school. She had enjoyed playing when she first came to school but the teacher had mentioned to the year 1 class teacher, Ms A, that Poppy did not settle well to directed tasks and would need 'a firm hand'. Ms A was on the lookout for off-task behaviour and when Poppy did not meet expectations told her in front of her classmates that her work was not good enough. Within a couple of months Poppy started to tear up her books and throw pencils. Annie, her mother was asked into school but only ever heard negative things about what her daughter was doing wrong, including from other children. After a while she began to dread going near the school. Annie and Poppy's relationship deteriorated at home and the little girl began to say she felt ill on school days so she would not have to go.

Ms A went on maternity leave at Easter and a temporary teacher, Mrs M, began to take the class. She was a retired lady with a great deal of experience. She soon noticed that Poppy seemed able to grasp the concepts being taught but avoided formal pencil and paper work. She decided to ask advice from the educational psychologist who thought that Poppy had dyspraxia – a difficulty with motor co-ordination, organisation and sequencing. Annie was asked into school to talk about her daughter and confirmed that she did struggle with doing up buttons, jigsaws, drawing and getting things in the right order.

Mrs M focused on getting Poppy to feel successful as a learner and to raise a positive sense of self in the class before she introduced some activities aimed at supporting her writing skills. She also talked to the class about how well Poppy was doing, despite her difficulties. Poppy's behaviour improved, the relationship between mother and daughter became more supportive and Poppy began to look forward to going to school again.

### Behaviour perceived as meeting needs

In the following theories behaviour is seen as an attempt to attain basic psychological needs. If these needs are actively addressed for all students the incidence of behavioural difficulties may diminish.

### *Self-determination theory*

This theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) says people are motivated to meet their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. The first refers to the need to experience yourself as competent in controlling your own environment so you can predict what will happen. The need for autonomy is defined as determining your own behaviour. What you do is your choice; you are not coerced into action. The need for relatedness includes feeling a sense of wellbeing from participating in a social world. There is a strong correspondence in this theory with the protective factors in resilience.

### *Choice theory*

Glasser's theory (1998) says that all human behaviour aims to satisfy one of five needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. The only behaviour we can control is our own. Once this is recognised we take appropriate responsibility for ourselves. More on Glasser in Chapters 6 and 7.

## Behaviour as a special educational need

Students who have physical or sensory difficulties have provision made for them so they can access the curriculum. Students with emotional/behavioural difficulties also have needs but there is often less willingness to make adjustments in such cases. The following analogy puts this into a different perspective.

If a child needed a wheelchair you would give her a wheelchair. You would not insist that every student in the class have a wheelchair so it was 'fair'. You would also not say that she 'should' be walking at the same pace as others. Children who have social and emotional difficulties may also need adjustments to ensure their needs are met. Other students often understand this better than adults.

Behavioural difficulties are often part of a child's repertoire of special educational needs – more on this in Chapter 9.

## DEVELOPING PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Over time we learn how to be and how to live together by the interaction of the following:

- Our experiences
- The mediation of these experiences that help us understand them in certain ways; e.g. the conversations children have about family break-up can prevent them feeling rejected or to blame



- Our personality, abilities and the development of our self-concept – who we believe we are and what we can do
- Expectations of others in the formation of our sense of self
- Our relationships; who is significant in our world, who we copy and who we want to please
- What we discover meets our needs, especially social, emotional and psychological
- Direct teaching and reinforcement of expectations and relational values, knowledge and skills
- Structured opportunities to reflect and talk about personal and relational issues
- How our worlds are socially constructed – what we come to believe is the ‘right’ way to be.

### Behaviourist model

This says we learn how to behave by repeating what we find rewarding and avoiding what is painful. Despite being a dominant model in schools it has limitations, especially for those who have had multiple negative experiences. Such individuals are less likely to receive rewards and more likely to have sanctions applied. This can entrench rather than remediate their behaviour.

Punishment is more to do with retribution and ‘justice’ than learning. If punishment worked well as a deterrent our prisons would be empty. For many individuals it is shameful to get into trouble and for these students a serious conversation may be all that is needed for them to reflect and change. For others punishment can be meaningless or even a badge of pride. For some students anything a school can hand out doesn’t come close to what they have already had to deal with. Meaningful consequences handed out by people who matter may have an impact on how a young person thinks about themselves and their community, but a blunt delivery of detention, suspension or anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) is unlikely to change behaviour and can reinforce negative self-concepts and relationships. Simply punishing students can increase aggression, vandalism and truancy (Mayer, 1995; Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Meaningful rewards can, however, reinforce positive behaviours. Those especially worth having include:

- Acknowledgement of specific achievement and effort – although tangible rewards may be given it is the acknowledgement that really matters

Some schools have developed a system where teachers give out ‘Gotcha’ cards to students to reinforce positive behaviours. Staff are noticing an inverse correlation between the number of Gotcha cards an individual teacher gives out and the number of behaviour referrals they make. The more acknowledgement for positive behaviours, the less problems there are.

- Positive messages home – letters, certificates, merit awards
- Second-hand praise: say something positive about a pupil in the knowledge this will get back to them – this is particularly helpful for students who resist direct praise

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- Privileges such as free time or choice of activity can be an incentive to reach a specific target. Primarily extrinsic motivators, however, do not internalise pro-social values. When students understand that certain behaviours increase their sense of wellbeing or connection to the group they begin to choose actions for different reasons.

### Restorative justice approaches

Our judicial system is set up to identify evidence of wrongdoing, make judgements which attribute blame to the guilty and hand out appropriate sentences. Restorative justice questions the wisdom of a model that disconnects individuals from their communities and offers even less motivation to behave responsibly. Restorative justice requires a shift in belief about the appropriate way to respond to wrongdoers. It builds on the importance of relationships and connection – themes constantly revisited here.

In restorative practices an incident of wrongdoing is seen as affecting the whole community. The basic philosophy is that:

- Many unwanted behaviours are violations of people and/or their relationships.
- Violations create obligations and responsibilities.
- Restorative justice seeks to heal the harm caused and put right the wrongs.

Rather than upholding values of vengeance, retaliation and reprisal, restorative justice promotes values of compassion, reparation, thoughtfulness and generosity of spirit. These are qualities we are aiming to instil in our students, especially those who are struggling to learn them. More on putting restorative approaches into practice in Chapter 11.

### Teaching wanted school behaviour

Some students need to replace behaviours they have already developed with those that are more helpful to them in the social context of school. This requires all staff to clearly communicate and reinforce expectations. The following example demonstrates how not to do this!

Along with other parents I went to see my son in his primary school assembly. As we took our seats along the sides of the hall the head teacher walked through the rows of children seated on the floor. She had her hands behind her back and every so often she would shoot out a finger to point at a child who was talking, fidgeting or not sitting up straight. They would be loudly reprimanded. She was probably aiming to show the parents what great control she had in her school. I wondered how the children felt.

The following principles focus on the positive and apply to all students:

- Make expectations explicit: give both visual and verbal clues as to what is wanted (do not emphasise what is not wanted – the ‘don’t think of an elephant’ principle); for some students pictorial ‘cue cards’ to remind them of expectations such as waiting their turn or saying thank you can be helpful.

- Give a rationale so that students know these expectations are for their benefit, not just yours.
- Expect students to comply.
- Be surprised rather than angry if they don't: it shows you think well of them.
- Model and demonstrate the behaviour required.
- Make requests succinct – too many words can be confusing.
- Keep things simple. We do not expect students to learn curriculum targets all at once – divide behavioural targets in a stepped sequence where necessary.
- Give prompts and positive feedback.
- Give reminders before reprimands.
- Discuss with the students how they are doing.
- Pay particular attention to the beginnings and endings of activities, as this is when most behavioural difficulties occur.

A life-sized paper shape of a child on the window, or puppet, teddy, rag doll or similar, can be helpful in establishing expected behaviour with young children. The image has a name, is a member of the class and provides a 'third person' to whom the teacher addresses remarks such as:

- Well, Teddy, what do you think of this class for waiting for me so nicely? Aren't they just wonderful?
- I am a bit sad today, Teddy, some children were fighting. You don't feel safe when there is fighting do you? You think children need to sort out their arguments without fighting? Perhaps we can all talk about that in our Circle.

Bill Rogers (2009) suggests that sometimes when students are not complying with expectations mirroring their errant behaviour can be a strong motivator for change and brings humour to the situation. Students usually see the funny side of this so long as individuals are not embarrassed in front of others.

When students are having difficulties complying with expectations they may also need opportunities to understand why their behaviour is not helping them be part of the class group and support to learn specific behaviours that will help their inclusion. They need opportunities to practice. Once they have mastered a skill, such as not interrupting, they can become models for others. This will reinforce and sustain their new learning.



### Case study

Max was not an easy child. He was energetic, curious and single-minded. This meant that he was demanding of teacher attention, did not always listen to instructions and was not always cooperative. In his second year in school his parents separated and Max began to be moody and aggressive as well as highly active. His mother was brought into the school several times to talk over concerns about his behaviour but things continued

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to deteriorate. Max began to lock himself in the bathroom in the mornings. His mother was at her wits' end.

The following year a new approach was taken in which it was decided to give Max a red star in a special book every time he waited his turn, had a playtime in which played well with other children and when he completed a task set for him by the teacher. The teacher made sure that Max was successful by reminding him of his targets, giving him tasks where he was going to be successful and asking staff on playground duty to reinforce positive behaviour. When Max had a page of stars he was given a certificate to take home to show how well he had done. Within a few weeks Max's behaviour began to improve and although still very lively he eventually settled into the routine of the class and made progress with his learning. His relationships at home also improved.

### Focusing on strengths to develop a positive self-concept

Children develop a view of themselves that they have been given by adults since their early years. These may include 'naughty', 'lazy' or a 'nuisance'. If you tell a 4-year-old how helpful she is she will try and be helpful, if you tell a 7-year-old often enough that he is clumsy and careless this is how he will see himself and have nothing to aim for. This is not ignoring problems but focusing on what is going well and looking towards goals. Working from a strengths perspective is more motivating than addressing entrenched deficits and problems. It can be powerful for students to have their strengths identified and acknowledged. More on strengths in Chapter 10.

### SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Catch students being 'good'.
- Be clear and concise – say briefly what you want students to do.
- Provide a model to copy – show students what to do.
- Enhance confidence – it is OK to not get it right the first time.
- Construct a positive self-concept.

### SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULTIES

- Focus on encouraging and teaching wanted behaviours rather than trying to get rid of unwanted behaviours – in small steps if necessary.
- Acknowledge that changing behaviour takes time and that there are no quick fixes.

- Give reminders before reprimands.
- Aim to be 'significant' to challenging students so their relationship with you matters.
- Respond to unacceptable behaviour in ways that maintain connection to community.

### **Professional development activities for teachers**

#### ***The good student***

Identify three students whose behaviour you find challenging.

Observe these students over a period of a week and identify all the times they perform 'the good student', that is doing what is expected in school. What happens when they do?

Discuss your findings with a small group. Are there any common threads?

#### ***Changing behaviour***

##### *Paired discussion*

Think of a time someone wanted you to change in some way.

Which factors influenced what you did (or didn't) do?

##### ***Being 'in trouble'***

In a small group discuss times you or close friends were 'in trouble' in school. What happened and what did you think/feel about the outcomes?

##### ***Teaching and learning behaviour***

With a partner go through the list of behaviours wanted in school and choose three for students you are teaching. Write five to ten things you might do to help a student learn these.

### **Circle Solutions activities with students**



These activities will help students learn about change and help you learn about them.

All Circles begin with a statement of the principles:

- When one person is speaking everyone else listens.
- You may pass if you do not want to say anything.
- There are no put-downs.

You may like to add 'What is said in the Circle, stays in the Circle', and also remind students they should only talk about what they are comfortable to share.

#### ***Silent statements***

Stand up and change places if...

- You know someone who has had some tough things to deal with.

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### **Pair share**

Students talk to each other about what has helped them get through some tough times. They find two things they have in common and feed this back to the Circle:

- We have found it helps when ...

### **Changes**

Put the following words on cards:

- Past history
- Eye colour
- Hair colour
- Personal qualities
- Family
- Health and wellbeing
- Physical development
- Likes and dislikes
- Learning
- Outlook on life
- The future
- The weather
- Confidence
- Friendships.

In the Circle give one of these words to pairs of students. Ask pairs in turns to place their card in one of two piles – what can change and what cannot. Give them time to think and talk about this. The pair say why they have placed the card in their chosen pile. Invite other students to comment.

Now ask students to place cards into three piles. In one are things that are up to them to change, in another are things that are a mix of themselves and others (and sometimes chance) and in the third are things that they cannot influence.

Ask students to think of one thing they value about themselves and one thing they would like to change. They write these on a piece of paper, screw this up and then everyone throws their paper across the room. After three throws the teacher asks students to pick up a paper near them and each gets read out anonymously to the Circle. Comment on similarities between students.

## RESOURCES

Bill Rogers' *Behaviour recovery* (2004, London: Sage) is an excellent resource for teaching expected behaviours to students who are really struggling and looking at what is involved in developing an individual plan with them.

Find out more about the Glasser Quality School model at [www.wglasser.com/](http://www.wglasser.com/)

Read the first four chapters of Tom Billington's book *Separating, losing and excluding children: Narratives of difference* (2000, London: Routledge) for a clear exposition of the power of discourse.

John Burningham (2007, London: Red Fox) has written a children's book called *Edwardo: the horriblest boy in the whole wide world*: it illustrates very simply that the more we tell children they are lazy, untidy, cruel, noisy and rude the more they will be these things. The more we tell them they are kind, helpful, strong, polite and gentle and give them opportunities to be so, the more they are likely to develop these qualities instead.

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