



Not What a Child Does, But Why They Do It

Behaviours have a purpose and serve a need. When a child has unwanted behaviours we need to prioritise: changing long-held coping strategies and unwanted habits is hard, takes time, and requires helpful and supportive relationships. Children will probably not change their behaviours just because we want them to. They need opportunity to develop new, more adaptive skills, and to model acceptable behaviour.

It is important to remember that a child does not need to perform a behaviour to model it. It is enough that behaviour is observed for the child to incorporate it into their repertoire. From experience, the “modelling ratio” for children who have been abused and neglected can be as much as probably 1000:1, that is, a very defended child may need to see a new behaviour consistently (perhaps up to 1000 times) in order to incorporate the new behaviour into their repertoire, but only needs to see an existing behaviour once in order to have it confirmed that this is a satisfactory way of acting. Suddenly, being a “good role model” doesn’t seem so easy; how many little bits of negative social behaviour do we bring to our own interactions, with kids, with colleagues, with parents, with strangers? It is also worth remembering that modelling is a more powerful influence than conditioning; that is, a child learns more about how to behave from how they experience significant others around them behaving toward them, or see them acting toward others (children and adults) than attempts to change behaviour through rewards or sanctions (conditioning).

It is important to recognize that behaviours (good and bad) happen in a context, and that the context in which a person acts is at least as important in deciding their behaviour as their personal characteristics and learnt behaviours. Hardly seems possible does it, but true none the less. Therefore, in considering how to help a child develop alternatives to unwanted behaviour, we must take account of the context in which the behaviour occurs.

The first step towards change is to create a hierarchy of behaviours to focus on – it cannot be possible to change all behaviours at once. The maximum number is three, and if these behaviours are coping strategies, they will need to be replaced with more adaptive ways of coping that work for the child.

In order to encourage change you need reliable data; what does the child do, where do they do it, what else is going on, etc. A data grid is useful. For each target behaviour observe:

- Date
- Time
- Duration
- Antecedents – what was going on before?
- Accurate description of behaviour
- Describe what happened as a result of the behaviour

- List all the people this was a problem for
- Explain for each why it was a problem
- What is the child's perception of what happened - you may need to get this information later
- Were they able to identify a goal they had in mind when they behaved like this?
- What function (purpose) do you think the behaviour served?

These data need to be analysed in order to plan effective interventions. We should always ask more about why a child does something than about what they do.