



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet

A close-up photograph of a young child and a woman smiling together. The child is on the left, wearing a grey shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a purple top. They are both looking towards the camera with joyful expressions.

A parent's guide to
promoting positive behaviour

Parent Guidance

Parents' Guide to Promoting Positive Behaviour

Being a parent is a wonderful experience with many magical moments that create memories to treasure for a lifetime. Sometimes there are bumps in the road which can be caused by a young child's challenging behaviour. All parents will have differing experiences of challenging behaviour with their children. Some children may exhibit more challenging behaviour than others but as parents, you may feel like your child is the only one who is behaving in this way. This is not the case.

This factsheet has been developed to offer some tips to promote and support positive behaviour, identify some of the typical behaviours that your child may display and suggest ways in which you can work with your child's nursery to help combat them. Working with the nursery to implement strategies will ensure consistency to enable you and your child to have a more settled time at home and nursery.

Promoting positive behaviour

Relationships are built on meeting the emotional needs that we all have: attention, acceptance, approval, comfort, security, encouragement, support, respect and affection. When our needs are met, we feel happy and secure. When they are not met, we can feel anxious, insecure and unhappy. Young children can often display unwanted behaviour because they are tired or hungry or want something that someone else has. Unwanted behaviour may also be seen when they feel they cannot communicate what they want, or that the adult doesn't understand what they want. It is worth noting that adults can also sometimes react adversely in these situations and may display signs of frustration and need time and space to calm down and regain perspective.

Young children's understanding of abstract concepts such as 'later', keeping safe or possessions belonging to someone else are still early in the development stage. Your child might hear what you are saying but may not yet have the knowledge or language skills to fully understand what you are saying, what this means or be able to negotiate with you. This can sometimes result in tears and/or anger. It is unlikely that your child has planned this. It is more a response to pent-up frustration.

Reflection

Think about a time when you were starting a new job or going through a stressful time. How did this make you feel?

Usually, as adults, we can talk about how we feel and gain support from family and friends. Young children usually display their frustration through their behaviour as this can be the only way they know. **Children use behaviour as communication.**

Providing a positive, safe environment and meeting primary needs will support positive behaviour traits.

Children are individuals who develop at their own pace. Some children will pass through developmental stages with ease, whereas some children may need a little more support. As children go through a range of new and different experiences, they begin to explore and test out boundaries. Young children may go through shorter periods of challenging behaviour where some behaviours continue which may be due to other undiagnosed needs where further support is required.

Supporting positive behaviour is about encouraging children to understand their behaviours and the impact they may have on themselves and those around them. This encourages you to focus on the positive areas and praise these rather than always focusing on the negative elements. There will be times when you will have to use strategies to stop negative behaviour but preventing this behaviour in the first place through praising, rewarding and giving attention for good instead of inappropriate behaviour, can encourage this rather than children 'playing up' to gain attention. Prevention is better than the cure when it comes to managing behaviour.

Top tips to encourage positive behaviour:

- **Be consistent** – Try to adopt a consistent approach to behaviour so children can quickly develop their understanding of what is expected. Share expectations with other family members such as grandparents, so children don't become confused as to what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable, e.g. if you expect your child to sit down to drink their milk, then ensure those around them do the same
- **Provide positive role models** - Children learn from those around them. It is important for them to have positive role models who follow the rules and boundaries themselves and model appropriate behaviours, such as paying attention, listening when someone else is speaking, taking turns, saying please and thank you and using positive body language
- **Have clear and realistic expectations** - Rules or boundaries that are achievable and fair are an important part of daily life. These may include walking inside, looking after toys and keeping their hands to themselves. As children get older try to involve them in developing the rules too.
- **Positive reinforcement** - Positive feedback is the best and most effective way to promote positive behaviour and minimise unwanted behaviour. This encourages children's self-confidence and self-esteem. Children need to know when they are getting it right through your positive and warm body language, tone of voice, physical touch, praise and compliments, encouragement, attention, treats, rewards and privileges.

Top tip: “Remember that the most powerful reward of all is a smile and kind word.”
(Cowley 2011)

Pre-planning: Children often misbehave when their routine is altered and they feel insecure, even if the routine is being altered because of something exciting or novel. Try to prepare your child wherever possible about any changes, so for example, if you need to change your plans on a Saturday because of a late party invitation, explain this to your child and tell them about the different kind of fun they will have at the party.

Distraction: Many young children can be diverted from inappropriate behaviour by giving them focused attention or simply turning their attention to something else. This can often be successful when diverting them to something that they are particularly interested in or a particular favourite toy or resource. For example, if your child is becoming agitated in the supermarket because they want a chocolate bar, try distracting them by giving them responsibility for finding a specific item on your shopping list that they would be interested in e.g. fruit juice or cereal. Make it exciting like a treasure hunt. This can distract them away from the cause of their unwanted behaviour.

Choices: Offering choices can take conflict out of the situation. If you would like your child to sit down at the dinner table (and they are refusing) offer them a choice e.g. “You can sit down on that chair or on the big chair next to me. Which would you like to choose?”

Problem-solving: You can begin to support your child in developing the necessary skills they need for later life. As your child rushes over to you and tells you what their problem is, do not rush in to give them a solution. Repeat back what they have told you, acknowledge how they feel about the situation and then ask them, “How are we going to solve this?” This will encourage them to begin to solve problems for themselves, rather than always running to an adult for support. For example, if your child runs over to you and tells you they want the toy their friend or sibling has, encourage them to think about how they can share this or come to a compromise.

Structures and routines: Young children find routines safe and reassuring and are more likely to behave appropriately within structures they feel comfortable with. These need to be flexible and appropriate to the age of the child, for example not expecting your child to sit at the table for too long, as this can sometimes result in them displaying unwanted behaviour when they may just be bored or frustrated.

An excellent summary can be found on the Parenting Pyramid ([link below](#)).

Typical behaviours in young children

There can be a range of underlying reasons for why a child is behaving in a certain way and unfortunately there is no single answer to ‘fixing’ any of these. There is a spectrum of behaviours: some may be due to changes in the child’s life, for example, a new sibling, loss of a family member

or pet or your child may have needs that have not been identified yet e.g. underlying educational or physical needs or disability, such as a hearing impairment.

Schemas are repeated patterns of behaviour that young children display in their play. Often these can appear to be negative behaviour by adults but they are just part of your child's development. Examples that you may have observed in your child might include:

- Your child repeatedly dropping items from their high chair. This is known as a trajectory schema
- Repeatedly filling and emptying boxes, bins and bags. This may result in you losing important items in your home such as car keys or the television remote. This is known as an enveloping and containing schema.

Some of the most common reasons for challenging behaviour may be your child trying to tell you something but not being able to use the correct words yet, or maybe unable to communicate at all. This can lead to challenging behaviour due to frustration, fear, hyperactivity, discomfort, a lack of understanding by the child or adult, or a lack of attention your child needs at that moment in time.

Sharing

The development stage for 'learning to share' can be a complex one and takes time. Some children will understand this concept earlier than others and this can cause additional conflict. Having positive role models that support and encourage sharing is important as well as supporting children to take turns in play and conversation.

During the earlier stages, your child may have a favourite toy that they do not want to share. Role modelling and encouraging them to share and praising others who are sharing are positive ways to encourage this. It will not happen overnight and sometimes, if this toy is also a comforter for your child, it may not be appropriate for the child to share this particular toy but instead share another.

As children get older, they begin to understand what sharing is. Sand timers or timers on your phone are useful to support them in understanding when it is their turn or when they need to give someone else a turn. This can help with arguments between your children about sharing toys, games or books.

Biting

Biting other children and adults can be quite common in young children as many children pass through this stage as part of their development. This can occur out of frustration because they want or think they need something that another child has, or because they are teething.

Biting incidents can be a difficult time for parents. Your child may bite a sibling, a friend's child or other children at nursery or your child may also be bitten by another child. Often there is no known

cause as to why the child is biting and in some cases, particular children will continue to bite for an extended period of time.

If your child bites, it is important to redirect the attention to the child who has been bitten first and give them comfort and support so that the biter can see that they do not receive the attention for biting. You should then speak to your child who has bitten afterwards (in terms that they understand) that you cannot let them hurt their friend or sibling and it makes the child who has been bitten and you really sad.

If your child is bitten while at nursery this can be upsetting, as no one wants to hear that their child has been injured, especially by another child and sometimes the bite marks can be quite deep. Nurseries will have behaviour policies that should include biting incidents so you can ask to see them and ask what the nursery are doing to support both children and to minimise this happening again.

If your child is the one who is biting other children at nursery, the nursery team should invite you to talk about how you can work together to minimise it happening. They shouldn't make you feel that it is yours or your child's fault. Identifying triggers e.g. when your child is tired or hungry, is helpful to gain an understanding of when and why they may bite. Strategies to support your child could include having biting rings, picture routines (photographs showing the sequence of events in your day), relaxing and sensory time, reiterating the importance of positive role models, encouraging all children to be kind to one another and praising positive behaviour.

Bullying

Young children may display inappropriate behaviour but usually, with the right support and strategies, these do not lead to anything more serious. The word bully and bullying is usually a bigger concern during primary and secondary school.

There are many definitions of bullying but most have three things in common.

These are:

- Deliberately hurting behaviour
- Repeated over time
- An imbalance of power, which makes it hard for those who are being bullied to defend themselves.

Behaviours of young children are very unlikely to include children deliberately hurting others time and time again. They are usually due to young children testing out boundaries or exhibiting their frustrations.

Inappropriate language

Children develop their vocabulary through experiences. If children hear inappropriate language more than once then they may repeat it. Children could hear this from familiar adults, other children, others in their local surroundings or even accidentally through overhearing conversations on TV when an adult is watching something that they think the child is paying no attention to.

If the inappropriate language incident is a one-off you may choose to ignore it and instead reinforce what has been said with an alternative word.

Lindon (2011) suggests, for example, replacing “What a ***** big beetle” with “That is one enormous beetle” or “Hey! Olivia’s found a giant beetle!”

Where the inappropriate language becomes a repeated behaviour you need to acknowledge the words rather than ignore them, as this is unlikely to be effective. Children need to know that the words are not kind or that those words are not used at home and give an alternative example.

Children need positive role models. If you accidentally stub your toe, you may be tempted to use inappropriate language. You need to be aware of how you respond to these situations and use alternatives because, as we know, children will copy. If you do use inappropriate language, then you do need to explain to your children, if they copy you, that this is not the right word to use and that you were wrong when you said this. Positive role modelling does not stop at the behaviours and language you use as it also includes admitting when you are in the wrong and correcting your own behaviour if you need to.

Working in partnership with your child’s nursery

All Nurseries in England, Wales and Scotland have a duty to follow the statutory guidance and the framework from their regulatory body, for managing your child’s behaviour at nursery. There are links to all the statutory frameworks specific to your nation for further reference in the links below.

Additional needs

Children who have additional needs may have greater frustrations, especially if they do not have the words or signs to express themselves. This can sometimes result in tantrums, screaming, hurting others, breaking things, feeding problems and lack of sleep.

If you are worried about your child’s behaviour, you should seek further support. You should try to record any incidents so you have a log of how often these occur and any potential triggers. These can then be shared with other professionals who may be involved in the referral process.

If your child attends nursery, it is important that you work together and share information with the nursery, especially your child’s key person. The nursery will carry out observations that will also

identify any triggers or times of the day that your child finds particularly difficult. Supporting children's behaviour is easier when everyone works together and implements the same strategies, ensuring there is a consistent approach.

Further information, support and resources

- England: The Early Years Foundation Stage: <https://bit.ly/2XwGfYc>
- Scotland: Realising the Ambition: <https://bit.ly/3AdT0EG>
- Wales: Foundation Phase Framework: <https://bit.ly/3mrA40l>
- NHS guidance: <https://bit.ly/3a4E3ua>
- Child Mind Institute: Managing problem behaviour at home: <https://bit.ly/3Osc1M8>
- Parenting Pyramid: <https://bit.ly/3Db5ezS>

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Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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