

Understanding Behaviour (Early Years)



Behaviour is everything people do. It encompasses all the actions that are made every day, from talking to running, to eating and sleeping. It even includes reading this text.

What defines behaviour?

When thinking about behaviour, people can often confuse it with *thoughts* and *feelings*, especially if a person is reflecting on their own behaviour. To help with this, it can be useful to define behaviour as the '**observables**' or what a person can see. In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, this could include a child asking for a hug, packing away toys, or digging in the sandpit.

Children of all ages display a range of skills, strengths and characteristics. How these skills and characteristics are interpreted can often be dependent on what educators and other adults believe about a child's behaviour and how they should be supported or guided. Therefore, it is important that childrens' behaviour is understood in the context of one's own expectations. It is important that educators stay mindful of the language used when describing behaviour.

Educators are encouraged to shift from using value-based judgements, such as "*negative*", "*bad*" or "*challenging*", and shift towards a more neutral and objective description such as "*safe*" or "*unsafe*". This also provides a clear way to describe the concern across contexts.

Children are continuously learning how to regulate their emotions and adapt to the behavioural expectations of the environment around them. This means they may not yet understand the meaning of their expressions or the impact of their actions. This can lead to children expressing their emotions, or communicating their needs, through unsafe behaviours. In that moment, that behaviour may be the most effective way, or only way, to get their needs met.

Unsafe behaviours can include kicking or hitting others, consistent withdrawal from staff and peers, or prolonged crying, yelling, or screaming. Whilst this is a normal part of children's growth and development, unsafe behaviours in an ECEC setting are important to consider, as they can impact staff, peers, and of course, the child's own wellbeing.

Positive behaviour guidance (PBG)

This is where the implementation of PBG strategies in ECEC settings can be beneficial. PBG encourages children to express their emotions and needs in safe ways, allowing them to feel connected, accepted, and respected whilst they continue to develop their skills and knowledge. This might look like a child asking for a regulation break, using fidget toys on the mat to stay engaged, or going outside for physical movement.

What influences and drives behaviour?

There are many factors that can influence, motivate, and drive children's behaviour. For children within ECEC settings, some of these factors can be supported by educators, while some of these factors will be external, and outside of the control of educators and teachers. All humans have a range of needs, including the need for predictability, safe and secure relationships, and autonomy. An individual's behaviour will communicate if their needs are being met or not.

Children, just like adults, are motivated to have their needs met, and if left with unmet needs, the impacts are soon felt. If a child's need for safe and secure relationships is not met, they may experience loneliness and social isolation. If their need for skillset match is left unmet, they may begin to experience low self-esteem and develop self-beliefs of 'I'm not good enough'. Therefore, it is only natural for children to communicate through their behaviour if their needs are not met. If using unsafe behaviours, it is important for educators to recognise that this is the child's attempt to have their needs met and is not personal or targeted in nature.

Educators are encouraged to become curious about a potential unmet need in order to proactively plan adjustments and implement strategies to support these needs. This then enables educators to positively guide the child's behaviour.



There are many adverse childhood experiences that may contribute to a child's unsafe behaviour. These can include stressful and traumatic events, caused by exposure to abuse, neglect and household adversities. While educators will not have control over a child's life experiences, within ECEC educators can be mindful of these experiences when guiding children's behaviour.

No matter what factors are at play, it is important for educators to approach children's behaviour with **curiosity, empathy, and acceptance**, so that children feel supported in learning how to express their needs in safe ways.

References

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