

AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING



A Case Study

BEN KINGSTON-HUGHES

East Midlands Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

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Ben Kingston-Hughes is an international keynote speaker, author and multi award-winning trainer. He is also the Managing Director of Inspired Children and has worked with vulnerable children across the UK for over 34 years. He has appeared on television several times working on a variety of children's projects and his distinctive blend of humour, neuroscience and real-life practical experiences have made his training invaluable for anyone working with children.



OVERVIEW

This case study refers to a child who exhibited extremely negative behaviour and describes behaviour patterns that are some of the most challenging to address because they originate from adverse childhood experiences and a deep-rooted feeling of worthlessness in the child. Throughout I have referred to the child as Ahmed as I believe referring to "child x" feels clinical and can lead to dehumanising of the child in question. I have however changed the name to protect the vulnerable child.

BACKGROUND

I worked with Ahmed both in a nursery setting and then at the after school club which he started in reception class. Ahmed had been abandoned by his birth parents and was eventually legally adopted by his grandparents after several different foster carers throughout his early years. His Grandparents were extremely strict and used corporal punishment to maintain his behaviour.

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AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

BEHAVIOUR

Ahmed was extremely hard to engage in activities but from an early age would disrupt any other activity taking place. If another child in the nursery was building with construction toys Ahmed would knock it down. If a child was painting, Ahmed would splash paint on the paper and laugh if the other child cried. If a practitioner attempted to read a story he would shout loudly to disrupt the story. His only interest seemed to be disruption and destruction. This became markedly worse when he started school. He was constantly excluded from school and his behaviour steadily deteriorated. His presence at the after-school club was met with dread from other members of staff and even particularly caring members of staff found him difficult to engage with and almost impossible to like. One of his favourite things to do was to run onto the football pitch where older children were playing and steal the ball before throwing it over the fence then running away laughing.

The only way after-school staff could moderate his behaviour was to threaten to tell his grandparents at which point he would sit in an out of the way part of the project and silently hit himself. Staff at the setting saw this as a respite from his disruptive behaviour and initially did nothing to support him in these moments. Finally, it was recognised that Ahmed was at risk of exclusion from the project and something needed to be done.



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

ROOT CAUSES

I believe the reason for his behaviour was quite simple and something I have since encountered in other children. Ahmed felt so utterly worthless that he could only feel empowered by preventing others from succeeding. His adverse childhood experiences during early years had been further compounded by his experiences at school where he continuously struggled academically and his relationship with his grandparents only served to exacerbate his behaviour. These feelings of worthlessness were made worse by the fact that due to his behaviour not one single adult ever showed him more than cursory kindness and most adults treated him with contempt or even fear.

His behaviour in this context actually makes a lot of sense. One thing we know about children's behaviour is that "children do what works". Every single behaviour pattern in children, whether positive or negative "works" to address a need or a disempowerment. Ahmed had the concrete belief that he was without value. This is an untenable position for a child to find themselves in so he therefore needed to do something that worked to address this. Ahmed believed he could not play football well, so he empowered himself by stopping other children playing. He believed he could not draw or do artwork so he would rip up other children's work. His behaviour was giving him a palpable sense of empowerment when the rest of his life experiences only served to disempower him. In short, his behaviour "worked" and when a behaviour works effectively, no matter how negative, the child repeats the behaviour. He was therefore trapped in a loop of failure, humiliation and worthlessness which almost guaranteed that the only behaviour that worked to address this continued. No amount of challenging or punishing this behaviour can ever address the behaviour because all that sanctions do is further embed the child's feelings of worthlessness.

AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUITABLE STRATEGIES

So, what can we do if a child exhibits this behaviour? Unfortunately, there are no instant miracle cures for such a deeply rooted problem. However, the answer is actually quite simple. I don't have the word count to explain in detail how we work with children's behaviour, but two very simple concepts are important. Firstly, we need to see through the behaviour to the child underneath and recognise that we should not define a child by their behaviour but look to the root causes of the behaviour. Secondly, we need to ask a very simple question of the child. "What do you need?" This can be an actual question directed at the child but in many cases the child will not be able to articulate their answer. Sometimes it is up to us to ascertain what that child needs through careful observation of their behaviour, triggers and background. In short we often need to ask ourselves "What does this child need?"



For Ahmed what he needed was to feel important and valued. Therefore our first method was to go on a praise offensive. We made sure that he was welcomed when he arrived and tried our best to praise him to make him feel valued. This had only limited success, mainly due to the fact that vulnerable children often do not believe praise. If a child feels utterly worthless then praise is much less effective as they instinctively disbelieve the person giving praise unless they have particularly strong bond with said person.

AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUITABLE STRATEGIES

At the time this seemed a key issue. Ahmed did not fully trust any adult in his life and so these all important bonds were absent. It was vitally important that Ahmed learn to trust us and that he not feel judged when engaging in an activity. Until we formed those bonds he simply would not believe us when we praised him.

One thing I thought might help was to try to engage Ahmed in a series of process focused activities where the experience was more important than any perceived outcome. By this I mean I made sure there were activities he could take part in where there were no winners or losers, no perceived end product or goal and where he could take part without fear of failure.

A particularly successful activity at engaging Ahmed was using scooter boards and cardboard boxes. We built a large wall out of cardboard boxes and then we pushed children on scooter boards into the wall collapsing it. Ahmed actually joined in and seemed to really enjoy being pushed into the wall. Clearly in this activity there is no prerequisite skill level, no aspect of competition and no failure threshold. Anyone can be pushed into a wall of boxes and so there was no opportunity within this to feel in any way less able than another child[1]. Perhaps even better for Ahmed was that fact that it is difficult to “destroy” an activity where the whole purpose was destruction in the first place.



[1] By the same token many of our disabled children's groups love this activity!

AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

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PROCESS FOCUSED ACTIVITIES – REMOVING FAILURE THRESHOLDS

Ahmed seemed fully engaged and we were already pleased with the outcome of the activity as we had no behaviour issues whatsoever whilst Ahmed was taking part. He even waited for his turn with patience and did not seem to resent other children joining in. However, the biggest outcome came when we reversed the activity allowing children to push the adult staff into the wall of boxes. Ahmed absolutely loved this and must have pushed me into the wall over 30 times before the end of the session. He left the session grinning, and we felt a real sense of achievement.

Over the next few weeks we included lots of activities like this where the ultimate aim was silliness and fun rather than a learning outcome. Some were more successful than others but overall we saw a much higher level of engagement from Ahmed and a small but definite improvement in his behaviour. We also observed him being less defensive with members of staff.



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

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SLOW PROGRESS

There were several occurrences which showed how much progress Ahmed was making even though at the time it was still extremely challenging. One such was after a particularly silly activity where we were trying to kick a baseball cap off of a shop mannequin's head without hitting the mannequin (don't ask!).



We were all having a much-needed drink after the exertion when I noticed that Ahmed had sat right next to me for the first time. As we drank our water, he started to tell me about his day in school and how he had lost his break time and lunch because of his behaviour. This seemingly innocent conversation was an absolute first for Ahmed. No child will ever volunteer information about themselves or their day unless they feel safe with an adult and for Ahmed to sit next to an adult and actually chat, especially about a subject that was clearly upsetting for him, was utterly unique. For me it was one of those very special days which reminds you why you do the job in the first place but for Ahmed it was a turning point.



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUPERHERO PLAY

The biggest turning point for Ahmed though was when we decided during the summer Playscheme to do a whole week of Superhero themed activities. Everything we did was process focused and it was one of those beautifully sunny weeks where anything and everything are possible. Every single child made a superhero costume and it did not matter that we had very few resources as many of the children made their costumes out of black bin liners. Ahmed initially laughed at me in my costume but eventually he let me help him make his own costume and mask. I made him a black mask with pointy ears very similar to a certain copyright hero who I will leave to your imagination. He also wore a black bin liner with a “nocturnal flying mammal” emblazoned across the front in bright yellow and he had a long black cape to finish the ensemble. With the black costume, black cape and mask you can probably guess what superhero name he chose? Yes, “Captain Amazing” – go figure?



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUPERHERO PLAY

The thing is that whilst Ahmed often had a desire to destroy and spoil other children's fun as a concrete method to empower himself and assuage his feelings of worthlessness, it turned out that Captain Amazing had no such urges. All Captain Amazing wanted to do was help other people. Ahmed spent a week being the most supportive and helpful member of the whole group. It got to the point where we had to invent jobs for him to do just so Captain Amazing could leap into action. His behaviour whilst being a super hero was utterly transformed. Whilst Ahmed often felt worthless, when he was Captain Amazing he had an additional level of confidence which, despite being imaginary, still had a palpable effect on his self-worth and ultimately his behaviour. Interestingly I have also witnessed this effect when I do super hero play on adult training courses. Many adults subconsciously stand taller and their body language appears somehow more "mighty" when they have their costumes on.



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON-HUGHES

HIS VERY OWN COMIC

One of the best things about superhero week was that we took so many photos of the children that we decided to make a comic. With very limited IT skills we put speech bubbles on the photos, created a narrative and added special effects like laser beams from eyes etc. We tried to feature at least one frame with each child being heroic and some of the staff team kindly agreed to be supervillains for the comic dressing up in outlandish costumes and cackling a lot (clearly enjoying their villainy far too much!) The finished comic was not technically very professional but to the children it was nothing short of awesome. We printed out the short comic and they each got a copy to take home. It cost us the ink for the printer, a few hundred sheets of A4 and a few hours extra work, but to the children it was priceless.

Ahmed was so excited by his comic that he would bring it in every day until it became so dog-eared we had to print out another one for him.



AHMED

AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUMMARY

Was this a complete cure for his negative behaviour? Of course not. Ahmed sometimes had bad days when he would slip into the destructive behaviours that were his coping mechanisms. After all, many of the factors that made him feel worthless were still present in his life. However, now he was surrounded by people who did not always judge him, who supported him and soothed him when his behaviour deteriorated. Basically people who had his back when things got tough. He joined in more and more of the activities we offered and even the less process focused experiences such as woodwork[1].

His behaviour, attitude and mood improved markedly and Ahmed soon became a valued member of the group. He now knew that even on his worse days he had a safe place he could go to when the rest of the world felt anything but. A place where he could feel like a superhero.

[1] Not proper woodwork - hammering and nailing things together to make stuff



AHMED VS CAPTAIN AMAZING

BEN KINGSTON - HUGHES

SUMMARY

So, in terms of behaviour, Ahmed exhibited an understandable coping mechanism to deal with his constant feelings of failure and humiliation. The behaviour was so effective at empowering him that he became stuck in a negative loop which was only making his situation worse. The only way to support Ahmed was to see through his behaviour to the vulnerable child and ask the simple question, what do you need? It turned out that what Ahmed needed was to feel important and valued and by working hard despite many set-backs his behaviour was radically improved by a group of caring adults. None of this would have been even remotely possible using traditional behaviourist approaches to behaviour only by asking the simple question – “What do you need?”

Ahmed is now a successful carpenter with two children of his own. He is currently on the management committee for the project that meant so much for him. I spoke to him recently – he still has his comic just as I still have a copy of my own. After all it is not just children who need to feel like superheroes.

The Department for Education Early years Child Development Training offers free training modules for practitioners on brain development and how children learn.

<https://child-development-training.education.gov.uk/>



Department
for Education

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support self regulation and executive function and understanding child development.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/evidence-for-the-early-years/early-years-evidence-store>



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