

HAVE YOU THOUGHT? – AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS



WRITTEN BY LISA WALTER

- AREA QUALITY PRACTICE
MANAGER AT THE BARN NURSERY
SCHOOL
- REACHOUT EARLY YEARS SPH
RESEARCH & PRACTICE LEAD

Lisa Walter is a member of the REACHout East of England Early Years Stronger Practice Hub, an expert on the Department for Education (DfE) Early Years COVID-19 Recovery: Expert and Mentors programme, alongside her role as Quality Practice Manager for The Barn Nursery School.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

As children become more independent (eg wanting to do everything themselves, control their choices of clothes etc) and begin to find their sense of self, parenting can sometimes become more challenging, and this is one of the most common scenarios, as Practitioners, we support parents/caregivers in dealing with.

At this stage of development children's emotional outbursts and negative behaviours may increase. For example, they may display higher levels of screaming, defiance, anger, and in some cases biting and hitting when their choices are challenged. Rest assured, these outbursts are a normal biological response to frustration and completely developmentally appropriate. What makes the difference is how we as adults support this.

A BIT ABOUT THE SCIENCE

Situated just behind the eyebrows is a part of the brain called the pre frontal cortex that is responsible for regulating emotion and controls social behaviours, and this isn't fully developed until around the age of 25, leading to these behavioural changes as children cannot make sense of or manage these new emotions.

SO HOW CAN WE SUPPORT?

It is always important to establish the reason behind the behaviour. With the fully functioning, highly alert reptilian part of the brain fuelling the emotions, no amount of reasoning, disciplining or penalising will solve this emotional outburst. Instead the child needs to be allowed time for the brain to reach establish a state of equilibrium. Also at this time it is important to think about how the comfort is offered as it may reinforce the behaviour.

INSTEAD: IN TIMES OF HEIGHTENED EMOTION

- Start by dealing with the emotion. Breathing calmly with the child may help calm the reactive brain.
- Always acknowledge and empathise with the emotion. Dismissing it (eg 'you are ok') is saying that the child's feelings and emotions aren't valid. This may mean stating the obvious 'I understand that you feel upset having to share the ball.'
- Allow the child time and safe space to fully experience the emotion. Don't be reactive. Instead, explain what emotions and behaviours are acceptable and what aren't, reinforcing the safety aspect of more challenging behaviours.
- Ensure the child knows you are there for them as they deal with the emotion and after.

IN TIMES OF CONTROLLING EMOTION

- Offer a choice of 2 (2 sets of clothes, 2 different cereals). By doing this you are still allowing autonomy but are ultimately still in control.
- Give specific instructions of first and then, eg 'first put your car in the box, then you can have an ice cream'.

No method of supporting these behaviours should include physical force or anger and always follow up with positive reinforcements, a hug or praise.