

# HEADTEACHER

## UPDATE

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## Trauma and insecure attachment behaviour

Some common approaches to behaviour management in schools risk triggering children's insecure attachment. In this Best Practice Focus, *Shahana Knight* looks at what to do and what not to do – offering us a number of trauma-informed strategies to help vulnerable children to successfully manage their emotions



# The dos and don'ts of attachment behaviours

**A**ttachment theory was first described by the psychologist John Bowlby in 1969. The theory describes the way in which the child forms their relationship to keep the attention of their care-giver. Securely attached children have care-givers who recognise their needs, are attentive and attuned. The child can explore all aspects of their feelings and display emotional needs without feeling rejected by their care-giver. A child who is securely attached will come to learn that they are worthy, loved and can be their true self.

That isn't to say that the parent is perfect or gets it right every time, but the child feels loved and safe in their care and this is vital for their emotional development and their future relationships.

When a child is insecurely attached, their experience is very different. Sometimes their care-giver is neglectful or unattuned to their needs. They might be chaotic and inconsistent.

Sometimes the care-giver is scary and volatile or unpredictable.

The child has to try very hard to stay safe and stay connected with their care-giver and, often, even if their attention is won, it isn't for very long.

Virtual school headteacher Darren Martindale put it well when writing in *Headteacher Update* in 2019: "Such children can come to view themselves as worthless or undeserving, and adults as threatening or untrustworthy. The world can seem like a treacherous place. So, when they're challenged, they may revert back to that earliest stage, where they felt that their very survival was threatened – because their emotional needs weren't being met. As a result, they dysregulate (or lash out or 'kick off') just to protect themselves." (Martindale, 2019)

Children who have developed insecure attachments struggle to form healthy relationships; they don't know what one is because they haven't experienced one. They also struggle with self-belief,

self-acceptance and self-love. How can you love yourself if nobody ever told you that you were worthy?

Often these children are rejected for having an emotional need. That might be simply feeling cold, needing food or wanting a hug because they feel scared. Often, it is the parent who is the one who is doing the scaring.

## A common challenge

In a class of 30, many children will have developed insecure attachment to varying degrees. You might notice that Jack rips up his work before you can see it, or Jasmine wants to control everyone around her. You might wonder why Joseph sabotages good things or why Sarah pushes you away when you get too close.

They have developed ways to keep themselves emotionally safe, many of which do not fit into the conventional classroom. Often children with insecure attachment get in trouble. Their experiences of rejection are reinforced by the

school system and popular behaviour management methods which means that being at school reminds them that they are not worthy, unlovable and "bad". The truth is that it is not the children who need to change, it is the adults.

## Therapeutic approaches

I write regularly for this magazine about the therapeutic school approach, which encourages you to look at children's emotional needs and develop a whole-school approach to supporting emotional and mental health.

The government's 2017 Green Paper – *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision* – states: "A whole-school approach, with commitment from senior leadership and supported by external expertise, is essential to the success of schools in tackling mental health."

But what does a whole-school approach look like? Well, it doesn't just mean including meditation or mindfulness in your curriculum or

  
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having a mental health lead. It means upskilling everyone within the school to understand what affects children's mental health, and then embedding what you know into your classrooms, your responses, and your policies.

This is particularly true of attachment – otherwise, you might actually be triggering children to fall back into attachment-style behaviours.

Research shows that relational frameworks are more effective, particularly with children who have difficulties related to attachment or early trauma (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

As Mr Martindale wrote in his 2019 article: "A relational framework acknowledges that all behaviour is a form of communication. So 'bad' or unacceptable behaviour is often a communication of an unmet need.

"The trick is to learn to 'read' that behaviour, to better understand what the child is trying to communicate. Does your school's behaviour or exclusions policy promote that principle?"

In this *Best Practice Focus*, I will look at what schools can do to support children with insecure attachment – and what not to do!

To begin with, I would like to discuss three common behaviour management approaches that I have seen in primary schools which I believe should not be used as they risk triggering insecure attachment responses from your pupils. I will suggest some alternatives.

I will then discuss the use of praise, consequences and boundaries, offering some practical ideas and examples.

## A tick-box approach?

Putting names on the board when children are not following the rules or are disrupting the class.

This is a behaviour management strategy that is underpinned by guilt.

This method picks out children and puts a tick by their name each time they do something wrong, such as failing to listen or distracting other pupils. Five ticks and they are sent out.

For children with insecure attachment, this is a sure-fire way to propel them into some of their coping behaviours. You see, for them, this technique does not elicit a feeling of guilt. Guilt is where we feel bad for something we did. Instead, it makes them feel shame. Shame is different to guilt, it makes them feel bad about who they are.

Putting their name on the board singles them out and says to them: "You are bad and I want everyone to know it, so your name is going to be displayed for them to see."

This causes them to feel emotionally unsafe which will remind them of times when they felt unsafe in the past, triggering a series of responses designed to help them feel safe again, or at least in control.

Have you ever noticed that the behaviour of a child who sees their name on the board suddenly deteriorates very quickly? That is very common for children with insecure attachment.

You have triggered feelings of anxiousness and shame and they are likely having intrusive thoughts: "I am not good enough. She doesn't like me. I am bad. I am

not worthy of any positive attention."

You have also pulled them into a power struggle. Remember, these children have experienced some scary things in their lives. They cannot trust adults to look after them or keep them safe, so must do that for themselves.

When you take their power away, there is an overwhelming sense for them to take it back. If they know that when you put a fifth tick next to their name then they will be sent out of the room, then they will take as much control over this as they can. They already anticipate that you will be sending them out – you have shown them that you believe they will fail just by putting their name up there. So, trying to be good will only increase their intense negative feelings; it won't calm them down or make them behave.

They will no longer be working from their rational thinking brain, they are now thinking from their survival brain. The only way they can take control is to get to tick five before you do.

So, their behaviour gets worse, they refuse to engage, they will do anything to get to tick number five – because if they have control over it then it won't hurt as much when you tell them they have failed. They expect it. The faster they get there, the faster they can relax.

## What to do instead

Think about the ethos you want to create in your school or classroom. Do you want to create a community that punishes and shames children for struggling or do you want to help and guide? Methods such as ticks on the board are outdated. Instead, think about your responses and your reactions to children. Try developing your therapeutic responses and noticing the feelings and behaviours of the children in your class as a response instead.

This means you focus more time on connecting to the children and

their needs, instead of disconnecting from them because you are unhappy.

So, instead of "Sarah, stop talking, I have told you three times – that is another tick against your name", notice how Sarah is feeling:

- "Sarah, you worry you are not good at maths, so you talk more in this lesson to distract yourself."
- "Cory, you are getting tired and struggling to concentrate, you have your head on the table."
- "Lilly, you have missed your friends so much, you are talking and struggling to listen."

These responses reflect that you are attuned to their emotional state and their needs. You can still give them a boundary or a consequence, but you should always use a therapeutic response first.

"Sarah, you worry you are not good at maths, so you talk more in this lesson to distract yourself. Let Toby listen and I will come over to you as soon as I have finished talking to help you get started."

This is more empowering for both you and the child and it will have a much better outcome.

## Rewards

Using rewards in school, such as to promote good behaviour or to celebrate a child's success

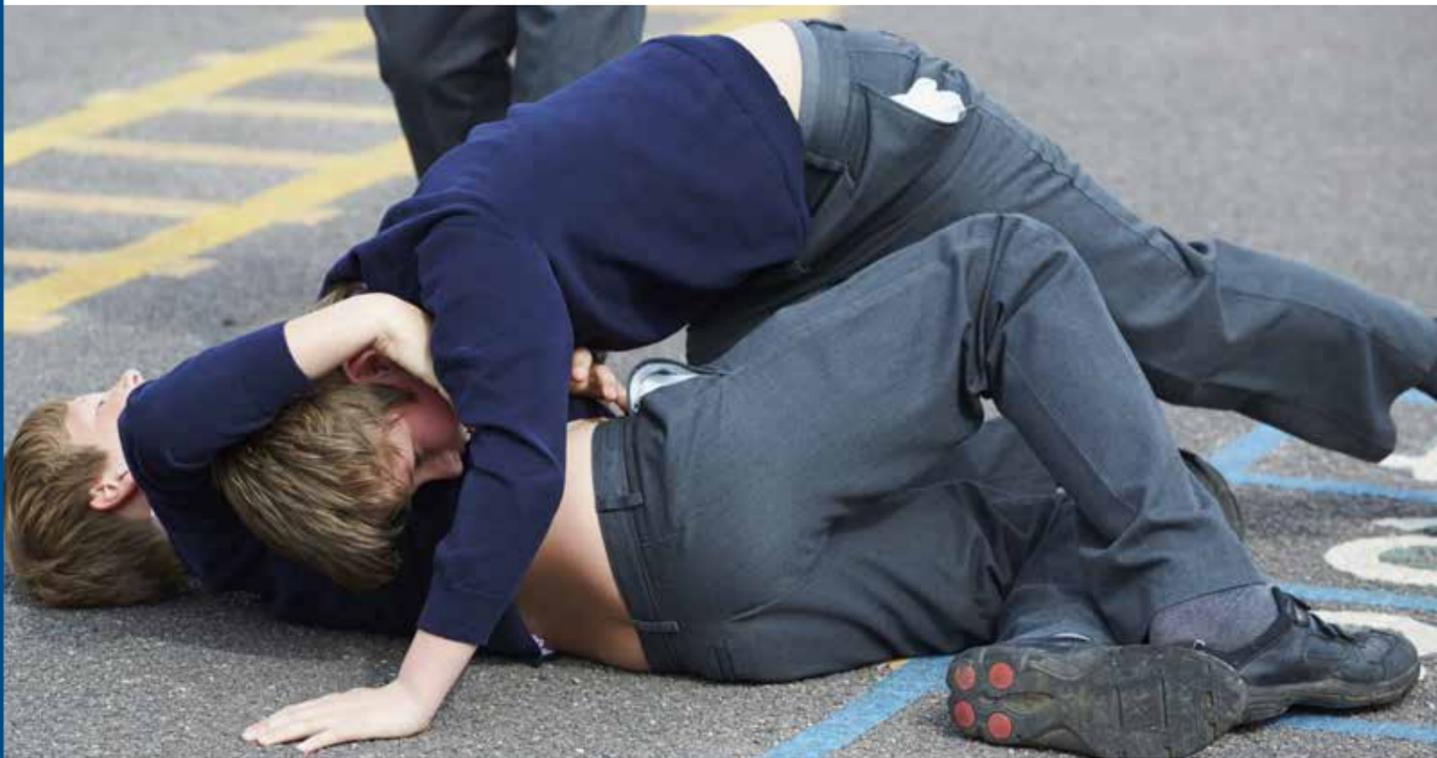
Rewards are often conditional and that can be hard for children with insecure attachment. Sometimes, rewards become a bartering tool: "If you are good, you can have golden time on Friday."

This approach doesn't work well with children with insecure attachment. They interpret this as another opportunity to fail. Especially if the reward is delayed.

Having to behave for a period of time before they can get something good can cause overwhelming feelings of anxiety. They don't believe they can get to the reward. Even before they have begun, they believe they have failed. Even if they try, they think you will likely take it away from them – so what is the point? All of this is so overwhelming that they end up self-sabotaging so that they have control.

Remember, these children may have repeatedly tried to please care-givers in the past and never won. They were always left

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vulnerable and hurt. They have learnt to protect themselves. Unfortunately, with the best of intentions, you have trapped them and they have no choice now but to ruin it for themselves.

Often schools use rewards to try to help children stay on-task. You might devise a timetable where a child does a short blast of work and then is rewarded by some free time before they are asked to do more work. For example, some schools let children go on the iPad for 10 minutes before they move on to the next lesson or have free play as a reward for completing the first task.

This method might be effective for a short time for some children because they want the reward. But as soon as they have an emotional need, they cannot sustain it, so it stops working.

This method expects children to be able to make the choice to behave well – which they can do if they are feeling calm and happy. They cannot do this when their survival brain takes over and they are struggling with their feelings.

Timetable approaches or reward charts activate a child's insecure attachment behaviour because, again, you are not focused on their emotional need and trying to help them to manage their difficult feelings. Instead you are focused on their behaviour and the

intention is to get them to do what you want.

This reinforces the insecure attachment they have experienced with others. As a result, they may interpret the reward chart as a means of control. You are trying to find a way to “make” them do what you want and this could be experienced as manipulation or trickery. They have experienced unattuned adults before and it often results in pain or hurt.

So, they respond by finding ways to stay in control or emotionally safe. They might refuse to use the free time to play or they may not seem interested in the rewards.

It is important to note that these responses are not conscious and deliberate, but instead are triggered by the brain, which recognises the emotional threat and responds in the best way to protect the child from further emotional harm.

### What to do instead

Stop using rewards as a tool to manage behaviour. Children do not choose to misbehave, it is a symptom of a feeling or internal need, therefore our response should acknowledge that. The only way to truly stop difficult behaviour, is to address the root cause.

Instead of rewards, try verbal acknowledgement when a child

has done something well. I don't mean praise (which we discuss later), but simple statements:

- “You worked hard on that.”
- “You kept going, even though you felt anxious.”
- “Sarah, you struggled with that but you didn't give up.”

Comments like this communicate that you have acknowledged their effort and noticed their feelings/actions/behaviours. This is far more valuable to a child with insecure attachment than a sticker or promise of a reward. The connection is more important.

Make sure this is simple and practical, focusing on what they did and what you noticed and avoid any promise/expectation for the future: “If you keep this up you might get the headteacher's award this week.” With statements like this, you are suddenly creating expectation and potential for future failure which will trigger attachment-style responses.

### Seconds out, round two

*Sending children out of the class or giving them a form of ‘time-out’*

This approach has been a staple of behaviour management in schools for years. When I was at school, you had to sit and face the wall if you were in trouble. Now, children are sent to other classes to sit on the

floor, sent to the headteacher, or put in “time-out”.

The thing is, when you send a child out, what you are doing is rejecting them for having an emotional need. This again, activates their insecure attachment responses and it does not have the effect you want.

Every time you push a child into survival mode, you lose an opportunity to teach them. That is why a child will exhibit the same behaviours repeatedly. You are not teaching them anything valuable about their emotions or how to manage them, nor are you helping them feel better – which is what they need in that moment. You are simply reinforcing their internal belief that they are bad and confirming to them that adults do not care and cannot keep them safe.

Imagine being a young child and feeling scared. You are in a loud room and it feels overwhelming. You grab your parent's hand, give them a hug or snuggle into their chest until you feel safe. You know you can rely on them to help you until you feel better.

What happens if that parent pushes you away? Does not recognise your need? Tells you to grow-up? Or leaves you there alone? That is what you are doing every time you send a child out. You are leaving them with intense

feelings and emotions that are overwhelming. You are rejecting them for struggling to manage their feelings. You are teaching them that their emotional state is irrelevant.

No child chooses to get so angry that they lash out. No child wants to feel so unsafe that they hide under a table. No child wants to feel so anxious that they cannot concentrate and so they get up and distract others. They need help. When you send a child out, you teach them nothing other than the fact you won't help them.

### What to do instead

Children need connection, they need to know that they can trust a safe adult to help them when they are overwhelmed or struggling. Instead of sending them away or punishing them when they are finding things hard, choose to connect instead.

Children with insecure attachment are expecting to be rejected for being “bad”, they are expecting you to disconnect as soon as they do something “wrong”. By changing your responses, you can actually change the pathways in their brain and teach them that people do care, that they are worthy of love and attention and that they are not bad. This takes time, but if it becomes a whole school approach then in the years between nursery and year 6, you can have a massive impact.

The way you respond to behaviour should be reflected in your whole-school behaviour management approach (or connection policy). However, for now, some quick tips might include:

- Always use therapeutic language first, connect to their feelings and help them feel validated: “You are angry and frustrated that nobody is listening...”
- Link their feelings to their behaviour: “...so you kicked out and hurt Ms Jackson.”
- Help them regulate: If you can see they are overwhelmed with emotion and lashing out or crying then you must respond to that behaviour. Sending them out and leaving them in an overwhelmed state teaches them nothing about managing their own emotions. You cannot expect them to calm

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down and then come back ready to learn – they need your help to do this.

### Fight, flight or freeze

At the heart of much of this is the fact that when a child feels threatened or attacked, their survival brain is activated – they will then go into fight, flight or freeze and their rational thinking brain shuts down.

They might respond with anger or fight-back, they may run away or avoid the situation, or they may shut down. As Darren Martindale wrote (2019): “In addition to the more extreme behaviour, these pupils might appear unfocused, withdrawn, controlling, manipulative, dishonest or self-destructive. It is hardly surprising that learning takes a back seat when the ‘primitive’ brain – the parts that govern our instant reactions to threat, such as fight, flight and freeze – is always in survival mode.”

The rational brain oversees reasoning, reflection, empathy and concern, it is also where we remember and recall things. If a child is in their survival brain, they cannot regulate their emotions, calm down or reflect on a situation.

They need help to calm down so that their rational, thinking brain turns back on, which will then allow them to respond with intention and learn from a situation. This is a huge piece of the puzzle that we often miss when “managing” behaviour.

So if a child is angry and upset, offer them ways to calm down. Teach them how to manage their own mental health. You might ask them to listen to some relaxing music for five minutes, sit in the “calm tent” and read, go for a walk, or play with some Lego. These are not rewards, but instead tools to help them begin to regulate their emotions.

It is no good running lessons about taking care of your mental health in PSHE if you do not then

let pupils practise these skills in real life, so build this into your behaviour management responses:

- “Elijah, you are struggling to calm down. Let's listen to some relaxing music to help you.”
- “Rebecca, you are so angry you are hurting yourself and others, you need some time to calm down. I want you to do some calming colouring for five minutes.” Then tell Rebecca “you are a lot calmer now” before issuing your consequence (see later).

These approaches do not mean that you ignore the behaviour, instead they allow the pupil to get back into rational brain mode before they are expected to then make amends.

They will be expected to follow through with a consequence or boundary in a meaningful way, but only when their brain is ready to learn from it. This will result in a child who is learning to recognise their feelings and behaviours and to manage them.

If you use this approach then, over time, you will be teaching them some very important skills.

### Using praise: A word of caution

When we praise children, we do it with the intention of making a child feel good. You might say things like “Well done, I love your colouring” or “Good girl/boy” or “Brilliant work”, but our efforts to praise can only be effective for those children who have self-belief, confidence and a positive internal working model.

Our internal working model is our inner voice, that belief system that we develop about ourselves and the world based on our experiences. For children with secure attachment, their internal working model is likely to be a fairly positive one. People have made them feel loved and worthy, they have built them up and made them feel good. They believe

people like them, they believe what people say is true, and they have a positive self-concept.

This is not the case for children with insecure attachment. These children are likely to have a very negative internal working model. Their self-talk reflects the way people have treated them, spoken to them or responded to them. It is likely to be negative and focused on not being good enough, not being worthy and not being loved. They do not trust what adults say, because they have so often been let down.

When you praise a child with insecure attachment, it can trigger a few different responses. The first, and most simple is that they will not believe you. They may also reject the praise.

You might say “good boy” and shortly after you notice their behaviour isn't very good. This is because they cannot accept your praise, they know they are bad, they have been told they are bad all their lives in different forms and so your praise makes them feel unsettled or anxious.

Many children believe that sooner or later, adults who are nice to them will stop liking them, let them down or reject them. So, they find themselves sucked into negative behaviour, almost to prove to you and to themselves that they are not good.

They may even find ways to be “rejected” by you, such as being sent out of a room or given a consequence. When you finally tell them off, they can settle emotionally because their internal belief has been met.

Praise may also trigger a power dynamic for some children. They may believe that when adults are nice to them, they want something. They don't believe that the praise is genuine or a reflection of them and what is good about them. Instead, it is a sign that you (the adult) are in a place of power.

You can pass judgement on them for being either good or bad and the praise indicates that they have succumbed to your direction and control. This triggers a survival response in many children, because if they allow you to have the power, they are vulnerable. They therefore become less cooperative and stop doing whatever it was you praised them for, some may even do the exact opposite. ➤

## Using thank you

Remember, these children are often going through some very difficult life experiences. They have had to figure out how to survive often from a young age. Praise suggests that there is a hierarchy between adults and children which is often a trigger-point for them – as far as they are concerned they don't need your praise, they don't need adults. So, tweak your praise responses and use appreciative comments instead:

- “Adam, thank you for sitting so calmly and working hard” – instead of “good sitting Adam”.
- “Sarah, that is a strong sentence, thanks for sharing” – instead of “brilliant work!”.
- “Thanks for helping Mary with her coat” – instead of “good boy”.

Saying thank you reduces this power dynamic and sends a message that you value and respect them without there being a hierarchy. It also allows children to accept the praise more easily, because it is linked to a tangible thing they have done, rather than being a blanket (patronising?) statement which doesn't fit their internal self-concept.

## Consequences and boundaries

Children with insecure attachment

need clear boundaries. They need to know what to expect and what will happen next. Remember, for many of these children, life is chaotic, they are not sure what time dinner is, whether they will be fed, when bedtime is or how adults will respond to them. Imagine being 10-years-old and knowing that the adults around you cannot or will not keep you safe.

When a child is struggling with their behaviour it is a sign that they need help, they are communicating that something is hard for them and they need a caring adult to step in and create a sense of security or emotional safety. This could be in the form of stopping them from behaving a certain way, soothing them, comforting them or putting consequences and boundaries in place.

## Avoid anger

Often in schools the common consequences or boundaries are anchored to rejection, humiliation and shame. Telling them off in an angry voice, sending them away, and even making them say sorry are all methods that can activate insecure attachment-style behaviours.

Avoid delivering consequences with anger and abruptness. Remember, that children with insecure attachment expect

rejection and are already working from a place of survival. If you meet their dysregulation with anger, they will see this as a further attack and it will keep them in their survival brain for longer. You might find that they argue back, lash out or run away.

## Avoid multiple warnings

Stay away from giving multiple warnings as this can activate a power struggle and, as we have mentioned, it can cause a child to accelerate their bad behaviour to get to the final warning because they believe they are going to fail anyway.

## Avoid pep talks

A common pitfall is giving motivational pep talks or negotiating with a child. You might find yourself coaxing and saying things like, “Come on Jack, you know this isn't good enough. I don't want to have to send you out. Sort it out for me and make the right choice” or “Come on Tilly, we have free time in 10 minutes, stop this now and you can have your iPad time with everyone else”.

I often hear teachers relying on methods like these, but they do not help the child to learn. Your goal should be to help them to figure out why they feel the way they do and how this links to their

behaviour. They need to learn how to manage their feelings better next time and gain some insight into their emotional state.

They also need to know that you can and will keep them safe – and this emotional safety is communicated through keeping secure boundaries and expectations.

They need to know they can rely on you and trust that your responses will be the same each time. Pep talks and negotiation don't achieve this. Instead you will find yourself back in the power dynamic.

Pupils may also find ways to navigate the conversation to the outcome they want which allows them to be in control. They are working from a place of survival during these encounters and finding ways to get the best outcome they can to keep safe. They are also learning that your goal is to control rather than to help and understand, which communicates that you, like everyone else, cannot keep them emotionally safe.

The learning outcome is reinforcing attachment styles rather than helping them feel secure and guiding them.

## The pitfalls of 'sorry'

Finally, let's touch on getting

children to say sorry. When you ask or expect a child to say sorry, you are expecting them to be working from their rational thinking brain. To be sorry for something you have done requires you to be empathetic toward somebody else, to understand their frame of reference, and to actually feel remorse.

When you ask children to say sorry, you are actually asking them to do something that isn't possible in that moment. For all children, secure or insecurely attached, they must be working from the rational brain before they can access empathy. If they are still in survival brain, angry or upset, they are not able to access their empathy response. They might say the word but with no real meaning and where is the learning outcome in that? Unfortunately, the only thing they are learning is that if they say sorry, the situation will be over quickly and they will stop being in trouble.

Insecurely attached children will not actually feel sorry. How can they feel sorry when nobody has ever felt sorry for them? Nobody has ever apologised for hurting them or shown empathy and you cannot have empathy if nobody has role-modelled this for you.

Children only learn to have empathy through feeling it and experiencing it. Getting them to say sorry is therefore meaningless. Instead, like with the other methods we have discussed, it activates a power struggle response and they may refuse to say sorry or say it sarcastically or with anger or say it with no meaning or feeling. You may find yourself thinking that the child does not care when they hurt others and, in part, you are right, they have learnt not to care because nobody cares for them.

## Survival to rational brain

When you tell a child off or give

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them a consequence, the intention should be to guide them and help them through the difficult emotional state they are in. Remember, they are actually in survival brain when they are misbehaving and they are unable to reach their rational thinking brain until they are calmer.

So when you tell a child off, or approach their behaviour, how you deliver consequences and boundaries can make all the difference.

Supporting a child who is aggressive, volatile, emotional or withdrawn can be difficult, especially in a school setting. It can feel overwhelming and sometimes hard to “control”.

However, the point here is not to control the behaviour at all, it is instead to soothe the child and guide them through their feelings and behaviours. It is important that you have consistent, reliable responses to behaviour that are linked to connection and not disconnection.

Be clear about your expectations for behaviour from the start so that the children know what the boundaries and rules are. When they struggle to follow them, follow a policy that puts their feelings at the core of your responses.

Remember, they may never have experienced a secure attachment with an adult – this means a secure relationship where they can trust the adult and the adult can keep them safe physically and

emotionally. You could be this adult, but your responses count.

First, connect with their feeling. Think about the context for their behaviour. What are they feeling? Why might they have behaved like this? Are they refusing to do the work because they feel overwhelmed and not good enough? Are they comparing themselves to others and feeling inadequate? Are they anticipating failing and getting things wrong? Is that why they are avoiding their work or distracting others?

Remember, there is always a feeling behind behaviour. Bring this to their awareness and help them to understand how they feel. This will help them to feel connected and noticed, which reinforces a positive, secure attachment dynamic: “Abdul, you feel like you can't do this and it is making you want to give up. You are distracting yourself from having to do it, because you are worried you will do it wrong.”

Not: “Abdul stop messing around, sit down and get on with your work.”

## Responsibility boundaries

If the child's behaviour requires a consequence, then ensure it is meaningful. What is the learning outcome you hope to get from the consequence?

A great way to help guide and teach children is to issue a “responsibility” boundary. This is where you expect a child to make amends for what they have done.

For example, if a child ruins someone else's work, they must tape it back together. Or if a child throws things, they must pick them up. This teaches the child that there are real, tangible, and fair consequences that are not a rejection of themselves.

You can also replace asking children to say sorry with a “responsibility”. Instead of expecting them to say a word that they often do not mean, try expecting them to show that they are sorry through actions. If they have made someone cry, ask them to get that person a drink of water. If they have hurt someone, ask them to get a plaster or a cold compress. If they have been unkind to someone, ask them to spend 10 minutes with that person drawing or playing a game.

These are real, tangible lessons that will teach a child how to

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rebuild connections after making a mistake. These real-life lessons will help enhance their relationship skills and their sense of empathy.

It is important to note that the child needs to feel heard, connected to and regulated before they can be expected to fulfil a consequence or boundary. You must notice their feelings and help them calm down first.

## Adapting our approaches

It is important that children behave at school – without good behaviour we cannot teach. However, we need to remember that teaching should always go beyond delivering the curriculum. We should be teaching children to feel safe, secure, loved and worthy. We should be teaching them how to manage their feelings of anxiety or anger. We should be teaching them how to build healthy relationships.

These skills are the foundations children need to flourish and to do well in the world. We should be modelling secure attachments and encouraging children to experience relationships where they can fail and still be accepted; where they can struggle with their emotions and be helped.

This is the only way we can make a long-term difference to their mental health and, in turn, their achievement.

