



# Supporting Extremely Challenging Children

# Extremely challenging children

- ▶ Some children can be challenging to teach for numerous reasons - defiant, energetic, impulsive, reactive, etc. - and teachers use their knowledge of behaviour management strategies to support these children. Children generally respond and their behaviour improves.
- ▶ But sometimes a child who is extremely challenging due to their extreme behaviour can present a real struggle for teachers when it comes to finding strategies that 'work' for the child.
- ▶ Children who are quick to escalate, seemingly have no trigger and constantly lash out at those around them, both physically and verbally, can be difficult to understand and support. 'Traditional' behaviour strategies don't seem to work.
- ▶ Teachers can experience a real sense of frustration and failure in finding successful strategies to help these extremely challenging children.
- ▶ This presentation has been developed specifically for extremely challenging children, however, there are many strategies that can be used for **all children with challenging behaviour**. The basic principles are the same - understand the child to understand the message behind the behaviour. Teach how to replace the challenging behaviour with more acceptable behaviour so the child can get what they want or need.

# Taking care of yourself

- ▶ It is natural to feel that you, as a teacher, should be able to manage and assist children in your care. When this is not happening as you would like it to, then teachers can have negative thoughts about themselves and their ability to provide a supportive experience.
- ▶ It is easy to begin to blame yourself or others (child, parents, other educators) but this is not constructive and will not lead to finding the solutions you need.
- ▶ It is important to acknowledge that the ‘situation’ is hard for all concerned, and that it is ok to be feeling challenged, out of ideas or out of energy.
- ▶ It is important to have someone neutral to debrief with, if you can. You need to be able to express your sense of frustration without feeling judged.
- ▶ At the end of each day (and throughout the day) make time to have a break, some ‘downtime’ to be calm and renew yourself through what works for you (take a walk, get a coffee, etc.), Ensure others who work with you also have this opportunity.
- ▶ Remember to breathe. In the moment and through mindfulness and meditation.

# Don't take it personally

- ▶ Sometimes children can target teachers, educators and other children with some extreme physical behaviour and extreme language.
- ▶ It is easy to 'take offense' at these times, but try to remember that the child doesn't really understand the emotional impact of their language or behaviour on others.
- ▶ They are most likely copying something they have heard or seen and may be watching to see your reaction.
- ▶ If your reaction gives them attention (they generally don't care that it's negative) then they are likely to repeat this inappropriate behaviour.
- ▶ It is important to stay calm (breathe), ignore and redirect by calling attention to something else or asking them to do something else.

# Try to understand the context of the child

- ▶ Gathering some information about the child's background can be a useful first step.
- ▶ Have they experienced trauma or witnessed a traumatising event? Is there a history of anxiety, ADHD, ASD, or drug abuse in the family?
- ▶ What supports have the child or family been able to access in the past? Is there a diagnosis? Who is involved with the child?
- ▶ What is their current family/living situation? Out of home care? Single parent family? Kinship care? Step-parent/family?
- ▶ It is important to try to keep an open and caring relationship with parents/carers - Do they have any concerns at home? How are they going with supporting their child? - If you can establish a trusting relationship, then parents/carers are more likely to be open with you, provide information about their child and be more likely to listen to you.
- ▶ You may not be able to account for the extreme behaviour, but children can present as traumatised. This can be a display of fight, flight or freeze mode.
- ▶ Children with ASD or ADHD can also behave in a similar way.

# Accessing further support for the child

Some children with extreme behaviour already have good supports in place and the services to support teachers as well. It is important that you discuss the options with families for further support for their child as early as you can.

These can include:

- Maternal Child Health Nurse, PSFO (Preschool Field Officer), ECEI (Early Childhood Early Intervention) (these services can all be referred to by parents or teacher and are free).
- Private Allied Health services - Child Psychologist, Occupational Therapist, Speech Therapist (no referral needed, there will be a fee, parents may be able to access a Care Plan from their GP which would give them a Medicare rebate for part of the fee).
- Pediatrician (need referral from GP, there is a Medicare rebate for part of the fee).

# Seeing the child not just the behaviour

- ▶ Sometimes we make the assumption that children are in control of their behaviour.
- ▶ It is important to remember the difference between a child who is choosing to misbehave and one who is not in control of the choices they are making.
- ▶ Telling a child with extreme behaviour to ‘be good’ or asking them ‘have you been good today?’ is very unfair as it implies that they are not good. All children are good, and we need to be mindful of the child’s sense of self.
- ▶ Children who have experienced trauma, or some other form of ‘brain rewiring’ can experience being ‘taken over’ by the protective responses of their body. If someone enters their space or tries to take a toy they have been playing with, their immediate reaction is to lash out. Their reaction is not one that they have chosen.
- ▶ Children may understand the rules, but they are unable to stop themselves when they are triggered.
- ▶ It is not always possible to understand an individual child’s triggers, but preventing escalation is a key part of any intervention.

# Establishing a connection

- ▶ Our system wants to heal. Children need to feel safe and accepted when they are with you. Warm relatedness is the key to healing.
- ▶ From birth, our brains are co-organising. We are responsive to the brains of others who are with us. We seek the most nourishing attachments our system allows us. Children are asking, 'Are you with me?'
- ▶ Establish a connection by allowing the child to direct their play with you and respond to their ideas, follow their lead. Then shift from play listening to stay listening.
- ▶ Sunshine Circles is a program that can assist teachers (and parents/care givers) to build a connection with children through a ritual of caring and relating with small group or individual children.
- ▶ Once we have established a supportive relationship, 'they will never go home alone'. Wounded parts have a guardian that is watching over them.



# Negative attention/positive attention

- ▶ If you think the child is attention seeking, then try to give them lots of positive attention. Engage with them in a positive manner and build a relationship with them that helps them to understand what it is like to be approved of by someone.
- ▶ Children with extreme behaviour are used to negative attention and generally won't respond if someone tells them not to do something. In fact telling a child not to do something can instead be like suggesting to them that they do it.
- ▶ IGNORE - as much negative attention seeking behaviour as possible.
- ▶ Instead teach all children the positive rules of kinder - 'use kind words', 'keep hands down', and tell the child what you want them TO DO.
- ▶ Teach all children about 'good choices' and give them and other children feedback whenever you can see them making a 'good choice'.

# Finding what works

- ▶ All children need to experience caring, supportive relationships in order to engage with their environment.
- ▶ Often the key to working with challenging children is establishing a safe and caring relationship with an educator. This does not have to be the teacher to begin with, once they have established one relationship of trust, they will then have the skills to form others.
- ▶ Children may never have experienced this sense of trust before and it can take a long time to establish.
- ▶ Sometimes the ‘classic way’ is the best - ignore as much negative behaviour as you can and give as much positive attention to the child as you can.
- ▶ Calming strategies can assist in both regulating energy and emotional levels and in forming a trusting bond between child and educators.
- ▶ What works as a calming strategy may change from one day to the next, so it is important to have a range of options for you and the child to choose from.

# Calming strategies to trial

(see also *Calming Strategies* document)

**Which ones work for the child?** Build a 'Tool Box' of strategies that they can choose from to calm them down.

**NOTE:** It important to stop immediately if a child doesn't like or respond positively to a strategy.

- ▶ **Retreat and escape** - child goes to quieter area when they are feeling overwhelmed e.g. Calm corner, outside, tent, etc. If child helps to set up a calm space with things they like then they will be more likely to use it. Some children prefer a very small space (cardboard box or bottom shelf) to retreat to.
- ▶ **Pressure and touch** - arm squeezes, rolling up in a blanket, massage, hug, rolling a ball over back, squeezing between cushions.
- ▶ **Tactile sensory experiences** - sand, water, goop, finger painting.

## Calming strategies cont...

- ▶ **Heavy work** - weight-bearing through the arms: pushups, bear walking, wheelbarrowing, monkey bars, digging, carrying heavy items. This can be very regulating for children who have high energy levels.
- ▶ **Expend energy** - running, climbing, jumping, bike or tricycle riding, swinging, trampoline, etc. Important to follow up with heavy work if the child is still heightened.
- ▶ **Music** - listening to favourite music, using music and songs with a strong beat encourages regulation, marching and action songs too.
- ▶ **Favourite activities** - reading a book, playing in construction area, drawing.
- ▶ **One-to-one** with an educator - sometimes children with extreme behaviour need one-to-one support to **co-regulate**. The educator is there to intervene to prevent and support child through challenges.

# Sensory input

Providing a good sensory diet can assist a child to stay calm and regulated throughout the day.

**Tactile** - fiddle toys, sand pit or tray, water, foam, kinetic sand, etc.

**Auditory** - headphones when too loud, music, beat and rhythm, monitor noise levels in the room.

**Visual** - Visual schedules, decluttered spaces, not too much on the walls, iPad, reading a book, bubble timer, marble or car run.

**Smell (Olfactory)** - having a variety of different calming smells like lavender , vanilla, baking, flowers, herbs in the environment, fresh air - encourage child to breathe in deeply, hold and breathe out slowly (both calming and mindful).

**Oral** - variety of textures in food, electric toothbrush around mouth, blowing bubbles, chew toy or wrist band.

**Vestibular** - movement, dancing, freeze games, balancing, climbing, jumping off, falling on mat, handstands, forward rolls, swinging.

**Proprioceptive** - firm pressure (wrap in blanket, cushion sandwich), touch (shoulder squeezes, ball massage), crab walking, pushing, carrying heavy objects, digging, swinging from hands.

# Strong feelings

(see also *Zones of Regulation* document)

- ▶ Children can experience strong feelings that they don't really understand. Children can be in great pain and at such a young age it is impossible for them to recognise, understand and begin to process that. For some children understanding and coming to terms with their feelings and beginning to heal will be a lifelong process.
- ▶ Begin by teaching all children to recognise and label their own feelings and the feelings of others.
- ▶ Teach children also about what they can do when experiencing these feelings. 'When I'm happy I can..., 'When I'm sad I can...'
- ▶ It is OK to feel angry or sad, what to do when feeling like that is the focus. Teach some strategies and provide areas to go to that can assist in both expressing anger, calming down and receiving love.
- ▶ Some children with extreme behaviour have little experience with feeling calm and regulated and need to learn how good that can feel.

# Children need to experience success

- ▶ Ask yourself about your expectations for the child. Do I have specific goals for them that are achievable? Am I setting this child up to fail by asking them to do something they are not capable of? This can include things like sitting and joining in at group time, asking for a turn, saying sorry to someone they have hurt, etc.
- ▶ Try to examine what the existing skills of the child are and ask them to follow instructions, and to complete routines and jobs that they are capable of completing. Then give them positive feedback about themselves and what they have achieved.
- ▶ This not only gives the child the experience of success and receiving praise from an adult (an unusual experience for some) but it also gives teachers an opportunity to build on and extend capabilities.

# Other educators in the child's environment

- ▶ All educators and staff need to have shared understandings and strategies when working with a challenging child.
- ▶ This may sound obvious but can be one of the most challenging things to achieve.
- ▶ Teachers may need to educate others around understanding the background of and expectations for the child in the kindergarten environment as well as support strategies.
- ▶ All need to be using the same approach. An educator coming in and taking a 'hard line' with a child can be a real challenge for that child and often does turn out well for either.
- ▶ Language used and expectations need to be consistent.



# Other children in the child's environment

- ▶ Other children in the group need support as well to understand and respond appropriately to the other child.
- ▶ Language about the child 'still learning the rules of kinder' can help other children (and their parents) in understanding what is occurring.
- ▶ Teaching other children some defensive behaviour: move away, get help from an adult, say to the child, 'Stop I don't like that', can be some useful life skills for all to learn.
- ▶ Teaching other children that the child isn't 'ready to share yet' and helping them to access what they want another way or supporting them to ask the child for a turn and assisting the child to give them a turn.
- ▶ Teachers may also need to evacuate a space or room to keep other children safe during lashing out or meltdown behaviour. This may need to be practiced, so children know what to do.
- ▶ Encourage other children not to laugh or respond to inappropriate behaviour.

# Staying calm and positive

- ▶ It can be easy to become discouraged. At times working with a challenging child is just hard. It is ok to acknowledge that.
- ▶ It is ok to have setbacks. Holidays, changes at home, new staff member or new child in the group can trigger a setback. Children can come in heightened and will just have a 'bad' day.
- ▶ Picking things up again afterwards is important.
- ▶ It is important to celebrate the small things. Even the really small successes add up over time.
- ▶ Continue to teach and reinforce 'good choices'.
- ▶ Stay calm - losing your cool in front of a child is not helpful. It is ok to express to a child (calmly) that you are feeling angry or frustrated and will need to have a break so that you calm down. This is an opportunity to model for that child that it is ok to have strong feelings and what to do when you feel like that.

# Situational management

- ▶ It is important to have a plan for when the child is 'out of control' (Red Zone) and putting themselves and others in danger. The first priority is to keep the child, other children and staff safe.
- ▶ You may be able to direct child to an 'escape/retreat' area - this could be outside, and you may need to bring other children inside.
- ▶ You may need to move other children away from an area - leave the child inside and move all other children to the other side of the room or outside.
- ▶ Always have someone supervise the child, but they should not approach or speak to the child until they are showing signs of calming (as they are not in a state to be reasoned with).
- ▶ If the child is engaging in behaviour that is self-harming, then educators may need to physically position themselves between child and object/s.
- ▶ Only touch or restrain the child if absolutely necessary to prevent injury. This is a strategy that ideally should be discussed with parents and documented in the Behaviour Support Plan (see next slide) for that child.
- ▶ Once the child has started to calm, then trial approaching them to assist in calming and regulating (co-regulation).

# Positive Behaviour Support Plan

Child's Name:  
 Kindergarten:  
 Date:  
 Present at planning meeting:  
 Results of:  
 \*ABC (Antecedent, Behaviour, Consequence)  
 \*Learner profile

Behaviour of Concern	Function of Behaviour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attention</li> <li>- Escape/avoid</li> <li>- Sensory overload</li> <li>- To gain item</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>	Proactive changes to environment to prevent behaviour occurring	Proactive skill development to replace function of behaviour	Positive reinforcement strategies for replacement behaviours	Situational management if behaviour occurs

# Co-regulation - Time In

- ▶ Time Out is a common parenting strategy, when parents withdraw their attention from the child by physically separating them for a period of time until the child has calmed and is ready to listen and comply with instructions.
- ▶ Time Out is not used in kindergartens and can be upsetting for children who have attachment concerns (many children with extreme behaviour challenges).
- ▶ Co-regulation creates potential for reparative and restorative experiences. Time In is a strategy to be used when the child is in the 'Yellow/Red Zone' or having a 'meltdown'.
- ▶ The adult ideally sits next to the child (or stays in the area until they are ready to be approached) and waits with the child as they calm down.
- ▶ Once the child accepts their presence, the adult may give them a hug or pat their back. This is a form of co-regulation - the adult assists the child to calm.
- ▶ Once the child has calmed, then the adult can discuss with them what happened and discuss with the child what they could do 'next time' (see Restorative Practices Script - next slide).

# Restorative practices script

- ▶ The restorative practices script can be used in a conflict situation or inappropriate behaviour with others to give child a chance to express their perspective on what happened, encourage them to listen to the perspectives of others, learn how to re-establish a positive relationship with the other child and learn about what they can do in future situations.

## Important points to remember:

- ▶ Children need to be calm before beginning this conversation with them - if they are too emotionally heightened, they may not be receptive, so ensure that they spend some time in calm space or alternate area until they are ready to talk about the incident.
- ▶ It will not always be possible to work through this whole conversation with the children involved. Pick some significant points to focus on at first, such as the rules of the kindergarten or feelings, and slowly extend.

## Restorative practices script cont...

**‘Tell me what happened?’** Ask main ‘offender’ first then the other child involved; listen to the answers of both.

**Choices** ‘When \_\_\_ happened was that a **good choice** or **not a good choice?**’

**Feelings** Ask both children ‘When \_\_\_ happened **how did you feel?**’ ‘How do you think (other child) felt?’

**Rules** ‘At kindergarten/home it is **not OK** to \_\_\_\_\_. (May also discuss why it is not ok.)  
**INSTEAD** we \_\_\_\_\_ (state positive rule).

**Apology** Ask ‘offender’ to say ‘**I’m sorry for**\_\_\_\_\_.’ Encourage other child to accept the apology rather than say that it is ok (as the behaviour is not ok).

**How Can we Make it Better?** Is there anything else that the child needs to do to ‘fix up’ the situation? (Pack up thrown toys, etc.)

**NEXT TIME** (teaching opportunity) - if this situation were to happen again, what could you do instead?

# Always remember

Teaching is an art

You will need all your passion, energy, love, knowledge, problem-solving skills, determination, compassion and experience every day.

Your job is not to just make problems go away. Your job is to do the best you can to meet, accept and support a child wherever they are in their journey as best you can.

Be truly present, be available.

‘I see you’

‘I am here’



# Resources and references

- ▶ ‘Sunshine Circles’ is a program that is designed to help build a trusting relationship between children and adults. It is simple and easy implement in small groups at kindergarten.  
<http://www.wp.theraplay.org/australia/photo-gallery/sunshine-circles/>
- ▶ ‘Zones of Regulation’ by Leah Kuypers is an approach to teaching children with Social Communication difficulties, self regulation and emotional control .  
<https://www.socialthinking.com/Products/zones-of-regulation-curriculum>
- ▶ ‘Stickids’ visuals - strategies to trial to help children in working out which calming strategies work for them.  
<http://www.stickids.com/>
- ▶ ‘Hey Warrior’ by Karen Young is a picture book that explains **anxiety** to children and what the Warrior (Amygdala) in their brain is; how how it works in their body to protect them; and how they can learn to be the boss of their own Warrior (Amygdala). This book is written for children aged 5 and up but the illustrations can be used to explain this concept to younger children (and adults too). <https://www.heysigmund.com/product/hey-warrior/>

# Trauma resources and references

- ▶ ‘The Whole-Brain Child’ by Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson  
[https://www.drdansiegel.com/books/the\\_whole\\_brain\\_child/](https://www.drdansiegel.com/books/the_whole_brain_child/)
- ▶ ‘The Heart of Trauma: Healing the Embodied Brain in the Context of Relationships’ by Bonnie Badenock  
<https://www.nurturingtheheart.com/nourishing-resources>
- ▶ ‘The Pocket Guide to Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe’ by Stephen Porges  
<https://www.stephenporges.com/books>
- ▶ ‘The Invisible Classroom’ by Kirke Olsen  
<https://www.booktopia.com.au/the-invisible-classroom-kirke-olson/book/9780393707571.html>
- ▶ ‘Self-Reg’ by Stuart Shanker <https://self-reg.ca/>