



Information sheet:

Proactively preventing challenging behaviours

One of the most important factors that contributes to children or young people becoming motivated and successful learners is the quality of the relationship with their teacher.

Show the child or young person you care

For example, through personal greetings, using their language, pronouncing their name correctly, getting to know them better, spending time playing with them, making contact with their parents to talk about their successes or accomplishments.

Show the child or young person you believe in them

For example, identify negative self-talk and promote positive self-talk. Communicate your belief that they can succeed and acknowledge special efforts and accomplishments.

Show the child or young person you trust them

For example, invite them to help with tasks, allocate tasks which carry responsibility, offer curriculum choices, encourage them to help others.

Play with children and young people

Playing with children or young people makes the relationship temporarily more equal. It can build intimacy and trust and promote cooperation. Follow the child's lead in play rather than instructing them. For younger children, use descriptive commenting rather than questions while playing – eg, "You're painting that a bright, colourful purple," rather than, "What colour is that?"

Facilitate positive peer interactions

Encourage children or young people experiencing challenging behaviour to work with peers who have the skills to help and include them in their activities and learning. Proactively teach peers how to support and respond.

Build on this foundation of strong relationships with some of the approaches below to help create a positive learning environment.

Remember, teaching any new skill or behaviour involves:

- lots of opportunity to practise
- lots of opportunity to get it right
- lots of positive feedback when they get it right
- lots of support when learning a new skill
- modelling patience and support when they don't get it right.

Rewards, encouragement and praise

All children do not respond the same to rewards, encouragement and praise. Carefully select and personalise them and ensure they are age appropriate.

- Give more attention and praise to positive behaviours than to unwanted behaviours.
- Aim for a 4:1 ratio of positive to negative attention.
- Children with challenging behaviour need extra amounts of praise and encouragement – they need it more often than most. You might also need to provide them with motivators, such as stamps or stickers. They are likely to have a negative self-evaluation and low self-worth. They may not trust adults. They are also more likely to miss praise, particularly if it's delivered in a neutral tone or is vague or infrequent.
- Pinpoint what it is about the behaviour that is helpful, useful, compliant and be specific in your praise – “You’ve done a good job of …” rather than, “Good job”.
- Don’t wait for behaviour to be perfect before praising.
- Use praise consistently and frequently, especially when a child is first learning a new skill or behaviour.
- Focus on a child’s efforts and learning, not just the end result.
- For a particularly challenging situation, have a plan for the child and use praise and encouragement strategically to support your goals for that child.
- Promote child self-praise, eg, “You must feel proud of yourself for…”.
- Keep your praise pure – avoid combining praise with put-downs, eg, “You picked up the toys like I asked but next time how about doing it before I have to ask”.
- Balance your praise of academic and social behaviours and remember to praise aspects of a child’s personality, such as thoughtfulness or patience as well as persistence with tasks.
- Use praise that is not always specific to a particular behaviour, eg, “It is fun working with you”.

Setting clear limits

- Communicate expectations positively and clearly. Use non-verbal cues, eg, pictures demonstrating expectations, as well as words.
- Use ‘when-then’ and ‘first-then’ commands.
- Avoid negative commands, corrections, demands and yelling.
- Redirect a disengaged child by calling out their name with a question, standing next to them, making up interesting games, using non-verbal signals.
- State requests or give directions to the child using brief descriptions of positive behaviours you want to see.

Ignoring and distracting

- Identify those behaviours you can ignore while keeping the other children safe. Avoid eye contact, verbal comments and physical touch and keep neutral. Immediately return your attention and encouragement to the child when they are behaving appropriately again.
- Redirect the child to other activities when they are frustrated.

Teaching children or young people to self-regulate

Self-regulation is a developmental skill that evolves over time in the right environment and with the right support. It is dependent on a person's understanding of their own emotions and other people's intent.

- Help the child to recognise emotions and sensations, and their meaning.
- Help the child to recognise frustration for themselves and seek a calming activity.
- Teach the child to self-regulate through specific techniques such as deep breathing and positive self-talk. Coach them in patience, persistence, trying hard, sticking with it, concentrating, staying calm, waiting for a turn, using words to express feelings.
- Help the child to understand how peers feel by pointing out facial expressions, voice tone, body language or words.
- Teach emotional literacy words by labelling feelings and responses when the child shares, trades, waits or helps.
- Help the child know when to avoid certain situations.

Teaching children or young people to problem-solve

- Teach problem-solving by helping children to follow the sequence of: 1) define the problem 2) think of solutions 3) ask what would happen next 4) evaluate the best choice 5) choose the best solution to try out.
- Use books and stories of problem-solving to practise the problem-solving steps.

Behaviour contracts

A behaviour contract is an agreement between a child and their teacher, and can also include parents. It sets out the desired behaviours, the behaviours that are not acceptable, the benefits (or rewards) for improving behaviour and the responses for continuing with unwanted behaviour.

Behaviour contracts have been shown to work well with a range of behaviours, including attendance, on-task behaviour, playground behaviour and work accuracy. They work for children of primary, intermediate and secondary school age.

- Include who, what, when and how well.
- Make sure the desired behaviours are in the child's skill set. Behaviour contracts are for 'won't do' problems rather than 'can't do' problems.
- Consider the child's developmental level. Younger children and children with disabilities can respond to symbols and other graphics.

Social stories

Social stories are a simple and easy way to help children interpret social cues and respond appropriately. They are shown to work well to reduce aggressive behaviour, inappropriate vocalisations, obsessive behaviours and tantrums. They can be presented in words, pictures or even on video.

- Define the problem behaviour and create a story detailing the appropriate behaviours for the child.
- Include picture cues and text, meanings for social cues, the desired social responses and thoughts and feelings for the characters involved in the story.
- Be descriptive in the story rather than directive.

- Rehearse desired behaviours through modelling, role play and feedback.
- Write at the comprehension level of the child.

Home/school/centre notebooks

Notebooks can promote communication and collaboration between teachers and parents and whānau to improve a child's academic and social behaviour.

- They are useful for 3-16-year-olds.
- They work for children who you believe are capable of performing the behaviours you would like to see.
- They don't work well with children and young people who are depressed or who are poorly managed at home.
- Notebooks focus on positive feedback that will encourage teachers and parents to focus on building skills and reinforcing appropriate behaviours.

Self-monitoring and self-reinforcement

Self-monitoring and self-reinforcement work well with five-year-olds and possibly younger children. You can use them to address behavioural, social and academic needs. A child compares his or her performance or participation to a standard he or she has chosen, the teacher has chosen, or that has been agreed by the child and/or teacher and the parents.

- Be aware that the child needs to have the required skills.
- Make sure the child has a clear understanding of the required behaviour.
- Develop a form for recording performance – use icons and pictures to illustrate behaviours.
- The child can assess and record their own behaviour and may select and administer awards to themselves.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning, ko te akoranga mahi tahi, reduces the competitiveness and failure that contributes to challenging behaviour. Peers reinforce each other rather than the teacher reinforcing children. You might need to coach children and young people in their roles.

- Ensure each child has a specific task that contributes to the group's goals.
- Teach the prerequisite skills if a child lacks the skills for small group work.
- Review the skills that children need for working together, eg, listening carefully to each other's ideas, providing feedback in a respectful way, asking for clarification.
- Encourage children to self-monitor their levels of participation so they make sufficient but not excessive contribution.

Tip

Look at what you can do to make your classroom or centre a stimulating, supportive and well managed learning space where positive behaviour can thrive.

- Build caring relationships with children and young people. Respect what each one brings to the class or centre (from home, their culture and peers). Allow the experiences of the child or young person to be recognised in the classroom or centre.
- Have high expectations of all children and young people (be sure they are achievable).

- He moana pupuke ka ekengia e te waka – a choppy sea can be navigated. Have belief and faith that children and young people can grow and learn new strategies and behaviour.
- Be flexible, adjust the programme and use a range of learning strategies.
- Use a range of interactions – instruction, monitoring, coaching, recognition, feedback, feed-forward and individual and group interactions.
- Anticipate issues, plan and improvise.

Caution: There are no quick fixes. Single, unplanned interventions on their own may not be effective. You also need to:

- understand the purpose of the behaviour (eg, to avoid or obtain)
- address the events that contribute to the behaviour
- identify whether you need to teach new behaviours or positively reinforce what a child or young person already knows
- identify whether you need to make changes to the environment around a child or young person
- decide how you will discourage unwanted behaviours
- provide extra helpings of rewards, encouragement and praise for positive behaviour
- experiment – it will take time and numerous adjustments to get it right for a child or young person