

Information sheet:

Understanding why children behave the way they do

A child or young person's behaviour won't change unless the adult behaviour changes first.

Behaviour is a form of communication that serves a purpose. When you understand its purpose, you can understand how to respond and intervene.

Factors that may contribute to unwanted behaviour include:

- developmental
- significant events (ones that previously occurred)
- triggers (usually things outside the immediate environment)

Teachers can influence and interrupt patterns formed in the above environments.

Understanding behaviour

Behaviour is effective – it works. It is most likely meeting the child or young person's needs. They are communicating in the most effective way they know at the time.

Managing challenging behaviour is often unsuccessful when you try to manage the "what" (form) rather than the "why" (function).

What happens after the behaviour either weakens or reinforces it. Your response to behaviour impacts the occurrence of the behaviour.

For example, if you remove a child from an activity when they have tantrums to avoid work, you increase the chances of the behaviour happening again.

By identifying the "why" of the behaviour, you can effectively intervene. You can teach the child an alternate behaviour (this may take time!) because if a child's need is fulfilled, the unwanted behaviour usually disappears.

The two most common purposes of behaviour are to obtain and to avoid.

- A child seeks to get peer or adult attention, a desired object or activity, a sensory stimulation.
- A child seeks to avoid a physical demand, an undesired activity, a peer, a difficult, boring, or easy task.

Getting to the "what" and "why" of the child and the behaviour

Four steps that can help you identify the "what" and "why" of the behaviour are:

- describe the behaviour
- identify what goes on when the behaviour happens
- describe the child
- identify the function of the behaviour.

Describe the behaviour

First, detail the unwanted, concerning behaviour. Determine how often it happens, how long it goes on, where it happens, its intensity, and its seriousness (for example, threats to others, the child, the classroom kaupapa).

Identify what goes on

Next, identify what goes on when the behaviour happens. Consider setting events, triggers, consequences, and ecological factors.

- Setting – what is going on in the environment (time of day, activity) and within the child (tired, hungry, sad, discomfort).
- Triggers – what happens just before or just after the behaviour.
- Consequences – what usually happens afterwards; how do adults and peers respond.
- Ecological factors – where does the behaviour typically occur; do certain behaviours occur more often with certain peers or groups.

Describe the child

Focus on what you know about the child.

What are the child's developmental levels and language understanding? Is the child bi-lingual and more proficient in one language than another?

How does the child play – alone, in a pair, in groups?

Assess the child's social understanding, learning attitude, and ability to empathise.

How else would you describe the child?

Identify the function of the behaviour

Finally, think about why the behaviour occurs. What underlying need is the child trying to meet?

Decide if the child is trying to get something, avoid something, or both.

Developing a plan for promoting positive behaviour and learning

Use what you have noted in, create a plan for promoting positive behaviour and learning.

Include how you will prevent, model and teach, end, reinforce, ensure, and deliver key elements of the plan.

Determine what each element looks like in your plan. Write down steps you will take for each of these.

- Prevent: strip the challenging behaviour of its important or significance. This might include redesigning environmental redesign aspects.
- Model and teach: demonstrate each new skills so that make the challenging behaviour is inefficient. Teach the child and give lots of time for practice.
- End: minimise the pay-off for the challenging behaviour so that it becomes ineffective.
- Reinforce: make the desired behaviour more rewarding
- Ensure safety: plan what you will do to maintain safety for all in dangerous situations
- Deliver consequences: do so in a socially appropriate manner and only when the behaviour occurs. Choose consequences the child or young person will not like.

Gaining insight from what the child says

My teacher hears what my parents and whānau have to say about what's going on for me.

My teacher understands me and where I'm coming from.

My teacher knows the things I'm good at and the things I find hard.

My teacher knows the sounds that stress me out. We have a signal for when sounds are making me anxious.

My teacher asks how I am every day and knows what's going on for me.

My teacher is in touch with my parents and knows what's going on at home.