

Michael Grose regularly sends emails to schools. At times we will publish articles in the newsletter which may be of interest.

The basics of managing children's behaviour - by Michael Grose

The ability to manage children's behaviour effectively, to prevent poor behaviour and to respond positively when children are less than perfect is the biggest challenge facing parents today. Children in the 2-3 age groups and the 11-14 age groups tend to present the greatest dilemmas to parents. Interestingly, both are significant transition stages in children's development.

Discipline is commonly confused with punishment. Discipline is about teaching children to behave socially and safely. Helping children be sociable beings and keeping them safe are the main purposes of discipline.

So what techniques do you use to achieve these purposes? What techniques are both effective and acceptable in terms of teaching children to be sociable and keeping them safe?

There are three broad behavioural strategies you need to use: 1) behaviour changers, 2) behaviour shapers, and 3) behaviour trainers.

These strategies are all effective given that you have reasonable limits and boundaries, you have positive expectations for children's behaviour, you model appropriate behaviours and you have a set of flexible routines for mornings, mealtimes and bedtimes.

1. Behaviour changers: These refer to the techniques you use to change children's behaviour or move it away from undesirable behaviour. Currently, logical and natural consequences are the most effective behaviour change strategies to use.

Many parents use their voice when children are less than perfect. We remind, remonstrate or rebuke when kids misbehave or don't do as we ask. If this doesn't work we tweak the volume a few notches to get the desired response. This often leads to parent deafness as children learn to tune out and act when mum or dad really mean what they say (i.e. they raise the volume). Let's face it, many of us parents are hard-wired to respond in such ways. It is far better to keep language for more positive notions and implement a consequence when children misbehave.

2. Behaviour shapers: These are the techniques you use to shape children's desirable behaviours or get more of the behaviours you want. Bribery, tangible rewards and social recognition are three major techniques you can use but not all are desirable. Social recognition, more commonly known as 'catching kids doing the right thing', is the preferred technique here. It is based on the notion that the behaviours that gain attention from adults are more likely to be repeated. Parental recognition is a high driver for children. So make a fuss over children when they display the behaviours you want, whether it is resolving a problem with a sibling in a reasonable manner, cleaning up their mess without being told or coming to the meal-table without being reminded. It is a matter of having your antenna attuned to the behaviour you want rather than tuning into misbehaviour all the time.

3. Behaviour trainers: These are the techniques you use to actually teach children about the behaviours you want. Behaviour-specific feedback and behaviour rehearsal are two techniques you can use to help children learn about cooperative behaviours. Behaviour-specific feedback tells kids how they did something (you solved that problem with your sister by taking it in turns to use the computer), whereas 'catching kids doing the right thing' merely draws attention to what they have done (it is great to see you resolve that problem with your sister) without focusing on the methods used.

Behaviour rehearsal is a useful way to teach children a range of behaviours from how to behave in a restaurant to how to react when the telephone rings. Basically, it involves children rehearsing or practising a desired behaviour. For instance, you can set your table up like a restaurant once a week so children learn appropriate ways to behave when they are out. Behaviour rehearsal is a powerful way of teaching kids appropriate behaviours.

So the basics of a behaviour management strategy are deceptively simple:

1. Use behaviour changers - more action less talk from adults
2. Use behaviour shapers - adults should make a fuss over the behaviours they want
3. Use behaviour trainers - use some teaching and training to help kids learn the finer points of the behaviours you want

