



GUIDANCE FOR CHILDMINDERS

Understanding Children's Behaviour

The early years are a critical period for all learning, in particular social-emotional learning. Childminders can play a central role in guiding children's social and emotional development, supporting children to understand their emotions and develop their behaviour skills.

To do this, you must first understand that children's behaviour is an important way of communicating their emotions and their needs. By understanding the reasons for a child's behaviour, and what it is they might be feeling, you will be able to respond in a positive rather than a reactive way, which will lead to better outcomes for the child.

This resource aims to give you a better understanding of children's behaviour and what it is that a child may be trying to communicate through their behaviour, and outlines how you can respond to this behaviour in an understanding way.



Social and Emotional Development

Just as physical development occurs in 'ages and stages', so too does social and emotional growth and development. A good understanding of how children typically develop and what you can reasonably expect them to cope with, to know and to be able to do is essential.

It is important to remember, however, that every child is unique and will develop social and emotional skills and behaviour skills at an individual pace. You will need to get to know each child and their individual temperament and dispositions, as well as their general family circumstances, in order to better understand and appreciate their learning and development needs.

The importance of relationships

When you are developing an approach to guiding young children in relation to their behaviour, it is important to begin from the understanding that children have a right to protection, secure and caring relationships, responsive interactions and a sense of self-worth. Their brain development depends on positive two-way interactions and positive experiences, and their behaviour is very much affected by these interactions and experiences, as well as by their sense of security and belonging.

Children need to know that you really care about them. If they feel a positive emotional connection with you, they are more likely to feel secure and happy, and to be cooperative and relate well to others.

Your goals for children must extend well beyond just 'managing' behaviour. The main goals are for children to:

- Feel secure and valued
- Feel good about themselves
- Be happy and contented
- Learn how to relate well to others (both children and adults)
- Be able to make friends and get on with others in groups
- Be able to explore, try things and learn confidently

Where children feel included, respected, safe and secure, and when their achievements and contributions are valued and acknowledged, they are more likely to develop self-confidence, resilience and positive views about themselves. Their behaviour will reflect this.

What Children Need at Different Stages of Development

Very young children need strong relationships and attachments with sensitive, responsive and positive adults who are tuned into, and understanding of, their non-verbal ways of communicating their needs. Through these relationships and attachments, young children learn that they are important, that they are listened to, that their needs will be met and that they are safe and secure.



Children also need adults who understand that certain types of behaviour are a natural and important part of their development and their learning about the world. Young children are innately curious and will seek out ways to explore their environment and assert their independence. This will require you to be particularly understanding as it can sometimes lead to behaviour that you may find frustrating, challenging or demanding.

As they get older, children need to be helped to learn how to say what they want and how they feel, how to ask questions and how to invite other children to play. They need support to develop the ability to recognise their own emotions and those of others, to control their emotions and to deal with frustrations.

Older children need to develop the ability to resolve conflicts, to control the impulse to act aggressively, to suggest different solutions and to compromise. They need to learn how to cooperate with others, to take turns, to respond and react positively to others, and to see others' points of view.

You can support this learning by modelling these in your own everyday behaviour. Children of all ages constantly learn from the adults around them so how you behave will have a big influence on how a child who spends a lot of time with you behaves.

Many adults have not acquired these skills. All of this learning and development takes time and practice, and the support of positive, sensitive and understanding adults.

The Role of Language Skills in Behaviour

Language has a role in regulating our emotions and behaviour, and is necessary for understanding what others are saying, following instructions, negotiating with others and explaining how we feel. The level of development of a child's language skills will have an effect on how they behave.

Very young children who are learning to communicate – whether this is through speech or through other forms of language such as facial expressions, body language or sign language – may sometimes find it frustrating not to be able to say clearly what they want or need to say.

Older children may also have difficulties understanding what is expected of them or what others mean when they interact with them. Supporting the development of a child's speech and language skills will also support their social, emotional and behaviour skills.

Expectations

Having reasonable and appropriate expectations of children is important and will have a positive influence on their behaviour. It is important that the expectations you have of a child match what they can understand and are capable of at their age and stage of development, and also in their particular circumstances.

Without a good understanding of child development and children's individual needs, you may have unrealistic expectations of children in relation to their behaviour. Unrealistic expectations can result in adults demanding too much of children. When this happens, children can get into trouble. For example, expecting a two year old to be able to eat without ever spilling food or an eighteen month old to play well with other children and to share their favourite toys is unrealistic. These are not age or stage appropriate expectations and can lead to children becoming frustrated or feeling incompetent, and expressing these feelings through their behaviour. A child who is over-tired or upset is also likely to find it difficult to stay calm if too much is expected of them.

It is important to remember that children are much more likely to understand what is expected of them if they are given the same type of message consistently both at home and while in your care.

What Might the Child be Communicating Through their Behaviour?

As mentioned above, children need to communicate their feelings and their needs to those around them, but they may not have the words to say how they are feeling so they communicate through their behaviour.

Sometimes a child may not understand what it is that they are feeling, especially if it is a complex emotion such as jealousy or frustration. Often their communication through their behaviour is unconscious and they will not be aware of what they are communicating.

In the midst of particularly challenging behaviour, it may be difficult to think about what the child is experiencing rather than what you yourself are experiencing as a result of the child's behaviour, but it is important to try to identify what the child's needs are and to respond to these needs. It is also important to recognise that a child who becomes withdrawn – although their behaviour may not be challenging – is also expressing a need.

When you understand what an experience might be like from the child's perspective, you are much more likely to empathise and to respond in positive ways that support the child.

Think about...

1. What is the child experiencing? For example:
 - Is the child hungry or tired? Are they uncomfortable?
 - Are they over-stimulated or overwhelmed?
 - Are they experiencing separation anxiety?
 - Are they feeling powerless with no choices?
 - Are they feeling very disappointed about not being able to have or do something?
2. What, when, where, how and with whom does the behaviour occur? For example:
 - Is the room too warm or too noisy?
 - Is the space crowded with strange people?
 - Is there someone who may be inadvertently scaring them?
 - Is there something that may be reminding them of a difficult time or a trauma?
3. What do you think the child might be communicating that they need or want?
 - How might the child be feeling?
 - What might be the purpose of their behaviour?
 - What might be the meaning of their behaviour?



How Might the Child Communicate Their Feelings

Some of the ways children may be 'telling' you through their behaviour that they are stressed and overwhelmed include:

- Having constantly high activity levels
- Having difficulty focusing on or completing a task
- Becoming easily frustrated
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Having difficulty following directions
- Trying to solve problems by hitting, biting, grabbing or pushing
- Having tantrums
- Clinging to adults
- Avoiding new tasks
- Not playing with other children
- Crying frequently and unable to be soothed easily
- Not eating
- Becoming unusually quiet or withdrawn

Respond in an Understanding Way

Children who are encouraged to express their ideas and their feelings – joy, sadness, upset, anger, frustration and fear – can develop ways to cope with new, challenging or stressful situations. Let children know that all emotions are okay and sometimes it is natural to feel strong emotions. It is what the child learns to do with these strong emotions that is important.

- When a child is distressed, it is important that your response always communicates these non-verbal messages to them:
 - 'I see you'
 - 'I will keep you safe'
 - 'I care about how you feel'
 - 'I can help'
- Create a caring, relaxed, supportive and fair environment where each child feels accepted and that they belong.
- Tune into each child's temperament, their sensitivity, their energy levels or level of tiredness on a given day.
- Focus on each child's individual strengths and what they can do rather than what they can't do.

- Avoid labelling a child, for example 'she's a biter' or 'he's aggressive'. It is important to separate the behaviour from the child. The behaviour may be unacceptable but the child is never unacceptable.

To support children and develop a good relationship with them:

- Ensure they understand what is expected of them.
- Remain calm, clear and consistent in your interactions.
- Create a positive environment where they feel relaxed and they belong.
- Show an interest in their family, their talents, their goals, their likes and dislikes.
- Engage with them, especially during mealtimes and playtime.
- Always treat them with respect; never embarrass or ridicule them.
- Encourage them to treat others with respect and model respectful behaviour.
- Recognise their strengths.
- Involve them in making decisions about activities within the household.
- Give them choices whenever possible to enable them to have some control.
- Have reasonable expectations.
- Set clear but reasonable limits and boundaries.
- Establish consistent and predictable routines.
- Always acknowledge when they show good manners.
- Remind them to treat others as they like to be treated.
- Work with children to resolve conflict.



Work with Parents to Support the Child

To fully support a child whose behaviour is challenging, you will need to communicate openly with their parents at all times and understand how the child has been at home. Discuss the following with the child's parents:

- Has the child's sleep been disturbed?
- Have they been unusually quiet or complained of feeling tired or unwell?
- Have they shown any of the signs of distress as outlined above?
- Can their parents identify anything that could help explain why the child's behaviour might be challenging?
- Has anything significant happened to bother, upset or scare them?

Ask parents what they do to support their child when the behaviour happens at home and discuss ideas to support the child together.

Any plans you make to support a child whose behaviour is challenging on an ongoing basis will need to involve their parents. For more information on approaches to addressing challenging behaviour see [Supporting Young Children's Behaviour Skills](#).

Remember, behavioural, emotional and social development is complex. Each individual situation is different and there are no simple 'off the shelf' solutions. High-quality, sensitive care with understanding and positive interactions will give children the best possible opportunities to develop the positive life skills they need.

Further Information

Useful books

Asquith, S. (2020). *Self-Regulation Skills in Young Children: Activities and Strategies for Practitioners and Parents*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Barnardos. (2014). [Supporting Young Children's Behaviour Skills](#). Dublin: Barnardos.

Lee, A. (2014). *How to be an Outstanding Childminder*. Bloomsbury Education.

Morris, K. (2015). *Promoting positive behaviour in the early years*. Open University Press.

Useful weblinks

[Aistear Siolta Practice Guide](#)

[Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework](#)

[HighScope – Conflict Resolution](#)

For parents

[First 5 Resources for Parents](#)

[HSE Guidance on Behaviour](#)

[Your Young Child's Behaviour](#)

[Essential Parent](#)



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