Managing Behaviour in the Primary Classroom:

a Research Brief for Primary Practitioners

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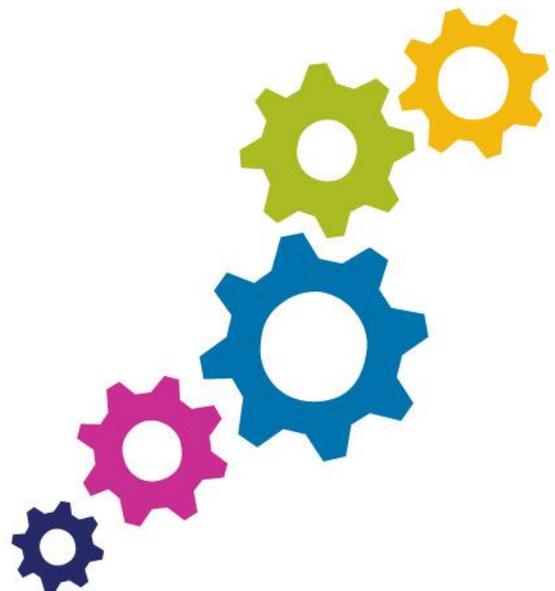
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Managing Behaviour in the Primary Classroom: a Research Brief for Primary Practitioners

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Contents

1 Background and context to behaviour management in primary schools

We know that effective behaviour management underpins successful teaching and learning. Primary schools with good or outstanding behaviour judgements, for example, have been found, on average, to have higher percentages of pupils with better outcomes in English and maths at Key Stage 2, compared with schools with satisfactory or inadequate behaviour judgements (DfE, 2012).

The standard of behaviour in most schools in England is good. According to schools inspectorate, Ofsted, our schools are mostly calm, well-managed places and poor behaviour is less of an issue now than it has been in the past (Ofsted, 2012). Teachers seem to agree; a recent survey, for example, found that 85 per cent of primary teachers reported that behaviour in their school was 'very good' or 'good' (Aston and Weaving, 2013). Despite this, there are ongoing issues relating to the low-level disruption that manifests in some schools. As a result, a new programme of unannounced inspections for schools has been introduced where behavioural standards are giving cause for concern (Ofsted, 2014).

This briefing looks at some of the effective whole-school and classroom-based approaches to improving behaviour. It is not intended to be an in-depth review of all behaviour management strategies and their effectiveness. Instead, it highlights key findings from a small number of relevant reports and research studies from England, which are of particular relevance to primary practitioners. This briefing:

- considers some of the research evidence on effective behaviour management

- details what some schools have done by providing case-study examples of behaviour management approaches and techniques implemented in primary school settings

- outlines what you can do in practice by summarising the key recommendations and action points from the research and guidance for primary school practitioners.

2 Effective behaviour management practices and approaches: evidence from the research

There is no single solution to the problem of poor behaviour, but all schools have the potential to raise standards if they are consistent in implementing good practice in learning, teaching and behaviour management (Steer, 2009, p. 26).

The following sections provide details of what key government reports and research studies say about effective school-level strategies and classroom-based approaches to behaviour management in the primary school setting.

2.1 Effective whole-school behaviour management approaches

2.1.1 School behaviour policy

A school's behaviour policy plays an essential role in achieving good behaviour across a school. According to Steer (2009), if a school behaviour policy is to be **meaningful** it needs to be **reviewed on a regular basis** and **communicated often** to pupils, staff and parents/carers. If this does not happen, it is unlikely to have much impact. Such policies should also be **informed by an audit of the behaviour needs within the school**. This should include the nature of the negative behaviours displayed by pupils; background details and characteristics of the individuals responsible; the location in which incidents occur and; an assessment of the successfulness of the interventions implemented.

It is a 'must do' document, but we find this to be supportive rather than restrictive. By having a common approach to what we call 'baseline issues' we support each other and pupils understand our expectations. Our policy is reviewed each year and is a subject for constant discussion (Steer, 2009, p. 20).

A study of primary and secondary schools in the North of England with high rates of deprivation identified differences in school ethos between schools that used exclusion from school as a disciplinary measure and those that did not. The research by Hatton (2012) found that staff in schools that excluded pupils tended to think that both teachers and pupils had insufficient understanding of the behaviour policy. There was also a view that staff did not take a consistent approach to behaviour management across school.

2.1.2 Staff development and support

All staff should be equipped with the skills to understand and effectively manage pupil behaviour. Providing **regular training**, which links classroom practice to an understanding of children's social and emotional development is key (Ofsted, 2005). Training and coaching should be made available to all staff taking up new posts at the school and form part of an ongoing training programme for existing staff. Staff development is just as important for

experienced staff as it is for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) *and* support staff. **A thorough induction programme** can help schools with a high staff turnover to ensure consistency in approach (Steer, 2009).

Top tips for ensuring effective staff training and development

☑ Ensure that all staff joining the school receive induction training that covers behaviour management.

☑ Provide opportunities for all staff to regularly share and develop their skills in promoting positive behaviour.

☑ Ensure funds are allocated within training budgets to enable support staff to be involved in training programmes with teachers.

☑ Create opportunities for staff to learn from the expertise of those with a particular responsibility for pupils whose behaviour is challenging (e.g. teachers who manage nurture groups, staff from Pupil Referral Units or other alternative provision, and specialist behaviour support staff).

☑ Develop the specialist skills of individual staff members that have particular leadership responsibilities for improving behaviour.

☑ Monitor the effectiveness of the behaviour management techniques used across the school as part of the school performance management system (Steer, 2009).

2.1.3 Leadership and management

Effective leadership is key to managing pupil behaviour. According to Ofsted (2005), the most difficult behaviour is almost always managed well in schools where senior leaders provide clear direction and reassurance to staff. These effective leaders monitor the management of pupil behaviour and their **regular presence** around the school creates a sense of calm and order. It is important for senior managers to observe the behavioural difficulties that class teachers experience so they have an understanding of the range of challenges they face. This helps to ensure that appropriate interventions are put in place across the school.

It is also essential to provide **regular opportunities for staff to discuss behaviour issues** and observe effective behaviour management practices within their own school and in other local schools. Good-quality written guidance on behaviour, for example, in staff handbooks and displayed in accessible places such as staffrooms, helps new staff to get up to speed with the specific standards and expectations of the school. Written guidance should be reinforced by a thorough staff induction programme, as well as ongoing reminders about behavioural expectations (Ofsted, 2005).

Our senior managers recognise that, as the term goes on and we get tired, we sometimes forget to follow through agreed practices. In briefings they gently remind us about simple things like smiling at children, saying good morning and getting to classrooms on time (Steer, 2009, p. 21).

2.1.4 Rewards and sanctions

According to Steer (2009), schools with good standards of behaviour achieve **a balance between the use of rewards and sanctions**. Praise is used to motivate and encourage pupils. At the same time, pupils need to be aware of the range of interventions and penalties that could be applied if they misbehave. In a survey of primary teachers, 18 per cent said their school uses same-day detentions and 46 per cent said they would use physical means to remove a disruptive pupil from the classroom (Aston and Weaving, 2013).

Practice example: Adopting a whole-school system of rewards and sanctions

In order to achieve a consistent approach to behaviour management, one primary school adopted a 'yellow card' system at lunchtimes. If any pupil exhibits poor behaviour they are given a yellow card. If they are awarded three cards at any one time, they receive an automatic detention. Any member of teaching or support staff can issue a card. A member of staff must witness and acknowledge the pupil displaying good behaviour on two separate occasions before they can return their yellow card back to a member of staff. Commenting on the success of the card system, a member of staff commented:

> *Initially we were inundated with cards but now the system acts as a deterrent and so we find that the number of cards in circulation is very small. A consistent approach to the use of the system by all staff is what has made it so successful.*

(Steer, 2009, p. 4)

2.1.5 Curriculum

In a report on the use of nurture groups for infant and primary age pupils with challenging behaviour, Ofsted outlined the key features of effective provision. Of the schools visited, inspectors found that **adopting a coherent curriculum** and setting **personalised and relevant targets** for pupils (which include academic, as well as social, emotional and behavioural elements), was particularly successful (DfE, 2012).

In a study looking at the adoption of a curriculum to promote pupils' emotional and social competencies to reduce behaviour problems in primary schools, Curtis and Norgate (2007) found that some teachers applied their own methods to make the curriculum more appealing and engaging. This included:

- Story-telling: teachers used stories to illustrate different emotions and, for pupils in older year groups, stories were used to help develop problem-solving skills. 'We do lots of freeze-framing stories, 'what should you do next?'.'

- Modelling: teachers found that talking to the children about their own emotions was very powerful. Through this, they were able to demonstrate that everyone is prone to feel angry or sad, even teachers, and that what is important is knowing how to appropriately manage those feelings in different situations.

- Role-play: teachers got the children to act out a story and adopt the facial and bodily expressions associated with the different emotions (Curtis and Norgate, 2007, p. 40).

2.1.6 Environment

Creating a sense of pride among pupils about their school has a positive impact on attitudes and behaviour. Ofsted acknowledges that in primary schools where play areas are well organised and supervised, poor behaviour is minimised. Schools which have **organised lunchtime activities** to engage pupils also experience improvements in behaviour. Those schools, which provide opportunities to **involve pupils in the design, improvement and maintenance of the buildings**, find this helps to create a sense of belonging among the pupils, which in turn helps to form positive attitudes about school. In the same way, creating **high-quality displays** celebrating pupils' achievements, which are evident in communal areas and classrooms, also helps to create a positive environment (Ofsted, 2005).
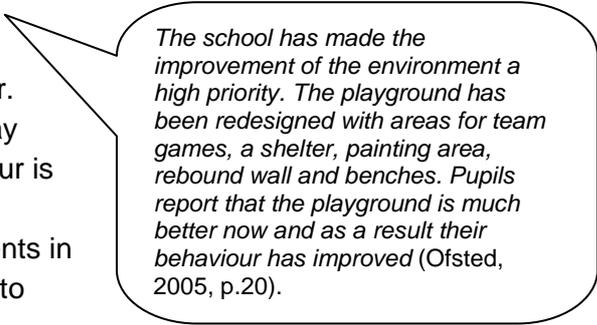
> *The school has made the improvement of the environment a high priority. The playground has been redesigned with areas for team games, a shelter, painting area, rebound wall and benches. Pupils report that the playground is much better now and as a result their behaviour has improved* (Ofsted, 2005, p.20).

2.2 Effective classroom behaviour management strategies

There is overlap between what can be implemented at a whole-school and at an individual classroom-level to manage pupil behaviour. The literature indicates that the strategies and approaches adopted at both levels should influence and reinforce each other to ensure good behaviour (DfE, 2012). Ensuring **a consistent approach** to behaviour management among all staff is seen as key.

Practice example: Adopting a consistent approach to behaviour management

A pupil became distressed during a literacy session, hitting his head on a table and kicking out. A teaching assistant sitting close to the pupil intervened quickly. She followed the clear guidelines for managing his behaviour, which consisted of removing him from the classroom. This was done rapidly but sensitively. After a short time the pupil returned to class. After five minutes the pupil became distressed again and the same procedure was followed, this time by the teacher. The teaching assistant carried on with the story and the pupil soon returned in a calm manner. Throughout the session, individual strategies for managing behaviour were implemented consistently between the teaching assistant and the teacher and disruption for other learners was avoided (Ofsted, 2005, p. 16).

In a report examining pupil behaviour in schools in England, the Department for Education (DfE) highlights a distinction between **proactive approaches** to discipline that aim to prevent negative behaviour and **reactive approaches** that take place after the misbehaviour

occurs. DfE suggests combining aspects of both approaches. For example, the use of proactive strategies such as adopting clear and consistent rules, alongside reactive methods such as having a whole-school discipline policy, ensures that pupils understand what behaviour is expected and what the consequences are if they break the rules (DfE, 2012).

A recent teacher survey showed that **a range of strategies** were used in the classroom by school staff to manage pupil behaviour. Broadly, teachers reported using proactive strategies more than reactive ones, and this was especially the case for primary teachers (Aston and Weaving, 2013).

Top tips for responding to inappropriate classroom behaviours

Consider adopting a combination of simple and more complex strategies including:

☑ Correcting errors: give brief, specific statements when a pupil displays an undesired behaviour. State the observed behaviour and inform the pupil of the correct behaviour that is required of them in the future.

☑ Giving performance feedback: help pupils to visually analyse changes in their behaviour to get them to understand what a situation might be like if they behaved differently. Specify a certain behaviour target for pupils to meet, with a reward if the target is met.

☑ Planned ignoring: withhold attention from a pupil when they are exhibiting undesired behaviour.

☑ Time out: remove the pupil from the situation, such as displaying inappropriate behaviour when playing with friends, to a different environment, such as an empty classroom, following an undesired behaviour.

☑ Group reinforcement: set expectations for the whole class in order to influence either the behaviour of the whole class or a particular group of pupils within the class (DfE, 2012 p. 83, 84)

The **active engagement of pupils** in lessons and other activities reduces the likelihood that they will become involved in disruptive behaviours. Practices identified in the research that encourage active engagement include increasing the opportunity to respond in lessons, for example, by asking pupils to answer in unison; setting practical activities; and through discussions and classroom debates (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.,* 2011). Some educational psychologists believe that the most effective way to deal with negative behaviour is to redirect the child's behaviour and at the same time praise the positive behaviour of another child (Hart, 2010).

> **Practice example: Actively engaging disruptive pupils**
>
> During story time, a teaching assistant read a story aloud and used interesting props to bring the story to life. A pupil with a short concentration span and poor social skills sat in a fairly calm manner for the introduction and first part of the story but soon became distressed as he was not actively involved. The teaching assistant quickly spotted this and deliberately asked him a question before he had time to demand attention through inappropriate behaviour. To answer the question he had to get up and select resources. He did this well, was praised for knowing the story and thanked for making a correct choice of resources. He smiled, returned to his seat and sat quietly for the rest of the story (Ofsted, 2005, p. 16).

Establishing **clear rules and expectations** for the whole class, as well as for specific individuals, also has an impact on classroom behaviour. Rules are particularly effective when they cover, for example, procedures for general classroom behaviour, group work interactions, transitions between activities, lesson interruptions, use of materials and resources, and conduct at the start and end of the school day (Marzano and Marzano, 2003). Rules also need to be clearly displayed for all pupils to see, and teachers and support staff need to continue to remind pupils of the rules verbally and monitor which rules are not being followed and by whom (DfE, 2012). Research shows that effective primary schools manage pupil behaviour by sensitively, and often privately, dealing with breaches of classroom rules. Staff sometimes use humour as part of this technique (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011).

Praising specific actions or incidences contingent on particular positive behaviours also helps to reinforce appropriate conduct among pupils. This approach was the most widely identified strategy for effective behaviour management in a study of the views of educational psychologists. Verbal praise was most commonly referred to as an effective means of reinforcing positive behaviours (Hart, 2010).

> **Practice example: Acknowledging and reinforcing positive behaviours**
>
> Each day, a different child is chosen as 'pupil of the day'. This child helps the teacher during the lesson, and receives compliments from the teacher and other children in the class. The compliments are written on a chart that is displayed in class and then sent home to the parents of the helper.
>
> Teachers felt that the introduction of 'pupil of the day' had a positive impact on children. They commented that the children were showing greater cooperation, empathy and self-control: 'When we sit down and we do our compliments they all know that they are going to have a turn so they sit really nicely for each other and they listen to each other'. The children also learn to generalise the skills they develop in the classroom to other situations. A teacher reported: 'one parent came into me when we had just completed the compliments section to tell me that her son had come home and said, 'oh thank you for my breakfast you're a very good cook', she said that he had never said that to her before. … He had said 'well mummy, that's a compliment'.
>
> The compliments also appear to help children's language development. In addition, as they progress through the year, they start thinking about behaviour and feelings rather than just physical qualities. So instead of just saying, 'she's good at doing something' or 'I like her shoes', they expand it to 'I like her smile, and when she smiles, it makes me smile' (Curtis, 2007, pp. 39–41).

Research shows that **creating a positive classroom climate** is key to effective behaviour management. Pupils are less disruptive and teachers are less likely to have to discipline children in classrooms where there are effective relationships, built on mutual respect and trust. It is important to establish and maintain a cheerful, happy and secure classroom setting that puts children at ease. It is also necessary to generate a positive energy for productive learning. This includes, for example, engaging in friendly chat or 'banter' with the children within well-established boundaries for what is acceptable behaviour (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011).

3 Conclusions and action points

In the context of the introduction of unannounced Ofsted visits to monitor behaviour in schools, this review of a small number of relevant reports and research studies has highlighted a range of best practice for managing whole school and classroom behaviour in primary schools. Here we sum up the key findings and present some practical whole-school and classroom-based behaviour management tips and techniques that you might implement.

At the school level: tips for headteachers and senior leaders

- Devise an appropriate and meaningful behaviour policy that is informed by an audit of the behaviour needs of your school.

- Review your behaviour policy regularly and communicate it often to pupils, staff and parents/carers.

- Ensure your induction programme for new staff covers behaviour management.

- Provide regular ongoing training and support for all staff to ensure consistency in approach across the school.

- Ensure the regular presence of senior management around your school.

- Provide regular opportunities for staff to discuss behaviour issues and observe good practice in managing behaviour from colleagues.

- Support your staff to develop an understanding that the needs of most pupils, even those with complex behavioural issues, can be met within the school environment.

- Develop a coherent curriculum which includes behavioural, social and emotional components alongside academic elements.

- Create a well-organised and visually appealing school environment and involve pupils in school design, where possible.

- Involve your pupils in the range of activities offered.

In classrooms: tips for teachers and support staff

- Ensure a consistent approach to behaviour management between teachers and support staff.

- Establish clear rules and expectations for the whole class, as well as for specific individuals.

- Display behaviour rules and codes of conduct for all pupils, teachers and support staff to see.

- Remind pupils of the rules verbally and monitor which rules are not being followed and by whom.

- Adopt a wide range of appropriate strategies to manage pupil behaviour.

- Use rewards more frequently than sanctions.

- Celebrate and reinforce positive behaviour using 'three-part praise' – (1) praising, (2) identifying the person receiving the praise and (3) specifying the behaviour that has earned that praise.

- Consider reward systems which enable children to work towards greater rewards if they repeat and keep up good behaviour.

- Use tangible rewards that mean something to pupils, for example extra free time.

Finally, did you know…

There is updated guidance from the DfE on the powers headteachers and school staff have to discipline pupils (DfE, 2014)?

Key points include:

- Teachers can discipline pupils for misbehaviour which occurs in school and, in some circumstances, outside of school.

- Unless the headteacher says otherwise, all paid staff with responsibility for pupils, such as teaching assistants, have the power to discipline pupils.

- Teachers can discipline pupils at any time the pupil is in school or elsewhere under the charge of a teacher, including on school visits.

- Teachers have a power to impose detention outside school hours.

- Teachers can confiscate pupils' property.

- Headteachers, proprietors and governing bodies must ensure they have a strong behaviour policy to support staff in managing behaviour, including the use of rewards and sanctions.

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