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WHY UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR MATTERS

> ‘Being listened to by someone who understands makes it possible for persons to listen more accurately to themselves, with greater empathy toward their own visceral experiencing, their own vaguely felt meanings.’
>
> (Carl Rogers)

The headlines

- Understanding the behaviour of the children you work with means you are better equipped to:
    - manage situations in your classroom
    - support children when they need you the most
    - support other colleagues
    - plan for success
    - reduce your own stress
    - build stronger relationships with parents.
- Think about children's behavioural development with the same attention to detail that you give their academic progress.
- Know the differences in a child's physical, emotional and cognitive development, and use that knowledge to inform your decisions on how to best help that child behave better.
- Teach children explicitly the language and behaviour of conflict resolution. Teach the differences between statements, promises and responsibilities.
- Be sensitive as to where and how feedback is given.
- Never use shame.
- Develop a culture where mistakes are used to push forward everyone's understanding.
- Understand that work avoidance can be an effective way to sidestep failure.
- Aim for independence. Children have got to be able to manage when we're not there any more.

It is self-evident why behaviour matters. If a child or children in your class are not behaving the way you need them to then they will be unable to take part in your lesson in the way you planned and to learn as well as you would like. In addition, there is the risk that the learning of other students is disrupted and this is unacceptable for obvious reasons. Sound simple? On one level, yes, it is simple, but for me this issue is a much broader and far deeper one. I worry that a proportion of the teaching profession have not taken their thinking beyond this and are, as a result, perennially frustrated. That is why *understanding* behaviour matters. A lack of understanding can leave a teacher feeling powerless, and there is nothing worse for a teacher than feeling that things are out of their control. This can become that sickening feeling that rises as time passes when, if you're a secondary school teacher, a lesson with a certain child or class approaches in the week or, if you're a primary school teacher, it is there constantly if you're struggling with a particular child.

Understanding what is going on behind the behaviour is important for a number of reasons:

- It means you are equipped with the knowledge and understanding to manage situations and improve the behaviour of children.
- You feel more confident to manage situations that may be unfamiliar to you. This confidence will manifest itself in that 'presence' mentioned earlier.
- You are more likely to plan for success in advance, knowing likely triggers and stressors and, as a result, there are fewer incidents to deal with, thus reinforcing your sense of professional confidence.
- You are better prepared to support the child or children at precisely the time when they need you the most, including the other children around the situation.
- You are better able to support colleagues in the heat of the moment or in a planned, coaching way.
- The stress that you may experience is likely to be lower as you retain a stronger sense of professional confidence.
- You build deeper trust with parents as they are reassured that you haven't written their child off as the naughty one and are seeking understanding in order to improve the child's behaviour.

Coping with the demands of the school environment and emotional self-regulation

Toddlers are inherently egocentric and parents make great efforts to teach them to share possessions with others, to learn to wait and to follow many other social norms. We are especially keen for these habits of emotional self-regulation and co-regulation (no one, including adults, gets by without the support of others, something we often forget) to be firmly in place by the time that young children start school, but the reality of life means that children start school at different levels of emotional development and some are less emotionally mature than others. When it comes to literacy and other aspects of cognitive development, we as teachers accept this entirely. We don't see it as a significant problem that some children are already reading and others are yet to recognise any initial letter sounds. We plan for this; we work out what the children can and can't do and use that knowledge to inform our teaching. But we are more likely to be critical of parents if a child is yet to attain what we regard as an acceptable level of emotional development and we can then unfortunately describe the child as 'not school-ready'. (We also do this with continence, interestingly, so the source is likely, in my view, to be because we are more likely to regard these matters as parenting and therefore not the job of teachers.)

We need to stop describing children as school-ready and start describing schools as child-ready

Professor Gert Biesta (2015: 4) describes this as the medicalisation of education, 'where children are being made fit for the educational system, rather than that we ask where the causes of this misfit lie and who, therefore, needs treatment most: the child or society.'

The structures, rules and expectations of schools and the presence of many more children than they are probably used to place demands on these young children, and some can find the transition from a home, childminder and/or nursery environment difficult to handle. There is a similar level of challenge when children move from primary school to secondary school. The rules and expectations may be broadly the same but the physical size of the school, the number of students there, the number of teachers the children have and the amount of homework, to name but a few factors, are all vastly greater. Coping with all these changes places great demands on 11-year-olds and this is why schools invest time in transition. It is no coincidence that a number of children leave mainstream secondary schools for specialist schools each year because they struggle with the social and organisational demands placed upon them. When I was first a Headteacher, a worrying quarter of our entire student population had started at a mainstream secondary school only to see their placement break down, ostensibly because of their behaviour, but there was almost always an underlying learning and/or communication difficulty that was not met well enough to enable the child to feel successful (how you define 'successful' for a child in a school is, of course, wide open to debate).

Spotting and understanding gaps in children's development

Early Years professionals are very good at working out what stage children are at in their emotional development and at building the skills of children over time.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that one of the core components of the Early Years Foundation Stage profile (the assessment framework for children before Year 1) is called Personal, Social and Emotional Development (split up into three areas: self-confidence and self-awareness; managing feelings and behaviour; making relationships).

I contend that teachers are generally less prone to think about the gaps in the emotional development of children the older the children get. With hindsight, I can see that thinking about the behaviour of children in this formative way – the same way that I and every other teacher in the land think about the academic work those same children are doing – would have helped me in my first few years as a teacher in a comprehensive school. It is certainly true that becoming a parent helped with this. Prior to that I had little to do with children below the age of 11 and had precisely no knowledge of child development (a major gap in my PGCE teacher training). Watching my own children grow from helpless newborns to speaking and then reading their first words, and understanding all of the steps that had to be in place for that to happen, filled in a lot of the gaps for me. It also helped me appreciate the problems that can surface when some of those steps are missing. I will never forget working with Dylan (mentioned in the Introduction). He had been abused as a baby and been adopted after a period of time in foster care. He can have no conscious memory of what happened to him as a baby, yet that abuse quite clearly had a significant effect on his emotional development and it manifested itself in his behaviour every single day 15 years later.

Looking for and understanding the gaps in the development of children is a skill that teachers in special schools would regard as second nature. They are used to their children having, as they would describe it, a 'spiky profile'. That is to say, the children are at different stages of maturity in their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development and teachers factor this into much of what they do. I've worked with teenagers going through puberty who may be working at the cognitive level of a 10-year-old and with the emotional maturity of a 5-year-old, for example. Failure to take these differences into account would be doing a disservice to that child.

REFLECTION POINTS

What is the quality of the information held in your school on the social and emotional development of your children?

Have a think about some of the children you're working with. I'll bet you could tell me the ins and outs of their academic progress in fine detail. Your school probably has spreadsheets, progress grids, tracker sheets, all neatly colour-coded to prove how well the children are doing academically. Think of the hours you spend feeding information into that machine. Now think about the depth of knowledge held in the school on the social, emotional and behavioural development of the children. There's probably no comparison. Almost all of what is known will be held

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separately in the heads of the staff working with those children. Many subjects are split into strands – reading, writing and speaking and listening in English, for example – yet, when we think of behaviour, we could just be bluntly imitating Father Christmas by essentially labelling children as good or naughty.

Tools such as the Boxall Profile (https://nurturegroups.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile) or Fagus (www.fagus.org.uk) can really help to fill any knowledge gaps in your school on the social and emotional development of the children you're all working with, set developmentally appropriate targets and then monitor how the children are getting on against those targets. Fagus, for example, divides social and emotional development into 13 domains: cognitive development, language development, attachment, self-concept, motivation and self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-control, awareness and understanding of others, socialisation, moral development, play, coping and self-awareness. There is a richness in there, with a psychological underpinning that allows you to move beyond thinking (labelling, in reality – see Chapter 2 on faulty thinking) of children as good or naughty.

Whilst a checklist or profiling tool doesn't improve behaviour by itself, it will shorten the time you spend action planning, will focus your efforts, and it does allow you to deepen collective knowledge and use a common language with your colleagues – and the parents too, don't forget – for the emotional development of the children with whom you are working. Crucially too, it will help you recognise and celebrate progress and successes with the child along the way. This can be really powerful in helping you and your colleagues sustain your efforts through a tough time as you can see that you're getting somewhere, and it can give parents confidence too that things are improving. It is far harder to do this when children are labelled good or naughty, for when does a child move from the good list to the naughty list? Let's leave that decision to Father Christmas. If you think that no teacher or school would do such a thing then consider the widespread use of names on the board for misdemeanours, or traffic light charts (see Chapter 6 for more on this).

- What will you now do differently?
- How can you improve on the quality of information held?
- What will you do with it?
- Who will you share it with?

Schools are intensely social places, so you can see that it is vital that all children we work with are able to manage the significant social demands each school day places on them. They also need to be able to manage the rigid nature of the school timetable. When the timetable says it is English, it is English, whether the child likes it or not, or, more likely, when the timetable says it is Mr O'Brien, it is Mr O'Brien (or Mr No'Brain as I was once brilliantly called), whether the child likes it or not. Primary teachers may have more flexibility and can extend an activity or lesson that is working very well and that they are loath to stop or, equally usefully, they can cut short a lesson that is dying on its feet (we've all been there). I had no such luxury as a secondary school physics teacher. When the bell went, off they trooped to the next lesson on their timetable. Many times, some of the children I taught would have loved an extra 20 minutes with me as they were either engrossed in black holes, magnetism or somesuch, and they felt they were doing really well, or they wanted to delay going to their next lesson. Equally, there will have been many times when some of the children I taught couldn't wait for the lesson with me to finish, either because of my lesson itself or because they couldn't wait to get to their next lesson. Either way, they had to manage the disappointment or elation of leaving my classroom and head off to their next lesson with a sense of anticipation, dread or indifference.

REFLECTION POINTS

How do you prepare children for changes, both expected and unexpected, during the school day?

Teachers and support staff who work with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can sometimes spend significant amounts of time working on transitions. Not just moving from lesson to lesson, but often managing the changes between activities in a lesson – moving from the story on the carpet to written work on the group tables in an infant class, for example, or from a science experiment to analysing the data on a computer in secondary. They extend this to preparing children for changes such as the absence of the expected teacher due to illness, or at times of the year such as Christmas or the end of the school year when large parts of the established routine can be changed.

Are there children that you work with who would benefit from some preparation for changes within lessons and between lessons or for unexpected changes such as staff absence? There are many ways to do this, but failing to do it will simply result in some children filling the void with concern or anxiety, which makes things harder for all of you. For some children, a conversation is all it takes. They are simply made aware of what is coming up that is different, and that is enough. For others, it might take the form of a First–Next–Last visual strip on their desk. First – English (Miss Hardy), Next – Break time (playground), Last – PE (Mrs Ormerod). A colleague of mine works with a small class of students, all of

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whom have autism. Their morning tutor time routine involves the construction of their colour-coded timetable each day, comprising the lesson, the teacher and the location on Velcro strips. Changes such as staff illness are communicated each morning in this way and the children carry these timetables around with them all day, depositing them each lesson in a specially prepared box as they arrive at the classroom. The level of detail required quite clearly depends on the needs of each child, but the basic structure is the same.

- What approaches does your school currently take to supporting transitions and changes?
- After reading the above, will you now do anything differently?

Lastly, you won't be surprised to learn that there is research that shows that self-regulation has a stronger correlation with school-readiness (the researchers' words, not mine) than IQ or entry-level reading or maths skills (Blair and Raver, 2015), can lead to higher academic achievement (Blair and Razza, 2007), and that teachers can have a positive effect on children's self-regulation skills (Burchinal et al., 2000). Professor Linda J. Graham from the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has conducted recent research on this (2016, webpage), commenting that:

> we're finding that children's ability to self-regulate has a large bearing on educational outcomes and that self-regulation is affected by many things, including age and gender. Unfortunately, this sets some kids up for conflict with their teachers, some of whom find it difficult to understand why some of the children in their class find it difficult to control their bodies and emotions, whilst other children seem not to have any problem at all.

Managing conflict and disagreement

That ability to regulate one's own emotions in order to cope with the demands of school is clearly vital, but it is a skill that has wider benefits. Children falling out with each other at school is as predictable as a downpour on a bank holiday weekend, but we expect children to move on from the toddler-type reaction of hitting another child over the head with the plastic toy that the other child is trying to take from them. Teachers all over the world spend precious time supporting children to resolve conflicts with each other; this is time that could, if freed up by their ability to manage conflict and disagreement on their own – or, more preferably, avoid it happening in the first place – be put to good use tackling the lengthy to-do lists that we all have.

Children who manage relationships well and deal with conflict and disagreement in a mature way are, I contend, more likely to grow up to be adults who manage relationships well and deal with conflict and disagreement in a mature way. I saw the other, ugly side of this when I worked for Thames Valley Police. A significant amount of my time as a Special Constable was spent dealing with conflict and disagreement between adults, including domestic violence, that had escalated to violence against other people (or themselves) or property, sometimes fuelled by alcohol or other drugs. The financial cost to the state, and the costs, financial, emotional and otherwise to them, their victims and the families involved on either side, were significant. Getting things right as early as possible is the best preventative strategy available. There will be more on the use of restorative practices in Chapter 7.

Explicit teaching of the language of resolution and what resolution actually looks like pays off with children. Mark Finnis, a restorative practices trainer, makes a big deal of the fact that there is a world of difference between statements and gestures, promises and responsibilities.

Statements such as 'I'm really sorry for hitting you' can indeed be heartfelt and sincere, but they carry with them no commitment to behave differently in the future. Sorry is a word we hear time and again in schools, but it can be a throwaway remark; it can be cheap. For many children (and adults, if we're honest), it is the learned response to a situation that marks in their mind that they've apologised, and that is all that is required to make the situation better; mentally they move on without giving the situation or people caught up in it another thought. It is a learned response because adults have led them to understand that this is the way problems are resolved. 'Say sorry,' and, as far as the child can see, that is the end of the matter. 'Say it like you mean it!' may well follow if the teacher is not satisfied that enough remorse has been demonstrated. This can unhelpfully escalate a situation and, as Bill Rogers (2002) says, 'It's tempting to want to confront, even embarrass, students in order to "win" – but win what?' Promises such as 'This won't happen again' certainly do contain a commitment to behave differently in the future and you can see how children can be held to account for those promises at a later time if problems do reoccur. Questions such as 'How can I fix our friendship?' are where the real power lies. Imagine the kinds of discussions you can support (and you undoubtedly do need to support these kinds of discussions, especially with younger children, for them to become meaningful) when the children talk in this way. There will be more detail in Chapter 7 on this, including scripts to help you get started.

I had one such conversation with two teenagers who came to blows in a football match one break time. One of the two boys was desperate to get the meeting over with and kept repeating 'sorry, sorry, I'm really sorry'. Interestingly, he was saying this to me and not the other boy, presumably because he thought that pacifying me was what was required, rather than repairing the relationship with his peer. He struggled when I asked him to explain why he was sorry and what he was actually sorry for. The discussion needed to be managed by me for it to be meaningful, and getting to the point where both were able to talk about their responsibilities towards each other in the future took time. But it was time well spent.

Interestingly one week after I'd written the paragraph above, I was asked to talk to two more boys, both 13, about a falling out they'd had during a different football match (yes, yes, I know. I need to look at what's happening on the astroturf at break- and lunchtimes). When I approached them in the playground, I said that I needed to get them together and, before I could even finish my sentence, Faisal said to me, 'Don't worry about it, sir. We've sorted it out between ourselves.' 'Are you happy with that, Eddie?' I asked of the other child. 'Yep, all done,' he replied and off they went. Ideally, they wouldn't have fallen out in the first place, but resolving their difference themselves indicated a level of maturity, saved me time and means they are more likely to do so again in the future should further disagreements or conflict happen and, I hope, reduce the likelihood of such things actually reoccurring at all.

Reducing bullying

It follows that children who are emotionally secure, good at getting on with other people and good at resolving disagreement are less likely to bully others or be resistant to being bullied themselves. Every school experiences bullying, and resolving it swiftly is always a priority for teachers and school leaders. However, bullying can persist and this is problematic for all concerned. Parents can lose confidence if they feel a teacher's or school's strategies are ineffective as they rightly demand that their child be free from harm whilst in your care. Restorative practices are one of the most effective ways to reduce bullying and, ideally, prevent it rearing its ugly head later on. As with managing conflicts and disagreements above, I will cover restorative practices in Chapter 7.

This parental confidence was sorely tested when I first became a Headteacher. A mother and father, two of our school's strongest advocates, met with me repeatedly over the course of a couple of weeks as I grappled with a bullying problem that their son was coping with. I explained how we would resolve this using restorative means, but the mother said pointedly, 'Everything you're saying sounds very nice. Trouble is, I don't believe you. I don't believe this will actually work.' All I could weakly say in response was that they would judge me by how things panned out. The bullying stopped. Admittedly it took a little longer than I was content with, but it stopped. The father later told me that they were 'this close' (think of the smallest gap you can indicate with your fingers, halve it and then halve it again) to taking their son out of our school.

As a Headteacher, I could have used fixed-term exclusion (suspending a child for one or more days from school) as a punishment and, knowing the parents of the victim well, this would have met with some immediate approval. I know, though, that the situation would have remained unresolved and the attitude of the bully unchanged. Yes, the bully may have spent a short period of time away from the school, thus ensuring that the victim was free from bullying for that time, but it would have done nothing to improve his behaviour. The thinking behind the idea that simply by being away from school for a period of time changes the behaviour of any child is superficial. It is sometimes portrayed as a 'short, sharp shock', the logic being that the child is stunned into improving their behaviour because they are upset or traumatised at the thought of being prevented from attending school. This logic – simply a question of the attitude of the child – is, at best, tenuous. As Patrick, a former student of mine (again, one who left a secondary school because of his behaviour), so neatly put it when we were discussing exclusion, 'Easy. Excluded means a lie-in and Xbox.' The point that usually follows, that exclusion is a deterrent and an example is set to others is, I am convinced, wishful thinking.

This approach can be a hard sell to some teachers as it can seem permissive or soft. I am determined to improve behaviour. I am not interested in grand gestures to show how tough I am as a teacher or school leader, although I used to be. If bullying reoccurs once the child is back in school then I have done nothing to support the children, staff or parents. It leads down a road to permanent exclusion which means the victim is no longer bullied by that child at school, but the other child is elsewhere, behaviour unchanged and with a deeper feeling of negativity and rejection about school in general, potentially repeating the same behaviours towards another child. I will cover this in more detail in Chapter 6 on sanctions, punishments and consequences.

Coping with feedback and criticism

Have you ever been on the receiving end of some criticism of your work? It doesn't feel good, does it? Clearly it matters how the message is delivered, but the bottom line is that, even with the gentlest delivery, someone else holds the view that your work and, by extension, you if you take it personally (which is hard not to do and I certainly have a tendency to do so), is not good enough. Not convinced? Tell your partner what you really think about their driving the next time you're in the car together. And don't say I didn't warn you.

> Your thinking is pedestrian and you have no leadership skills whatsoever.
>
> (Feedback on my application to the Fast Track school leadership programme, 2004)

The heavy feeling in the pit of your belly, the same one I got (and can still feel) when the comment above was said to my face, can be magnified if you've put everything you've got into that piece of work and that feeling can be doubly strong if the person delivering the message is very important to us. The cocktail of emotions that can surface as a result needs to be managed somehow. As adults, we may have significant flexibility in our working day so that we can cope with this by deciding to walk around the block in our free period or call our partner or a colleague for advice. Besides, if our boss has an ounce of humanity, the discussion will have been in private anyway. It's not likely that the feedback from a lesson observation that we spent the night before fretting about would be delivered in a staff meeting in front of 30 of our colleagues. The children we work with, perhaps in full view of their peers, may have to simply sit there and take it on the chin. Clearly, for the majority of children receiving feedback is a part of school life that they are used to and accept. They cope with advice in the form of written marking and verbal feedback all the time and see it as positive. They accept that it is given with the best intentions and not used to shame them publicly because their relationship with the teacher is on solid ground and they use that feedback to improve their work, but this is not universal.

I still feel sad when I recall how Mrs Rogers publicly ridiculed my attempts to identify tenths, hundredths and thousandths when I was in primary school:

> 'Which number is in the tenths column?'
>
> 'Three?' [tentatively]
>
> 'Wrong! Try again.'
>
> 'Eight?' [weakly]
>
> 'Wrong! Try again.'
>
> I was resorting to guessing now. I blush easily so I must have been puce by this point.
>
> 'Nine?' [barely whispering]
>
> 'You don't have a clue! You could do with being like Elaine sat next to you.'

I didn't know what that meant then and I don't know even now. What's worse is that I had a thing for Elaine and felt sure that this public dressing down ruined my chances with her. Well over 30 years ago now, but the legacy of that minute remains to this day.

When my son was younger, his lovely primary school helpfully laid out all the children's exercise books on parents' evenings so we could leaf through them whilst we were waiting to see the teacher. It was clear that the school at that time had a policy of getting the children to respond in written form to the teacher's marking. I noticed in my son's books, but not in my daughter's interestingly, that he had two stock responses to comments from the teacher. If the teacher's comments were in the form of praise (or, as he would say, positive), he would always write 'Thank you' afterwards. Polite, but essentially a complete waste of time and done presumably to prove that he had read the feedback. If the teacher's comments were formative (or, as he would say, negative), he would always write 'I'm sorry. I'll try harder next time.' I did feel quite sad after reading that a number of times. My daughter did no such thing and I put this down to the fact that she has a much more confident sense of herself as a learner than my son does, which showed in his responses. His hold on his confidence as a learner is fragile and it doesn't take too much to convince him that the task at hand is too difficult and well worth quitting.

I'll mention a few times in this book that learning needs to be an intrinsically rewarding experience. Without this sense of satisfaction that comes with the knowledge that you are making progress (and I don't mean in the way we have bastardised the word in teaching these days to mean the next tick on the assessment database), we can view criticism or feedback as reasons to give up or avoid work altogether.

Your well-intentioned feedback may be taken as scathing criticism

In large part, feedback is delivered sensitively by teachers with due regard for the dignity of the child and in the context of a secure, trusting relationship, but there are some avoidable practices that still seem to persist that increase the temperature in relationships and classrooms unnecessarily. Two that trouble me most are:

- Reading out grades and test scores in front of the whole class.
- Public displays ranking students on the basis of attainment.

Nothing good can come from either of these practices. I am ashamed to say that I was guilty of reading out test scores to my Year 10 and Year 11 classes when I first started teaching, largely out of expediency and certainly with no regard to the dignity of the children. Some of the children must have been sitting there dreading the time when their name came up, immediately followed by a number that marked them out as an arbitrary success or failure. Those children just sat there and took it, but some will have hated me for it, others waiting eagerly for public confirmation of their prowess. I see that it is becoming increasingly popular in England for secondary schools to display achievement boards around their site, ranking children on the basis of grades and test scores, with children heading for a hatful of 8s and 9s at the top and those getting a couple of 1s or 2s at the bottom. The ham-fisted logic that lauds one child's achievement at the expense of another, and without any regard to their needs or difficulties, is worrying. The child with a learning difficulty who works away at their studies day after day and makes great progress still gets the clear message that they are a failure. The flawed reasoning that we are motivating the children at the bottom of these charts to up their game and get to the top is offensive (see Chapter 5 for more on motivation), as is the assumption behind it which is that their relatively low attainment is simply a result of a lack of effort. I challenge any teachers or leaders employing such tactics to do the same for the staff they manage. Rank them in a big, colourful display based on some arbitrary achievement scale in the staffroom – or better, in the reception area for parents and visitors to see – and set the watch on how long it stays up for. You're on safer ground criticising your partner's driving.

Managing disappointment, getting things wrong and dealing with failure

Have you ever avoided applying for a promotion at school because you convinced yourself that the Headteacher had already made her mind up that Steve in the Maths Department would get the job? Or maybe you know someone else who has done that? This is not behaviour limited to teachers. We protect ourselves with a prophesy that becomes self-fulfilling. We don't put ourselves forward in order to protect ourselves from the painful feelings of rejection. We lie to ourselves by maintaining the certainty that we never stood a chance, so we would be wasting our time even to apply in the first place. If we were honest with ourselves, we would admit that it's safer for our ego to avoid the chance of failure altogether than to take the risk that we might actually succeed. I've seen adults, including myself, do this many times and justify to themselves that it is OK, yet it can go unrecognised in school when children do it, or be met with punishment. I will go into more detail on avoidance of failure in Chapter 2 on how psychology can help your understanding, but if we recognised it for what it is and responded accordingly, our relationships would be stronger for it.

The late Donald Winnicott, a paediatrician who studied psychoanalysis and did influential work developing the concept of 'holding environments' – that is to say, caring and supporting environments that lead to a firm sense of trust and safety – suggested that it is a duty of parents to slowly but surely disappoint their children; knowing when to say no and being clear with their children that they are not their friend. Substitute 'teacher' for 'parent' above and this still holds true. We are not in this job to indulge children to meet their every whim, but nor are we there to ignore their feelings entirely, in the way I did when I read out test scores to the whole class.

One of the things I loved most when I was a Headteacher was watching my superb colleagues create a culture in their classrooms where mistakes were opportunities to address misconceptions and build on and deepen knowledge. Getting things wrong, struggling and failure were a regular occurrence, but the students knew that they would be met with unstinting support and encouragement. We were working with children with learning difficulties – some had been hammering away in various ways at their number bonds to 10, 20 or 100, or their initial letter sounds, for a decade, so they were intimately acquainted with feelings of struggle and failure. If mistakes were seen by the children as risks to avoid (and many children came to our school feeling that way) then it is no surprise that work avoidance follows. I summarised to visitors that our students needed to know that *we were there to catch them, not catch them out*.

The best teachers use the errors that children make and the misconceptions they bring to a topic in a positive way, coupled with skilful questioning to deepen the children's knowledge and understanding. You can just ask children if the Earth orbits the Sun or if the Sun orbits the Earth and do a Mrs Rogers on them if they get it wrong (they'll keep guessing until they guess 'correctly'), or you can elicit from them by skilful questioning why they may initially think otherwise and draw them towards what really happens, deepening their understanding of physics in the process. You can achieve some serious depth in a discussion with children when you ask them if a snowman melts quicker or more slowly if you put a coat on him. (Have a think. There is a *lot* of physics in this!) Of course, you could just ask them to guess and tell them off if they get it wrong. 'Quicker, er … I mean slower!' as they look for the subtle cues on your facial expression that indicate if they guessed correctly. In classrooms such as these, the children can offer their views, safe in the knowledge that their answer, however wide of the mark, is welcomed and makes a positive contribution to the lesson. They also know, however, that their answer is likely to result in further questioning to elicit the reasoning behind it. Guessing is no good, as they need to adopt a position they can defend. A child can maintain that the Earth is flat – a perfectly reasonable conclusion for children given the evidence in front of them – but they can improve their communication skills by defending a position with clarity and precision, and improve their reasoning skills if they have to change their mind when the evidence shows that their initial thoughts were, in fact, wrong. Simply telling them otherwise is a missed opportunity. There is an open goal here for children to think hard – and it is a characteristic of classrooms such as these that the children are expected to think hard. (I was introduced to Rosalind Driver et al.'s (1994) excellent book on research into children's ideas about science as a student teacher. I always included a section on lesson plans and schemes of work for common misconceptions about the topics we were covering, and this was invaluable. I would deliberately provide opportunities in lessons to cover these, such as the common misconception that there is no gravity on the Moon as it has no atmosphere.) Times such as these improved my communication skills too – try explaining to a child how you can *prove* that the Earth is a sphere or that it orbits the Sun and not the other way round without saying you read it in a book or saw a picture of it!

REFLECTION POINTS

Let's think what might begin to explain work avoidance

Do you work with any children that reject work out of hand before they even begin, or perhaps before they've even seen what it is they'll be doing? Do you work with any children who may even refuse to come into the lesson to begin with? What could be at the heart of that avoidance? Writing? Reading? Speaking? A body image problem (if it's PE)?

Think back to Seanie in the Introduction. Avoiding writing with a paper-thin excuse was preferable to displaying to all who could see that he couldn't write as well as he would like. Any consequence was preferable as it would inevitably involve less or no writing. Mission accomplished.

- How might you approach work avoidance in the future? Are there ways you could pre-empt this happening?

Supporting a successful adult life

I have worked in a broad range of different schools with children with very varying levels of needs, some cognitive, some medical and some behavioural. Almost all of those children were, without a shadow of a doubt, going to go on to live and work independently. But some, those with the more significant support needs, had a mountain to climb to achieve full independence in both their personal and working lives, and some, sadly, never got there. Part of that independence is the ability to regulate our own emotions and our conduct as soon as we can. Society understands this when we walk past a toddler lying on the floor of the toy shop, crying and screaming that he can't get the toy he wants, with the hard-pressed parent doing her or his best to manage the situation and the expectations of the child, and find a resolution without caving in to the child by buying the toy. Society is less forgiving when the person lying on the floor crying and screaming is an adult who is six feet tall and 15 stone. I often used a memorable but less traumatic example to explain this to visiting parents when they toured my school when I was a Headteacher. For a number of years, one of our students, Louise, had a habit of impersonating Alan Sugar.

'You're fired,' she would quip to anyone within sacking distance, delivering the famous *coup de grace* from the reality television show *The Apprentice*.

This was incredibly funny and difficult not to laugh at, yet it became so common that we had to work hard to ensure Louise didn't behave inappropriately and that we didn't encourage her by our responses. We were very successful with this and were feeling very pleased with ourselves. Soon after, we were delighted to learn that Louise had been invited to the annual children's Christmas party at 10 Downing Street, hosted by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his wife, Samantha. Louise was fortunate enough to meet the then Prime Minister and – you can guess what's coming next – the first thing she did was to tell David Cameron that he was fired. On the face of it, brilliantly funny, and I'm sure David Cameron was a good sport. However, it feeds the narrative of low expectations from society of some young people, especially those with learning difficulties whom society can infantilise even when they become adults. Louise has Down syndrome and society, in my experience, can infantilise people with this syndrome or with other syndromes or learning difficulties. They expect less from them and allow, either by encouraging or by ignoring, behaviours that they wouldn't accept from people of the same age without special educational needs. In fairness, I'm sure this is, in part, because many people don't actually know the extent of someone's difficulties and, therefore, what it is OK to accept. It's one thing to say that to the Prime Minister on a social occasion, but quite another for it to be your opening remark to anyone and everyone you meet – it becomes a significant barrier to securing employment for starters.

It boils down to this: They've got to be able to manage when they walk out of our schools for the final time and we're not around to support them anymore.

Reducing teacher stress

Last but not least, a better understanding of behaviour that leads to improved behaviour will reduce the stress we feel (and, importantly, the stress of the children involved too) as a result. This can only be a good thing.

NASUWT, a large British teaching union, carries out an annual survey called The Big Question. Its 2019 survey (NASUWT, 2019), completed by over 5,500 teachers, notes a steady increase in concerns about behaviour in each year from their 2014 survey:

> Over four fifths (82%) of teachers said that they think there is a widespread behaviour problem in schools today [77% in 2016] and over half (56%) of teachers stated that they believe there is a behaviour problem in their particular schools [44% in 2016]. More than four fifths (87%) [actually over five-sixths] of teachers believe that there is an issue of low-level disruption amongst the pupils they teach.

The survey also notes that 'Almost two fifths (39%) of teachers said that they were not given the appropriate training to deal with poor pupil behaviour'. Perhaps that's one reason you're reading this book.

Understanding behaviour does matter. It matters for the sake of the child and it matters for the sake of the teacher. Improving our understanding takes an investment in time and energy, but I can assure you that it's worth it. We are the adults in these situations and we need to take responsibility for helping the children understand their own behaviours so that they learn over time to be able to manage without our support, to achieve the independence that they need to be successful adults.

TAKING IT FURTHER

Questions and activities for you and your colleagues

- Do we expect our newest children to be school-ready, or do we unconditionally welcome them as they are and start from there?
- Do we think about the behavioural development of the children that concern us with the same attention to detail that we give their academic progress?
    - o Consider ways in which you can assess the social and emotional development of these children.
    - o Use this to start using a common language when discussing the development of these children.

(Continued)

- How do we prepare children for planned or short-notice changes to their routines? Do they need more structure, perhaps in the form of visual support, beyond merely telling them?
    - o Consider building timetable construction into the start-of-the-day routine for children for whom changes can be problematic.
- Are we teaching children how to resolve conflicts between themselves? Do we explicitly teach the language and behaviour of conflict resolution? Do we teach the differences between statements, promises and responsibilities?
    - o Consider training up a member of staff to become the resident restorative approaches lead.
- Are some of our feedback policies inadvertently shaming children in public? Can we improve here by considering the dignity of the children and improving our relationships at the same time?
- We all want our classrooms to be, as Winnicott would describe, 'holding environments' – that is to say, caring and supporting environments that lead to a firm sense of trust and safety for everyone in the room. Are there any children who have yet to attain that feeling of security? Can we work out what's missing? What will we need to do to help them feel secure?
- Is failure avoidance behind the behaviour we see for those who seem to avoid certain activities or lessons? If so, how can we reduce the chances of failure?
- Are we over-supporting, leading to a dependence over time from the child towards adults?
- Do we allow some children to display age-inappropriate behaviours, such as hugging?

Further reading

- **Child development** – As a secondary school teacher, and before I was a parent, I knew little about child development. This interactive online resource from the NHS is very helpful in allowing us to understand what is typical for children at different ages. It also includes a very good set of sensory questionnaires for vision, hearing, touch, smell/taste, body awareness and movement/balance, with strategies and suggestions. www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/child-development
- **Making education meaningful and ensuring teachers are thoughtful in their actions** – We met Professor Gert Biesta at the beginning of this chapter. In this video (between 11:45 minutes and 19:15 minutes), he provides us with some provocative questions about the nature of education. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg7onT_WUdw

- **Attachment theory** – With Dylan, the adopted child from earlier in the chapter, in mind, this short article by Dr Pam Jarvis, Honorary Research Fellow at Leeds Trinity University, is a great introduction to attachment theory and the role that cortisol dysfunction plays in stress management and the impact it can have on emotional and cognitive functioning. 'Four things teachers need to know about attachment theory', *Times Educational Supplement*. www.tes.com/news/4-things-teachers-need-know-about-attachment-theory
- **Adversity** – For those wanting more after reading the article above, here are two further resources:
    - A podcast from the *Times Educational Supplement* in which Jon Severs interviews Professors Essi Viding and Eamon McCrory from University College, London – 'What every teacher needs to know about the impact of trauma'. www.tes.com/news/what-every-teacher-needs-know-about-impact-trauma
    - NHS Highland's 'The annual report of the Director of Public Health (2018) – Adverse childhood experiences, resilience and trauma informed care: A public health approach to understanding and responding to adversity' provides much on the impacts of trauma and adversity throughout the lives of the children we teach who have had such experiences. www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/Publications/Documents/DPH-Annual-Report-2018_(web-version).pdf
- **Transition** – Another *Times Educational Supplement* podcast in which Jon Severs interviews Professors Stan Tucker and Dave Trotman from Newman University – 'The problem of transition: Why "taster" days don't work'. www.tes.com/news/problem-transition-why-taster-days-dont-work

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