

2 simple things

Enlisting parents' support to develop children's literacy can also improve behaviour, says Paul Dix. But sticking to a couple of straightforward requests is key to getting them on board.

I have a soft toy; a fox, who sits on my bed. Not the most manly confession, but yes, at 41, I have a fox who sits on my bed. The fox came with a name, 'Medium Bashful Fox'. My four-year-old asked me his name. Now it would have been far simpler to call him Fox, Foxy or Foxy Fox. Easy, simple, curiosity satisfied. But no, his name is Medium Bashful Fox - an absurd and joyful name that it seemed a shame to replace. After a minute or two of enjoyable rehearsing, the phrase 'Medium Bashful Fox' now trips off my child's tongue. We discussed the meaning of bashful, the absurdity of measuring bashfulness and the contradictions in the name. Does 'medium' refer to size or bashfulness? Why might a fox be bashful? How did he become bashful? Questions were fast and furious.

My four year old now impresses his brother and friends with his new words, has adopted a certain amusing intonation with them and has learned that 'shy' means 'bashful'. He tells anyone who cares to listen that it is not just a fox but daddy's Medium Bashful Fox (and it has to stay on his bed). I could have called him Fox, Foxy or Foxy Fox. I'm so glad I didn't.

Now I don't want you to run away with the idea that my life is

spent renaming items in an amusingly descriptive fashion ('has anyone seen my small, demure lager?'), but I strive to talk to children with appropriate adult vocabulary. Even when they were babes-in-arms I did the same. People would ask me who I was talking to as they heard me pushing the pram and having a grown up conversation. Some were utterly incredulous that I should even bother talking to a baby. But I remembered speaking to children who had been home-schooled and being blown away by their vocabulary range and by their linguistic skill. It always outstripped that of children who were in school. Parents and children had learned how to 'talk up'. They were completely comfortable in dialogue with an extended vocabulary and a fuller range of intonation than you would hear in a playground.

We spend a great deal of time trying to 'engage' parents. We ask a great deal of them in a thousand different ways, from mundane requests for adjustments to uniform, to 'help' making a Roman shield, to quiz nights, parents evenings and charity raffles. 'Engagement' can seem daunting to many, perhaps overwhelming for some. Raise the bar too high and it seems unreachable and

children simply give up. So it goes for parents - so let's keep it simple for them. Ask them to do two small things that have a disproportionately positive impact on literacy and, in turn, behaviour: read to their child for 15 minutes a day and 'talk up' to them constantly.

The roots of extreme behaviour

Somewhere around the end of Y2 and beginning of Y3, children become keenly aware of their rank in the class. The dawning realisation that others can read and write faster and more accurately is a difficult moment. As others sprint off into the distance some children are still trying to find the starting line. I rarely meet a child with extreme behaviour who is not behind in their literacy. At the end of the race the truth is stark: 66-90% of young offenders have below average language skills (Bryan K, Freer J, Furlong C, 2007). I still find it incredible that we focus so much energy on 'getting children to behave' when their behaviour is simply a natural defensive reaction to feelings of embarrassment and shame at their false start. Last week I came across another example. A behaviour record sheet

told a story of a disturbed and dangerous child, uncontrollable, angry and aggressive. Delving a little deeper it was clear that this child engaged in every lesson where reading and writing were absent. You don't need to be Miss Marple to work out the cause of the behaviour.

The link between low literacy levels and poor behaviour is the oldest relationship in school. It's a relationship that millions of pounds are thrown at to try to split it up. Ideas spring from the think tanks, the politicians and the quick fix culture as if there was no yesterday. In the search for the final solution to behaviour issues, it is easy to start believing that the answer is just over the next hill, or can be bought with the next budget instalment. The truth is that we stand on the shoulders of giants.

66-90%

Percentage of young offenders who have below average language skills - BRYAN K, FREER J, FURLONG C, 2007

Set achievable targets

Reading to their child every day is one simple thing that all parents can achieve. Many will start off doing this without prompting, few sustain it throughout the primary years. Reading to your child is so much more than a lesson in reading. It is modelling, teaching comprehension, extending vocal skills and the range of intonation. It drip feeds literacy over time. It is an essential contribution by the parents that teachers cannot substitute.

Of course we would love every parent to be a perfect model of outstanding parenting, advanced literacy and exceptional behaviour. The cards don't fall like that. You know this already as you have a sharp echo of each parent sitting in your class.

Really tricky homes where some of the trickiest children emerge from simply cannot deal with the level of engagement that is expected by most schools. They are treading water, and

demands for more time, involvement and attention fall with the parents as they may have already failed with the child. Simple consistencies work. Even the busiest parents can accomplish them. Too many demands for time and attention can fall like half ignored bills and pile up on the mat.

I want the parents to feel as though they are successful parents, just as I want the children to feel successful in their learning. Ask for too much too soon and everyone feels like a failure. I would forgo the lengthy parent consultations, the emails, letters, text campaigns, contracts and appeals for involvement in exchange for the two simple promises.

The answer to tricky behaviour lies in accelerating literacy. Accelerating literacy relies on doing simple things brilliantly.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Dix is a behaviour expert with his feet firmly rooted in the classroom. See pivotaleducation.com for free apps, tips and a fantastic online behaviour management course.



Who's leading reading support?

In so many schools the most difficult to teach and those who struggle most with their learning are led by those who are least qualified. I have lost count of the schools where reading support is led by an adult who has no specialist understanding or even teaching qualification. Excellent LSAs or mentors they may be. Experts in helping children to read they are not. We are all rightly concerned for those who don't learn to read properly. We need to look at how we organise our staffing to best support these children.