

# Born to be BAD?



Extreme and disruptive behaviour is not often without cause, so working with troubled and angry children requires a more flexible and understanding approach, says Paul Dix...

**W**e plan our delivery of the curriculum in minute detail. Hours are spent poring over lessons, differentiating materials and preparing resources. But how much time do we spend planning for behaviour? Very little. We tend to rely on our improvisation skills, our authority and our experience. We often take a light touch approach to planning for behaviour. It is an afterthought. The imbalance seems perverse and it is often encouraged by advisors who claim that good behaviour is simply a product of good lessons. They obviously haven't met Carly, tried to remove her from her snug in the coat rack or spoken to her mum who wants to put her into care. The suggestion is extreme behaviours that emerge from emotional trauma, neglect and abuse can be smoothed over with engaging lessons. How utterly convenient for inspectors. How utterly ludicrous to the rest of us.

The separation of how a child behaves and his or her identity is crucial. If you are to change

## One in five secondary school children have been severely abused or neglected during childhood

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behaviour it is important to remember that the arguments, defiance and liberal chair throwing are temporary. Your relationship is ongoing. If you put your relationship with the child on the line during the daily firefight, you risk damaging it in the heat of the moment: "Darren, you are being difficult. You are always wandering around. You are being silly, naughty and awkward". The truth is that if you teach Darren his identity and his behaviour are the same thing, that he is naughty in his DNA and there is nothing to be done, he will come to believe you. Unravelling this can take a lifetime, as I know all too well.

From the moment my parents divorced, my teachers saw me as trouble, challenging, aggressive and bad. That was the moment they decided to beat me, to force the bad behaviour to go away. They managed my behaviour so badly that I believed I was born to be bad. "Of course I am angry, I was born 'challenging', I swear like a bricky because of genetic 'anger issues' and yes, I stabbed Ruben's bottom with a compass, what else can you expect?" I had to excuse my behaviour. Accepting criticism of my behaviour was like accepting criticism of myself. You can see why I (and many others like me) took a long time to learn to take responsibility for anything.

### Seeing beyond the behaviour

The labels we attach to behaviour do not encourage empathy. Perhaps it is time we recognised that children who struggle to manage their behaviour are vulnerable and damaged, not difficult and naughty.

Children who have a difficult time at home learn very quickly that adults tell lies. When they meet other adults at school they transfer this mistrust. In the adult world broken promises are hard to deal with. It hurts when a person breaks his or her promise that they will be there, keep you safe and love you. As a child these feelings are amplified and can be more confusing. Adults find different ways of dealing with anger: meditation, drugs, screaming in dark cupboards, etc. Children have fewer options, particularly when there is little time for anger in the frenetic pace of the primary school day.

The empathy we are trying to engender in our pupils must be modelled by the adults. Social and emotional aspects of learning are not taught but modelled, overtly and daily. Truly

emotionally intelligent schools don't have difficulty with differentiating behaviour management. They understand that we are all affected by our lives outside the school. We all try and set our difficulties aside when we walk through the doors. We all know that this is often difficult for teachers to do successfully. Expecting children to leave their troubles at home is unrealistic for many. It can leave children drowning but not waving. If you can't be heard at home and then at school you are told that it doesn't matter, the world can appear frightening and unwelcoming.

### Set different standards

Working with the most damaged children demands patience, guile and cunning. It means that you need to go to them, to meet them where they are and show them the way. Sitting on a pile of high expectations and waiting for children to climb up to reach you might meet the needs of some teachers. It doesn't meet the needs of the child. It would be very easy to declare that everyone, regardless of their individual needs, must follow the same rules in your classroom. Yet working with students who struggle to keep control requires a more flexible approach. Everybody needs to accept that at different times you will make decisions that may not appear fair but are in the best interests of individuals. You can differentiate your management of behaviour just as you differentiate your teaching.

I often hear teachers who complain that it is unfair that Darren gets to work in the library, go on outward bound courses and is not excluded, daily, for his crimes against language. The expectation is that despite Darren's immediate 'difficulties at home' he must meet precisely the same standards of conduct as every other child. It is the, "I know that his house burned down last night, but where is his homework?" attitude. Fortunately, children are more understanding than these adults. Children recognise those whose behaviour doesn't seem to fit in and they show them empathy, kindness and a 1000 second chances. They grow to understand them, work alongside them and to dodge the occasional chair. As ever, we have a lot to learn from the children.

## Make a difference

### INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR...

- Adapt, individualise and negotiate rules, rewards and sanctions
- Set short-term targets that are reinforced and matched with short-term rewards
- Consistently and calmly step sanctions even when the student wants a confrontation
- Draw up a behaviour contract/agreement, with all stakeholders having an input
- Agree a mechanism with the child to indicate when they need 'time out'
- Agree collaborative strategies with an LSA or other adults working in the classroom
- Keep praise, reward and sanctions discrete and private
- Use modelling to reflect behaviour back to the child and help them to gain a better perspective on their actions
- Seek guidance and support from colleagues who are succeeding with the child
- Provide information and support to encourage the input of external agencies
- Ask the student to keep a food/sleep/TV/internet diary for a week. Compare the diary with a record of behaviour over the same period.
- Speak to the learning support coordinator to ensure the learning support you are providing is appropriate for the needs of the student. Does the student have hidden learning disabilities?

## tip

Working with students who struggle to keep control requires a more flexible approach. Everybody needs to accept that at different times you will make decisions that may not appear fair but are in the best interests of individuals. You can differentiate your management of behaviour just as you differentiate your teaching.

Paul Dix's award-winning behaviour training is now available as a fantastic self-paced interactive online course. Just email [ellie@pivotaleducation.com](mailto:ellie@pivotaleducation.com) for a free sample or call 020 7000 1735. Paul's company, Pivotal Education, has a national reputation for designing and delivering training that promotes real change. You can sign up for their free behaviour tips service at [pivotaleducation.com](http://pivotaleducation.com)