

positive behaviour in the early years

perceptions of staff, service providers and parents in
managing and promoting positive behaviour
in early years and early primary settings



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Professor Aline-Wendy Dunlop, Peter Lee, Jacque Fee, Anne Hughes, Dr Ann Grieve,
Dr Helen Marwick in consultation with Professor Ferre Laevers, University of Leuven,
with support from Colleen Clinton, Russell Ecob and Jackie Henry

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Faculty of Education
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summary for practitioners

research commissioned by the Scottish Government

positive behaviour in the early years

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summary for practitioners

This document sets out a summary for practitioners of the main findings of research carried out by the University of Strathclyde for the Scottish Government on positive behaviour in the early years. The Executive Summary and full document are available from www.scotland.gov.uk/publications

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POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR IN THE EARLY YEARS

Perceptions of staff, service providers and parents in managing and promoting positive behaviour in early years and early primary settings.

Introduction

Contemporary discussion in education research and the media on topics such as child development and styles of parenting have focused on children's behaviour and have coincided with a public debate, which suggests a deterioration in standards of behaviour. Inappropriate behaviour within any given context or situation is a barrier to learning, teaching and positive social relationships. Within the context of high profile policies on school discipline the then Scottish Executive wished to explore the perceptions of practitioners and parents, in early years settings, of the behaviour of children aged 0-6 years and commissioned research to explore perceptions of staff, service providers and parents in managing and promoting positive behaviour in early years and early primary school settings in two local authorities.

Aims of the study

The project sought to identify and explore:

- › the extent to which behaviour of young children is of concern to staff, service providers and parents, and any relevant factors in terms of children's or family circumstances or conditions
- › the approaches and interventions that parents, staff and service providers, use in a range of nursery and primary school settings use to manage behaviour and promote pro-social behaviour and whether particular practices were successful
- › the extent to which staff feel skilled and prepared for the behaviour that children display.

Key factors looked at in supporting children were transitions between different types of provision or different stages of education, information sharing between professionals and with families, and multi-disciplinary/inter-agency working.



Study Methods

Two local authorities: Edinburgh City and North Lanarkshire agreed to host this research and a range of urban and rural early years settings was represented. The study design aimed to recruit a sample of 2000 children and their early educators and families, with 1000 in each of the two local authority areas, spanning four age strata: 0-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6 (Primary 1) across a range of social areas. Forty-one settings, provided by the local authorities to meet the study sample requirements, took part in the study – 23 in North Lanarkshire and 18 in Edinburgh. In each local authority, nursery settings included 0-3 provision as well as 3-5 classes, schools and centres, including partner providers. The numbers of settings involved from each authority were different because the variation in total numbers of children in participating nursery classes and primary classes. The families of all children in any participating class or room group were invited to take part in the study. Two of the Edinburgh settings provided access to groups of ‘hard to reach’ parents, who, because of, for example, alienation, service resistance, or being part of a minority group, would not normally involve themselves in services or research of this kind. These two settings were not otherwise involved in the study. In this way a sample of settings that were typical of each local authority across a range of social areas were included in the study, enabling findings to be generalisable to similarly urban and rural parts of Scotland.

Investigative tools comprised standardised and customised questionnaires to parents and professionals, interviews, observations, focus groups, documentary information and case studies. Common measures were used across the age strata, in pre-school and primary, and by practitioners and parents. These common measures included the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), a customised Adult Strategies Questionnaire, and customised Transitions Questionnaires. Additionally parents completed the Daily Hassles Questionnaire (Crnic and Greenberg, 1990) and practitioners completed the Leuven Well-being and Involvement Scales (Laevers, 1994).

Questionnaire packs were handed out to a total of 1969 child families through the individual local authority settings. Settings were asked to encourage parental responses. There were 729 parental returns (37%) and staff collected data for 1253 of the children (64%). These return rates reflect the expected return rate for questionnaires of 40%. Representativeness of this data was established through cross-analysis of the ‘staff-only’ data for children whose parents did not return questionnaires but who were observed by staff in settings, which indicated only a very slightly higher percentage children in this group perceived to be causing concern in some categories. Most of our analysis is based on the final merged parent and final merged staff files, which contain the core number of cases for which we have complete returns across measures. In terms of the parent data, the number of cases included in the final file used for analyses was 603 (Boys n = 306, Girls n = 297).

Findings

What is the extent and nature of perceived behaviour difficulties among children in early years and early primary settings?

Perceptions of both parents and staff placed the majority of children within the normal range of behaviour as shown in Table 1. Responses by parents and by staff to a series of statements in the SDQ which related to emotional development, response to others (pro-social), conduct, peer relationships and concentration (hyperactivity) in individual children showed mainly low levels of perceived difficulties.

Table 1. Comparison of responses of parents and practitioners on the SDQ in placing children in the normal range (approximate percentages)

Domain	Emotion	Pro-social	Conduct	Peer-relationships	Hyperactivity
Parents	87%	88%	60%	80%	80%
Practitioners	90%	66%	80%	80%	74%

Are there differences between practitioners and parents in their perceptions of the nature and extent of behaviour difficulties among children in early years and early primary settings?

A marked majority of parents and staff reported positive perceptions in relation to the emotional domain of children’s development and peer relationships. A greater percentage of parents than staff was positive about how their children responded to others. In contrast the vast majority of practitioners perceived children’s conduct to be normal while parent perceptions placed nearly 20% of children in the borderline range, with a further 20% causing more concern. Overall, parents did not find dealing with their children’s behaviour and needs to be a ‘hassle’ (Daily Hassles Questionnaire).

“It can be difficult to achieve positive behaviour in a two year old setting as they are still learning to share and cooperate.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 2 year olds)

“The children have huge problems with concentration and inability to finish any work task without one to one support from an adult.” (Questionnaire response, Staff member working with 4-6 year olds)

Staff considered that 60% of children displayed characteristics of well-being, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, receptivity and flexibility, within the setting (Leuven Well-being and Involvement Scales for Young Children). Children overall were perceived by staff to be experiencing higher levels of well-being than involvement. Involvement includes concentration, energy, creativity, persistence and satisfaction, and in the view of staff, 19% of children were at a low level in terms of their involvement in the early years setting, 30% were at a middle level, whilst 51% of children were experiencing high levels of involvement.

Are behaviour difficulties perceived by practitioners and parents greater in extent in comparison to earlier studies?

Overall the extent of concern about behaviour difficulties in young children aged 0-6 in early childcare, pre-school and primary settings compared to earlier studies is fairly stable, with approximately 20% of children perceived as presenting with difficulties that cause some concern. When asked by means of the Parent Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (P-SDQ) about the children's behaviours in relation to emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer related problems, parents reported that 81% fell within the normal range of behaviour, with 18% of children being seen as having borderline or severely concerning behaviour (8% and 10% respectively). While staff identified 76% of children as being in the normal behaviour range, 24% were considered to have some behavioural difficulties. Of these 13% were viewed as borderline and 11% as severe. Previous studies, using comparable assessment measures, have reported 15% of 3 year olds to be considered by parents to present mild behavioural problems with a further 7% considered to show moderate or severe behavioural difficulties (Richman *et al.*, 1982), and 13% of 3 year olds perceived by parents to have behaviour problems (Thompson *et al.*, 1996). Teachers were found to perceive 17% of 4-7 year olds to show mild behaviour difficulties, with a further 16% viewed as having definite behavioural problems (Tizard *et al.*, 1988), and 22% of 7 year olds were perceived by teachers to show some difficulties in behaviour, with 14% considered to present serious problems (Davie *et al.*, 1972). Therefore the findings of this study are broadly in line with other studies.

Are perceptions of difficulties different for boys and girls?

Only in the severely concerning level of behaviour did perceptions of difficulties in boys compare significantly differently to those of girls. For parents, 12% of boys and 7% of girls were considered to present with severe difficulties in terms of the total average difficulties on the four negative domains of the SDQ. About twice as many boys (14% of all boys) were considered by practitioners to be in the severe level in comparison to girls (7% of all girls) on the four negative domains of the SDQ.

"He copies his brothers and sisters and I think that's what makes boys a bit wild sometimes." (Questionnaire response, parent of child 2-3 years old)

“I find it very difficult trying to cope with my son’s behaviour as he doesn’t seem to listen to a word I say. I’ve tried everything with him but he doesn’t seem to care.”
 (Questionnaire response, parent – child of 5 years 8 months)

In terms of parental perceptions the highest number of children presenting in the borderline and severely concerning range in any age strata is 3 year olds. More staff reported having ‘a lot’ of concern about children’s behaviour across all age strata in the areas of conduct and concentration (about 33% of responding staff in each case) compared to the areas of relationships or self-esteem (about 16% of responding staff in each case). At 3 and at 4 years, twice as many staff (34%-37%) reported ‘a lot’ of concern in the area of emotions, compared to at 0-3, and 5 and 6 years.

Does the age of the child affect perceptions of difficulties in behaviour?

In the progress records completed at the point of transition from pre-school to primary school, nearly 40% of children in four case study settings (n = 117) were reported to be appropriately skilled in all aspects of social, personal and emotional development skills and nearly 60% to be skilled in the majority of categories and to be developing in the others. The aspects where substantial numbers of children were in the developing category include: play cooperatively (31%), recognises others feelings, needs and preferences (20%), confident in relationships (33%), concentrates at an appropriate level (26%), commits to task and completes it (22%), exercises self-control (22%).

What was the nature of parental and practitioner perceptions of difficulty?

Promoting Positive Behaviour – what are the approaches and interventions that practitioners, service providers, and parents use to manage behaviour and promote pro-social behaviour?

The Parental Adult Strategies Questionnaire (P-ASQ) invited parents to describe the strategies they use in relation to their children’s behaviour in a range of areas, including behaviour, concentration, relationships, feelings, self-esteem, sleeping, eating and appetite. Parent reports indicated no noticeable differences between boys and girls behaviour in terms of the level of challenge in coping with it, despite the fact that boys were perceived to present more difficult behaviours overall.

Parents described a wide range of strategies in their overall management of their children’s personal, social and emotional behaviour including, responding in generally positive ways, getting involved, removing distractions, encouraging friendships, praise, establishing routines. Overall the main strategies reported as used by parents when faced with difficult behaviour are: time-out (16%), explaining that behaviour is not acceptable (14%), and negative reinforcement, such as a reprimand or punishment (10%).



“There are times when I wonder if I am doing the right thing – am I being too strict/not strict enough. I read too many books according to my husband.” (Questionnaire response, Parent – child of 3 years 8 months)

“Encourage/praise good behaviour. Explain consequences of bad behaviour. Ask how he would feel if he was treated in unacceptable way. Sometimes ignore bad behaviour.” (Questionnaire response, parent of child of 4 years 9 months)

“Feelings: I try to get my child to speak openly to me and I tell her I’m here to listen to any problems she has.” (Questionnaire response, parent of child of 5 years 3 months)

Staff made use of a wide range of strategies for managing behaviours. Ten approaches were the most commonly used: praise and encouragement, positive reinforcement, positive behaviour policy and strategy, consistency between staff, responsiveness, modelling, explanation, observation, communicating with parents, and parent workshops.

“Particularly when working with under 3s I feel being patient and consistent and giving praise where it is due is important. Also making sure that all staff in the room are following the same guidelines as one another.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 2-3 year olds).

“I encourage positive behaviour at all times and discourage negative behaviour. If there was a problem, I would observe the child to find out what they are interested in and carry out activities in relation to this.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 2-3 year olds)

“We try to build self esteem and encourage independence and self worth. We have a lot of staff and so children who need that extra bit of comforting/attention are able to get it.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 3-5 year olds)

“Constantly encourage and promote positive behaviour. Be positive and try to keep language positive as much as possible.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 5-6 year olds)

While many parents use a range of strategies in meeting their children’s difficult behaviour, a number of areas were identified by parents in which they would like more help, including dealing with tantrums, support and advice on dealing with ‘power struggles’, dealing with illness, help with safety, and managing sleeping and eating difficulties. The most frequently mentioned areas where help was indicated to be needed were behaviour in general (16%), managing their children’s eating (8%) and managing sleeping routines (6%).

Would parents like more help with managing their children’s behaviour?

“I think the parents should have more support as much as the children because when you leave your children you get worried that they want to settle but I think my daughter has settled and the nursery has been OK.” (Questionnaire response, parent of child in 0-3 group)

“She has never slept a full night in her 4 years of life. This has now become a habit and is very difficult to break when you have older school children in the house who need their sleep.” (Questionnaire response, parent of child of 4 years 1 month)

Staff noted communication with parents and parent workshops as being amongst the most common strategies they used in managing behaviour and promoting positive behaviour, and 99% of parents also felt it is important for nurseries, schools and families to share information that can support positive behaviour. They felt that feedback between staff and parents is important (53%), that this enables consistency (16%), and that good communication enables school support (12%).

Is communication between parents and nursery staff considered to be important?

What practices can be identified by staff and parents as successful in relation to supporting transitions from nursery/pre-school to school?

Most parents (76%) thought the transition experience, into nursery, within nursery and into school, would be mostly positive for their child before their child moved and slightly more found it actually was (78%). About 7% of parents thought the move had only been partly positive for their child. A small percentage of parents (1.5%) did not expect the transition to be positive at all, and two-thirds of these parents felt the same following the transition.

Were transition experiences positive?

Schools and nurseries were perceived to provide considerable support. Parents found that visits and pre-entry visits (30%), staff support (17%), and information given and shared (15%) provided good support at this time, and staff indicated setting transition plans which included these key elements. Not all parents felt these approaches were sufficiently available, however, and indicated that an increased focus on visits, pre-entry visits and staff support would be appreciated.

“He was very frightened as it was a whole new experience. We had never left him alone with anyone than his grandparents.” (Questionnaire response, Parent of child 0-3 group)

“Staff were positive and my child seemed to really like them. On moving to the next room my child visited the room frequently before moving full time.” (Questionnaire response, Parent of child in 0-3 group)

What effective approaches to training and support can be identified for staff in early years settings?

What sorts of training and support in relation to young children’s behaviour would be helpful?

Over half of the early educators participating in this study reported high levels of confidence in working with young children presenting with behaviour that caused concern. Nearly half of the staff respondents indicated that they felt quite well skilled to support children’s behaviour, 44% felt very skilled, with 6.5% feeling only slightly skilled.

Staff reported a variety of sources of their skills in managing behaviour: 52% drew from their own work experience, 30% attributed their confidence to previous qualifications, 25% drew support from their colleagues, 17% had found ongoing CPD helpful, 16% used a range of known strategies, and 8% drew on their own personal knowledge of individual children.

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘skilled’ as daily new procedures, ideas about promoting positive behaviour are occurring. What I am saying is that a selected few of my workmates and I are always discussing this issue and trying new strategies. This however has only been highlighted as a result of my colleague studying towards her BA in Early Childhood Studies.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 3-5 year olds)

Whilst staff confidence is a positive factor, 85% of staff felt in need of additional training at some level; 71% felt they could benefit from a bit more training, and 14% felt strongly in need of this. Particular areas of training need mentioned were behaviour management strategies and working with children with additional support needs.

“I feel there is always room for improvement and developing existing knowledge and skills. There is always new and improved techniques which we can be putting into practice and which the children will benefit from.” (Questionnaire response, staff member working with 2-3 year olds)

“More special needs in-service training, particularly for dealing with children with behavioural difficulties and in communication.” (Questionnaire response, Staff member working with 3-4 year olds)

Are children supported through multi-agency working?

Almost all practitioner respondents noted that they had contact with a range of agencies: social work, health visitors, educational psychologist and speech and language therapists. Only some respondents indicated specific inter-agency contact details and in these cases there was a strong focus on inter-agency working with heads of settings providing strong leadership in this area of practice.

In what ways is multi-agency working helpful in supporting positive behaviour?

Conclusions

Parents and practitioners show considerable similarity in their perceptions of positive behaviour in young children. Both parents and practitioners consider a minority of young children (around 20%) to have some behaviour difficulties, with about 10% of children considered to have severe difficulties, which represents a fairly stable level of concern compared to earlier studies. More boys than girls are placed within the level of severe difficulty by both parents and practitioners.

Participants in this study shared a wide experience of time spent with young children. Many behaviours were seen to be typical of the age and progress of the child. Only when behaviours persisted beyond such typical parameters did they cause concern to practitioners. Then they felt skilled to support the child, but they also felt that they would benefit from further training in this area. Parents and staff report a similar set of strategies in managing and promoting positive behaviour and communication, and sharing of information between practitioners and parents is greatly valued in this respect. A proportion of parents indicated a need for some additional support in managing behaviour, and increased support around transitions.

Does promoting positive behaviour in young children need greater attention?

Overall, practitioners recorded high levels of well-being in the young children in their settings, but also evidence of low involvement. While positive behaviour is actively promoted, it may be that early years learning environments need to incorporate more challenging activities and further enhance engagement for young children in order to address this area.

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