

Inclusive Education

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Understanding behaviour and its impact on learning

What is behaviour?

Behaviour is defined as the way one acts or conducts oneself, especially towards others. It is often a response to a particular situation or stimulus. Behaviour cannot be managed separately from learning and wellbeing.

The context usually has some influence over the behaviour. There are reasons why people behave the way they do. It is often helpful to consider the pay-off gained by challenging behaviour. For example:

- What needs does the behaviour fulfil?
- What strong negative emotions are being removed in the short term by the behaviour?

Why behaviours occur

Behaviour is a form of communication and it serves a purpose.

Behaviour is also a way of getting needs met.

The two most common needs are:

- to obtain – more time, understanding, order, calm, peer or adult attention, a desired object or activity, or sensory stimulation
- to avoid – a stressor, a frustration, a difficult, boring or easy task, a physical demand, an activity the student doesn't like, or a peer.

When analysing why behaviours occur, consider:

- the developmental factors that might contribute to unwanted behaviour – significant events that might have occurred previously in a child or young person's life
- ecological factors that can influence behaviour, such as home, peers, friends, neighbourhood, school practices and climate, socio-economic status, and the current point in time
- what may trigger the behaviour – usually things outside the immediate environment.

The impact of teacher behaviour

The way a teacher responds can impact on the occurrence of the behaviour.

- If we focus on the function (the why) of the behaviour and meet the child's need, the unwanted behaviour used to communicate that need will usually disappear.
- If we focus only on the behaviour and try to minimise it, the behaviour will recur because the need the behaviour communicates will still not be met.

(Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, n.d.)

Recognise the importance of culture

Students' behaviour and learning are influenced by:

- language and culture – culturally responsive practices draw on students' identities to enhance engagement and achievement
- the quality of the teacher-student relationship – caring relationships and classroom management are key aspects of culturally responsive practice.

Involving and working closely with whānau to develop useful strategies is critical, especially when supporting Māori students. Take an approach that:

- promotes collective ownership
- shared values
- recognises the authority of elders
- reinforces positive whānau values.

It is also important that teachers increase their awareness of the issues facing children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds by developing cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

(Advisory group on conduct problems, 2009).

Peer relationships affect behaviour

The nature and quality of the young person's peer relationships also play an important role in shaping behaviour; peer influence is particularly important during adolescence.

Fergusson, Boden & Hayne

Environment shapes behaviour

The nature and quality of the school environment play an important role in shaping children's behaviour.

Schools that offer consistent, non-punitive and supportive environments reduce risks of conduct problems (Fergusson, Boden & Hayne, n.d).

When planning schoolwide approaches to behaviour, take into account:

- the importance of early intervention to address behaviour patterns before they become consolidated and resistant to change
- the need to provide age appropriate management and follow-through
- the known co-occurrence of childhood conduct difficulties with other behavioural and academic difficulties, including ADHD, learning problems, mood and anxiety disorders, alcohol and substance abuse/dependence, and suicidality.

([Advisory group on conduct problems, 2009](#))

The role of the adult response

Behaviour as a form of expression is shaped, reduced or reinforced by what happens before and after it. A child or young person's behaviour is unlikely to change unless the adult behaviour changes and the context around the behaviour changes.

Improving motivation, engagement, and learning

When teachers get to know students and students feel teachers believe in them and have high expectations (mana motuhake), it can have a significant influence on student behaviour.

Sensitivity to difference

Having sensitivity to individual differences and experiences will also help teachers support students more effectively. For example:

- significant or traumatic events may have occurred in a child or young person's life that have impacted development
- ecological factors, such as home, peers, friends, neighbourhood, school practices and climate, socio-economic status
- learning differences or medical conditions.

It is critical for student safety and wellbeing that teachers use their knowledge of students to inform their practice.

([Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga, n.d.](#))

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