

# In other words

Learning to read different behaviours can help us better support children, says *Kay Mathieson*

**Q** I keep hearing the phrase ‘children communicate through their behaviour’. Are there some specific behaviours we should be looking out for to help us understand the children in our setting?

**A** With all children, but perhaps particularly those in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), there are some general behaviour responses that are predictable. A windy day can be the catalyst for excitable, bubbly behaviour; tiredness can show by a child being tearful and easily distressed. Understanding the effect that weather, temperature and emotions have on our behaviour helps us to be realistic in our expectations of children in such conditions.

In addition, if we can really tune into the trends of behaviours demonstrated by our current group of children, we can make our setting environment increasingly responsive to their learning needs.

## **BEHAVIOUR AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION**

We are all, adults and children, constantly communicating through our behaviour, though this is seldom at a conscious level of thinking. Our emotions ebb and flow throughout the day in response to the situations and contexts in which we find ourselves.

Levels of anxiety vary according to how threatened or at ease we feel. This response is part of our innate survival mechanisms with our amygdala and limbic systems in the brain detecting threats and preparing for a fight, flight or freeze response.

As adults we can override such signals from our amygdala by rationalising the extent of the threat based on previous experience. For example, a new group of children and parents starting at our setting may raise our anxiety but past experience tells us that the likelihood is that we will be able to cope without running away, punching someone on the nose or

freezing in sheer terror. We may, though, have a heightened sensitivity to others’ reactions because our anxiety level is raised.

Typically, we feel more at ease in familiar situations with familiar people around us. We have developed patterns of responses in these contexts that have worked; we give and receive signals that we are welcome and make positive contributions to the situation and our sense of self is enhanced.

In contrast, being in a new place with strangers where we are unable to predict events significantly changes how we feel. The cocktail of emotions is likely to include anxiety, excitement, fear and defensiveness depending on our individual perspective. Being able to make sense of sequences of events, others’ communication and expectations all contribute to our ability to feel at ease.

## **TUNING IN TO DEEPEN OUR UNDERSTANDING**

As adults, we have been practising and refining our skills in reading situations and others’ behavioural signals for many years, in many contexts. We have built up a comprehensive understanding of the possible interpretations, but we are still learning and get it wrong – for example, reading clipped, abrupt speech as a personal attack when actually it communicated anxiety on behalf of the speaker.

The children in the EYFS are at the very beginning of this process and are doing their very best to make sense of what is going on around them. A baby has no verbal communicate but uses sounds, body movements, facial expressions and sensory information to respond to the world around them. Parents and key adults quickly

**Recognising a child's typical reactions to situations allows us to see when they are struggling**



become adept at discerning that ‘hungry cry’ and individual ‘discomfort wriggles’ and respond appropriately to the baby’s communication.

As we get to know each individual child in our setting, we can begin to read more accurately the subtle changes in their responses that give us insights into what helps them calm, or increases uncertainty and anxiety.

‘Standing in the children’s shoes’ and exploring how things might look and feel from their perspective is a useful first step. Most so-called ‘inappropriate’ behaviour is related to changes in anxiety levels, so recognising a child’s characteristic way of communicating their anxiety can really help us to read their response more accurately.

## INTERPRETATION

As children’s skills and abilities develop, their understanding evolves in the light of the new information. Often, areas of development are progressing at different rates so, for example, the language needed to contribute to an interaction may not come easily though the intention and desire to contribute is strong so frustration can be overwhelming.



If a setting’s routines such as lunchtime, snacktime and tidying-up time are not going smoothly then it is worth considering whether the expectations are realistic and if the children are able to carry out every necessary step to complete the process. From the child’s perspective, there may be many reasons why it is difficult. For example, not understanding:

- what is being asked of them because of key vocabulary – ‘properly’, ‘nicely’, ‘share’
- specific phrases such as ‘sit down, sit up’
- because of conceptual/developmental progress – ‘the toys belong to everyone’, ‘we keep our clothes on in nursery, but take them off for swimming’
- because of a difference from previous experience – sitting for meals; using knives, forks and spoons; or trying different foods.

Our adult role, having observed that a routine or situation has not gone smoothly, is to consider the range of possible reasons why it is not working.

The more possibilities we can gather – informed by the behaviour we see and understanding this as the children’s communication of their frustration, confusion, anxiety, excitement or boredom about the activity – the more likely it is that we can adapt the routine in a successful way.

The key principle is that the children are doing the best they can with the information provided and situation we have created. In addition, if the adults feel frustrated, anxious, worried, excited or under pressure, their behavioural communication will impact on the children’s response too.

## VARIABILITY AND CONSISTENCY

As human beings, we are in a fairly constant state of emotional flux in response to the many interactions and situations we are involved in each day. The influence of one event on another – for example, our different emotions if we are late or early arriving at our setting – leads to further variation in our behaviour.

This, of course, is true for adults as well as children. Therefore, some days I can take part easily in activities while others I find it hard.

Recognising a child’s typical and exceptional reactions to situations alerts us to times when they are struggling to make sense of what is going on.

## MORE INFORMATION

- *Early Childhood in Focus 7: developing brains*, edited by J Oates, A Karmiloff-Smith and MH Johnson (2012)
- *I am Two! Working Effectively with Two-Year-Olds and Their Families* by K Mathieson (2013)
- *How Children Develop Social Understanding* by J Carpendale and C Lewis (2006)
- *Socioemotional Development in the Toddler Years: transitions and transformations*, edited by CA Brownell and CB Kopp (2007)
- *The Social Toddler: promoting positive behaviour* by H and C Dorman (2002)
- *Understanding Young Children’s Behaviour*, by K Mathieson (2012)

For many children, if their day begins well, being woken sensitively and guided gently through the transition into our settings, the rest of the day will often unfold smoothly, in contrast to when the start of the day has been unusual or unpredictable.

Throughout the day in our settings, there are routines that are particularly important for nurturing and caring for the children. Obvious examples are eating, drinking, toileting, nappy changing, arrival, departure and time with key person. At these times, subtle changes in response can be more obvious. Increased need for comfort can be a temporary response to a difficult start to the day, but can also indicate a period of rapid growth, changes in sleep pattern and developmental progress changing a child’s understanding of the world.

The cocktail of variation between us as human beings also means that our sensitivities to sensory stimulus will also vary, giving very different experiences of places, activities and interactions. Many children are particularly sensitive to changes in light levels, temperature, sound, touch, texture or taste. Undoubtedly, children are more sensitive to these sensory experiences than most adults, whose senses are gradually dulled over time or whose sensory information is ignored and ‘tuned out’.

Taking time to observe and consider the story our children are telling us through their behaviour provides many insights into why they are responding the way they are, but also helps us to recognise just how well they are coping with the complexity of their worlds. ■

## NURSERY WORLD SHOW 2015

Kay Mathieson is one of a line-up of top early years speakers taking part in our seminar programme at the Nursery World Show 2015.

Included in the programme are two three-hour masterclass sessions: ‘How children learn – delivering and assessing best practice’, with Professor Ferre Laevers and Jan Dubiel, and ‘Meeting the emotional learning needs

of two-year-olds’ led by Julia Manning-Morton, Penny Tassoni and Alice Sharp.

A programme of hour-long seminars covers key aspects of best practice, and speakers include Stella Louis, Vicky Hutchin and Julie Mountain.

The show is at the Business Design Centre, London, on 6-7 February. For more information, got to [www.nurseryworldshow.com](http://www.nurseryworldshow.com).