

Link up!

In the first of a series of articles looking at different aspects of two-year-olds' development and the behaviours that arise from it, *Julia Manning-Morton* explains why characteristics often considered 'challenging' in this age group are a vital part of individual growth



Two-year-olds are often labelled as 'terrible twos' who need 'taming'. They are stereotyped as egocentric people who flit from one thing to another wreaking havoc in their wake, are arbitrarily defiant and bite and have tantrums. So, their behaviour is often termed 'challenging', and parents and practitioners alike veer between digging in their heels in a determined effort to be in control or throwing in the towel and giving up.

These views and approaches are unhelpful to positive practice: labelling the ways in which two-year-olds behave as 'challenging' suggests that these behaviours are somehow a deliberate attempt by the child to be difficult or that they are abnormal in some way.

In fact, many of the everyday behaviours that give two-year-olds a negative reputation are a manifestation of fundamentally important aspects of their development.

It is useful for practitioners to understand the overarching process of the changes in two-year-olds' development, which loop and spiral in a process that is called reciprocal interweaving (Gessel, 1952, cited in Piek, 2006). In this process, there are stages of equilibrium, when things are comfortably balanced between two different poles, and stages of disequilibrium, when things are out of kilter and lean towards one pole or the other. This perspective can help us to understand that two-year-olds will move through periods of balance and instability at different times throughout the third year of life.

Through reciprocal interweaving, two-year-olds are learning how to reconcile quite opposite states and experiences. Examples of states they find themselves balancing include:

- being your own person with social co-operation



- physical competence with needing help
- confident exploration with needing reassurance
- understanding with confusion.

If you stop for a moment and think about how you balance these issues in your own lives, you will recognise how fundamentally important such learning is.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Two-year-olds' everyday behaviours also arise from the following common characteristics, each of which will be explored in more depth in the following articles.

Fond of mobility; busy and curious

A two-year-old's fondness for learning while they are moving about is sometimes seen as 'flitting' and not concentrating.

However, if observed closely it can be seen that, in fact, they are pursuing a particular idea or exploring a particular schema such as transporting or trajectory.

This characteristic means that expecting two-year-olds to sit still for prolonged periods is unrealistic and will result in the kind of disruptive behaviours some adults expect.



Two-year-olds are also interested in how things work, which, like adults who enjoy tinkering with car engines, means repeatedly taking things apart before you know how to put them back together. This can sometimes be misinterpreted as destructiveness.

In the 'here and now'; lacking understanding

Two-year-olds' limited understanding of time and their fascination with process and detail

mean that they are not focused on destinations and end products. This can be contrary to the adult's goals, so can be a source of conflict.

Their understanding of the subtle differences between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours is also at a very early stage, so they can often get into trouble for behaviour that is acceptable in one situation (drawing at the easel) but not in another (drawing on the wall).

Impulsive; assertive; lacking mature social skills

The neurological and physical developments that help us regulate our feelings, responses and actions are still very immature in two-year-olds.

Twos must learn how to balance opposite states, such as physical competence and needing help

Practitioners who understand this will appreciate the self-control that two-year-olds do exhibit and refrain from condemning them when they cling to a toy or push in front of another.

Two-year-olds enjoy the company of other children, but they are still learning what it means to be 'me' and, therefore, are not always able to consider or understand others' needs. Understanding this helps practitioners not to have unrealistic expectations of toddlers' ability to share, for example.

Unable to communicate fluently; able to imitate

Two-year-olds who are trying to communicate their needs and emotions with a limited vocabulary can feel very frustrated. Coupled with their strong emotions and immature social skills, this often results in them using physical means to get their needs met – pushing and snatching may be the most obvious tools for them to use.

However, although their verbal language may be limited, two-year-olds are keenly tuned in to the non-verbal communications of others.

So, they learn a lot from the way their close adults react to people and situations – how adults communicate, negotiate and handle them and other children. And, of course, they imitate both good and bad models of behaviour.

GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Developing greater knowledge and understanding of these enables practitioners to:

- respond more appropriately
- be less likely to attribute blame to the child, parents or colleagues
- plan their provision more effectively.

Developing a partnership approach

Because two-year-olds understand that they can cause things to happen, do things on their own and get strong reactions from people, practitioners can expect them to 'act powerful' and 'be contrary' (Greenman and Stonehouse, 1996). This can make adults fearful of losing control and, therefore, become more controlling.

Yet if we want children to develop inner control and become adults who understand why a behaviour is anti-social or an action wrong, then we need to implement ways of guiding children's behaviour that keep safe

boundaries yet keep in mind that resisting coercion and saying 'no' is sometimes a necessary life skill.

As Greenman and Stonehouse say, 'Discipline, guiding children's behaviour, or setting limits are all concerned with helping children learn how to take care of themselves, other people and the world around them' (1996).

So rather than viewing children as needing to be trained to fit in with a set of rules, it can be useful to see them as people with whom we are becoming social partners (Trevarthan, 1995). Where there is a successful partnership approach, the practitioner is able to show fairness, flexibility and reasonableness.

However, they are also able to take charge of difficult situations, so that all children know that they can rely on the adults to keep them safe and to ensure that justice and fairness is maintained. In this way, they show benevolent authority rather than control because they are interested in working alongside children, not in having power over them.

Developing a positive partnership in your setting

- Ensure that there is a proper balance of responses made between major and minor transgressions. Children who are constantly shouted at to stop doing something or are removed for minor issues will not appreciate the difference and may either become withdrawn, resentful and fearful or increasingly defiant and unco-operative.
- Focus on enabling the children to enjoy each other's company and on helping – and learning – from each other. This means emphasising what children can do, not just what they cannot do, and showing children appreciation of their efforts at pro-social behaviour - their acts of kindness and care towards others and the environment.
- Respond in a balanced way to misdemeanours. Explain simply and clearly why a particular behaviour is unacceptable and make it clear that it is the behaviour that is unacceptable, not the child. Providing alternatives

MORE INFORMATION

- *Key Times: a framework for developing high-quality provision for children from birth to three years* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2006), OUP
- *Key Times for Play: the first three years* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2003), OUP
- *Two-Year-Olds in Early Years Settings: journeys of discovery* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2015), OUP



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and redirecting a child to a different context in which their actions would be acceptable is effective. For example, 'No thank you, Lucy – throwing your cup may hurt someone. Let's find the balls in the garden to throw instead.'

Praise

Practitioners often identify praise as a key way in which they foster a positive self-concept in children and encourage pro-social behaviours. However, this needs careful consideration as praise can also be empty, indiscriminate and just used to exert control.

We have long understood the importance of avoiding labelling, such as 'naughty boy'. Now the same understanding needs to be applied to comments such as 'well done' or 'good girl', as they tell a child nothing about what they have done that is so wonderful. Nor do such comments help the child to understand and, therefore, repeat their positive behaviour in other situations. In this way, praise can lead children to rely only on an authority figure's evaluation of right and wrong, rather than develop self-direction and self-control.

Praise such as 'Well done' or 'Aren't you clever?' for completed paintings and such like, although intended positively, can also lead to children working in order to achieve adult praise rather than from any inner interest or motivation.

Such comments are shown to invite comparison and competition and, at a time when self-knowledge is forming, can lead to a child just producing what the practitioner deems is valuable rather than developing their own ideas about the value of what they have done (Dowling, 2010).

This does not mean that children's positive behaviours are ignored, but that they are noticed and acknowledged in more thoughtful and direct ways. Use strategies such as:

- participating in children's play
- encouraging children to describe their efforts and products
- using comments such as, 'Ooh, tell me about your painting' or 'Wow, you've climbed all the way to the top. That's the first time I've seen you do that!'

This approach ensures that children are given strong messages that their efforts, perseverance and concentration are valued – messages that contribute positively to children's dispositions to learning (Katz, 1993). ■