

Good or bad?

Emma Davis considers the need to rethink how early years settings manage children's behaviour and the language that is commonly used around it



There is often much talk about the need to 'manage behaviour' in the early years.

Educators have a host of strategies that can be employed to promote positive behaviour, one of them being the use of charts in the setting or classroom, which come in many different forms. You might have seen traffic-light behaviour charts, happy and sad clouds, rockets, rainbows, or emojis.

The premise behind them, no matter what the design, remains the same – reward and punishment. If children do something deemed worthy by an adult, they are moved up the chart. However, inappropriate behaviour means a child is moved down or to the 'sad side'. The idea is that the chart is seen as an incentive to

encourage 'good behaviour', with children conforming to what is considered acceptable.

WHY USE A BEHAVIOUR CHART?

Although some settings and schools are phasing them out, they are still seen across the country, causing debate, particularly on social media.

Used as a display, behaviour charts are a visual representation of the behaviour in a setting or school. Children are rewarded by moving up the chart – praising good behaviour in this way is thought to encourage others to act similarly, using them as role models. However, children are also punished publicly, by being moved down the chart when their behaviour is seen to be unacceptable.

Therefore, there is a visual sign for the rest of the class or setting to see. Herein lies the problem.

Behaviour charts are still commonly used, but the evidence is that they are ineffective

THE ISSUE WITH BEHAVIOUR CHARTS

In using behaviour charts, we are making the assumption that all children in the setting have control over their behaviour. This is not always the case. Moving beyond the concept of 'behaviour management', we look towards understanding why children find it difficult to comply with behaviour expectations.

Young children's brains are developing at a fast rate as they learn to control their emotions and how to self-regulate. Learning to manage their emotions, actions and thoughts grows from co-regulation, and therefore is relationship-based. They rely on us for cues as part of strong attachments to indicate the socially acceptable behaviour norms.

However, we must recognise that all children join our settings and classes with different experiences, backgrounds and home learning

environments. Not all children will learn to self-regulate at the same time, and for some it can be a long, complex developmental process.

Some children may not have the warm, responsive interactions and attachments which help them learn to self-regulate at home, impacting their experiences in the setting.

Behaviour charts can be seen as the educator exerting control over young children, expecting all to conform in exactly the same way. Let's just remember for a moment that, just with all other areas of a child's development, some will progress more quickly than others. In a Reception class, for instance, we simply cannot have the same expectations of a summer-born child as we do of an autumn-born one. In a child-centred approach, we want all children, regardless of their age, culture, gender or any other factors, to be happy, feel safe and become a confident and curious learner. Behaviour charts can in fact stifle this, making young children feel uneasy or stressed. In this respect, charts can have a harmful effect on children's time in the early years, especially for those who find it difficult to self-regulate.

Having their wrongdoings displayed for all to see can conjure up feelings of sadness, shame, anger and hurt. Children could feel that they have been judged and therefore live up to this label. Rather than encouraging the child to modify their behaviour, charts can actually make it worse.

By moving children up and down a behaviour chart, from the happy to the sad side or the green traffic light to the red, we are labelling them. Children quickly learn to interpret these labels, and discussions at home can lead to 'who was on the sad side today?' Messages get passed between parents, and the labels escalate into 'I don't want you playing with them.'

WHAT DOES A BEHAVIOUR CHART ACTUALLY TELL US?

Although a chart can give us a snapshot of a moment or a day in a setting or class, it cannot offer a holistic view of the behaviour patterns of children. Charts do not take into account the behaviour behind the child's place on the chart and certainly don't consider a child's feelings. What if your leader implemented charts for the adults in the workplace – how would this

make you feel? Probably stressed, upset, angry, hurt, a feeling of not being good enough and not trusted. Children can experience exactly the same feelings.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

Everyone working with children should have an understanding of brain development. Similarly, a grounding in child development will enable educators to recognise how a child's cognitive, social and emotional development impacts their ability to self-regulate. Those children who are able to self-regulate will confidently conform to the behaviour expectations, therefore be continually on the 'happy side.'

From this perspective, we begin to see how behaviour charts are ableist. Some children are sadly punished for something that they find challenging. Just as children are learning to count, read and write, they are also learning to manage their behaviour and self-regulate. This can take time and requires us as educators to be patient and empathic, rather than shaming.

In adopting a shaming approach to behaviour, we become engulfed in a cycle of the same children demonstrating the same behaviours, resulting in the same consequences, day after day and week after week. We need to acknowledge that this strategy isn't effective. Instead, we can work to understand the needs of these children, helping them to shift their identity from being the one always on the 'sad side.'

IDEAS FOR CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

- Talk – create a language-rich environment in which children are encouraged to talk and listen to each other and the adults. This develops communication and language development, enabling them to become more confident in discussing their feelings and emotions. Adults can model the language of feelings, giving children the words to connect their emotions to their actions and thoughts.
- Acknowledge that all children learn differently – think back to the characteristics of effective learning. All children develop at different rates in different areas, therefore we need to accept that not all children will be on the same trajectory. Just as some

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children learn through having a go, others will develop their own ideas and experiment – we need to be guided by these when thinking about behaviour, giving children the tools through the environment and interactions in order to develop their self-regulation skills.

- Positive praise – it sounds simple, but it can be difficult to manage this in a busy early years environment with a myriad of other things going on throughout the day. However, just as we respond well to praise, so do children. This is how they learn the expectations we have in terms of their behaviour. Catch them in the act and praise kindness, good communication, lining up, getting ready for PE quickly, helping to tidy up, etc.
- Clear communication – we know the way we want children to behave in the early years, but we don't always clearly communicate it. Children need us to help them understand, but not in an age-appropriate way – a stage-appropriate way. Just because children are in the same cohort does not mean they have the same level of understanding.
- Observe – learn to look and interpret, taking your focus away from the typical things we look for a child to be achieving. Instead, consider their place in the setting. Ask yourself: Do they have friends? Which areas in the setting do they prefer? Are there any triggers to the behaviour?
- Think more widely – when considering behaviour, it is vital that we look at the child holistically. What is it like for them in the setting? Think about the wider factors that could impact their ability to self-regulate – perhaps tiredness, excitement, stress, anxiety, or issues at home. Children talk to us through their behaviour, so it is our job to tune in and listen.

FINALLY

Children need us to be consistent in our approaches. However we choose to encourage self-regulation in the setting, we need to enable children to feel motivated rather than conform.

Children need to know that we value them, that they have a voice in the setting and that we are advocates for them. ■

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