PearTree

Managing challenging behaviour at home and school.

A behaviouralist approach to childcare, education and personal development.

Training Information for Pear Tree Staff

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Background

The amazing thing about getting older is the ability to reflect over such a long time, in my case from the 1970's onwards. I have some powerful memories of the 1960's but my sense of awareness and the world around me began in the 1970's. I became a teenager in the 1970's, an adult in the 1980's and a parent in 1990's.

Throughout this time I have always been aware of the shifting sands of public opinion, of having a huge interest in human behaviour and an awareness of societal changes.

The world I grew up in is hardly recognisable today. For the majority of people there have been huge improvements in most aspects of our lives, including tolerance, diversity, technology and general living standards. There are, however, areas we would be wise to consider where changes have not had as positive an impact on society as we would have hoped for.

Progressive educational ideals and a general distancing from natural emotional responses, to pre-programmed technical responses, have led us to a point where many skills have been forgotten. In a world where these need to be carefully considered, there is a lack of use or respect, for what had been previously been regarded as straightforward common sense. Everyone is so nice to each other we have forgotten how to challenge negative or even harmful behaviour when it comes our way.

It has been my long held view, that how we bring up our children has some serious shortfalls. The vast majority of children growing up, are able to overcome these shortfalls and for many they may be irrelevant. My concern is for the section of society for whom they are incredibly important and in fact, set the direction of their development for the rest of their lives.

The children in our care come from lives and places where people are not always nice to each other. These are places full of conflicts and tensions that often manifest themselves in challenging, violent and sometimes abusive behaviour.

As they have grown up, the children have not had suitable role models to follow. Often the opposite is evident, in that negative behaviour has imprinted on their psychology resulting in a negative way of living and being.

The other aspect is that early year's development, which is the difficult process of helping children through what is often affectionately known as 'the terrible two's', is not always successful.

This is the time the child is becoming aware of the world around them, their relationships with others and the concept that their behaviours have an impact on their caregivers. This is the time caregivers become familiar with toddler tantrums, which can be distressing and difficult to overcome. But overcome they must if the child is to develop appropriately formed relationships and understand those relationships going forward.

Having run Pear Tree from its conception to date and subsequently assessing and monitoring all of the children over the years, it is very clear to see, when it comes to challenging behaviour, they have not gone through this 'terrible two's "part of their development. The correct processes are not embedded into their minds, as it would be in most if not all, positive functioning developmental pathways. In many ways they are still in that stage where the toddler tantrums have in fact become the normal embedded and established, model of behaviour.

In my contact with many different parents, schools and agencies, I see the knowledge gap widen and the following simple formula which helps all children, is in my view all but lost.

- Positive consequences for positive behaviour.
- Negative consequences for negative behaviour.

The sooner consequences to positive or negative behaviour are imposed the better. The ideal is that they are immediate, and part of the automatic reactions and responses given by those responsible at the time.

It is hugely worrying that this simple formula is not adhered to. In many examples that can be demonstrated, positive consequences are given for negative behaviour and negative consequences are given for positive behaviour. Regretfully, in many cases we are systematically training often the most vulnerable young people, to be dysfunctional with devastating effects.

In this document I hope to be able to demonstrate this point and articulate how in my view this should be addressed.

Evidence:

Example 1/ Residential Home environment.

Through my own observations going back many years, it is clear children in a residential setting try their hardest to bring you into their world and recreate the environment they were familiar with prior to coming into our care. This must always be challenged.

This behaviour is demonstrated in many ways. For example, the way they initially may damage their bedrooms, which reflects their mental health and chaotic thinking.

It is also played out in their challenging behaviour. We have had many children be violent with carers in an attempt to provoke a violent reaction. We have even had children try to engage carers in a sexual way. Making themselves available for abuse.

Quite often the challenging or violent abuse will result in the child having to be held to keep themselves and the carers safe. The use of restraint techniques is full of dangers. The obvious ones, in terms of the physical protocols, are covered at length in training. The ones I am concerned about are around the process of learned behaviour. If the immediate consequence of negative behaviour is in any way perceived to be positive, this will only result in the behaviour being reinforced and subsequently promoted.

Being restrained, to any well- adjusted adult, may not be what is normally considered a positive experience. If, however, you are a confused child and this experience is the only thing that brings you into close physical contact with someone who cares for you, where it ultimately ends in a calming sense of security, the result is a positive consequence to negative behaviour.

Carers familiar with this concept who ensure the techniques are followed to avoid these pitfalls, may ultimately give the child who is compliant a reassuring cuddle. This is also a positive consequence for negative behaviour. The child will simply learn how to manage the stages in the middle.

Any positive reinforcement must only be after the child has done something positive. There must be a sufficient gap of time between the negative behaviour, i.e. the restraint and the positive behaviour from the child. Only then will the child clearly connect the positive reinforcement to the positive behaviour and not the negative behaviour.

Ultimately one of the most common processes is when the above doesn't happen. The child has a tantrum, gets held for support, stops the tantrum, cries through released stress and gets a very nice supportive cuddle. Result negative behaviour promoted.

Example 2/ School environment.

On one occasion I was asked to visit a special school in a very deprived area. The invitation was to see if I could help improve their environment. I visited the school to find it hidden away behind industrial units surrounded by secure fencing.

The school was divided into two parts, primary and secondary. I was asked to spend time with the primary children on the morning and the secondary children in the afternoon.

The primary school was chaotic. Children in classes but many were not focused or engaged in lessons. At various points down the main corridor were little booths with carpeted walls, dark interiors and no natural light. These were the 'time out' booths. Children who were presenting challenging behaviour were taken there to be held, or one to one time with the teacher to manage their negative behaviour.

During my observation it was clear that the children who were not wanting to engage in lessons or were attention needing, were acting out. The result was they needed to be held. At this point they were taken to these 'time out' booths to be restrained. This brought about immediate consequences for the child. They didn't have to engage in lessons, they got the teachers full one to one attention and physical contact from the teachers in a quiet calm soft environment. Whilst I couldn't observe, I would be confident this process ended with a cuddle. Consequence - the negative behaviour was systematically reinforced.

The children who were wanting to engage in lessons had their time disrupted. They saw the disruptive child get the teachers full attention and be taken to the nicest, calmest place in the school. Whilst I was only there a morning, it was clear that it wouldn't be long before the positive engaging child would learn that the only way to get the teachers attention would be to be disruptive. Consequence- negative behaviour became reinforced and the culture of the school directed by the most disruptive pupils. They had succeeded in taking the teachers into their world.

Being disruptive had become the norm. Children in the primary school were prepared for their time in the secondary school, as this pattern was evident there also.
At the end of the day, I was asked what my thoughts were. The hard working resilient teachers who have learned to put up with so much disruption had lost sight of what was normal. I explained that if they were wanting their students to be prepared for a life of learning and working, they were not being prepared at all. If they were wanting to prepare them for a life of institutional living, often found in prison then their system was doing well.

Several years later following the presentation of this information in a staff training exercise, a relatively new member of staff came up to me to explain her contribution to my story. She had been invited to this school for an interview. On arrival, a group of children were exiting the building on their way to McDonald's for lunch. It was explained to her they were the disruptive group who had made progress during the week. She asked about those that were consistently positive and was told they don't get to go at all!

This reinforced my initial view and her experience highlighted that doing the right thing has impact on recruitment also. As a result of her experience, she declined a job offer at that school and made her way to us instead.

Example 3/ Outside Agency involvement.

A girl in one of our residential homes became so challenging that on one occasion she set fire to her bedroom curtains. This was the latest act in a run of dangerous behaviours that resulted in this incident being reported to the police, mainly due to the potential life threatening consequences not just to her, but to everyone else in the home.

The result of the judicial process was she was referred to the local Youth Offending Service (YOT).

It was here she was to undertake a process of structured work. This was on the run up to Christmas. One day she returned with a bag full of Christmas presents donated from a local charity. The girl handed them over to her carers and stated, “there is something wrong here! I’ve nearly burnt the house down and I’ve now got more presents than any other child here, from the people who were part of my punishment”.

The fact she handed them over in the way she did, clearly demonstrated she had genuinely made progress and was aware of the inappropriate consequences to her behaviour.

Example 4/ Outside Agency Involvement.

A different time and different town, a young man finishing a course of work with YOT. As a result of completing the work he was taken for a day out Quad bike riding.

The consequences as seen by the other kids on the street is very simple. If you come from a deprived area where nothing of any good happens, the best way to overcome that is to offend, it will lead to a day out quad bike riding.

The judicial system is structured in a way of light touch gentle interactions, encouraging further interactions, which then increase in intensity as the level of involvement increases. A process adults would understand, but not children. If they want to avoid systematically encouraging juvenile delinquent behaviour, this should be reviewed. A behavioural approach would be to ensure there is no ambiguity between roles. The role of the police and subsequent judicial officers is to uphold and enforce the law. Those roles should command respect from the beginning and not overlap with the role of a social work agency looking to be friends.

I’ve been involved in the business of promoting business all my life, but surely in this context they cannot be trying to support their business as they appear to do and it is highly inappropriate.

The challenge here from our perspective is how we can minimise the negative impact of outside influences undermining our methodology. Quite simply it has to be managed and in my experience most outside agencies respect our position, when it is made clear to them.

Children need security from the knowledge that the adults are in charge. As ’Britain’s strictest head teacher’ says, ‘’If the adults aren’t in charge the bully’s will be!”

This is very true, and I remember well from my childhood experiences. The question is how can we get the balance right? In my view the question is all about balance from different perspectives.

Positive institutional systems.
Individual professional protocols and standards.

From an organisational perspective, the positive institutional systems are in our regulatory expectations. All professional staff have a contract of employment setting out what is expected and what the consequences will be, if a member of staff falls short of those expectations. These being in the form of disciplinary action at a level determined by the actions being scrutinised.

Whilst we don’t usually have written contracts in place with children, we should have clear expectations and clear messages as to what the consequences will be if those expectations are not met.

Negative behaviours of any kind should be matched with immediate negative consequences. These can be:-

- Positive ignoring. Turning your back and walking away from the negative behaviour indicating your disappointment.
- Challenging the behaviour with a verbal dressing down.
- Issuing consequences. These should be specific to the individual and something that is known to have an impact. This will be different for each child and should be known to all carers through the child's care plan. This can ultimately lead to the child being reported to the police and subsequent judicial action at varying levels.
- Having to take physical action to stop the behaviour.
- Any physical intervention once the child is calm, must be followed up with a structured detailed debrief of the incident in a firm and objective manner.

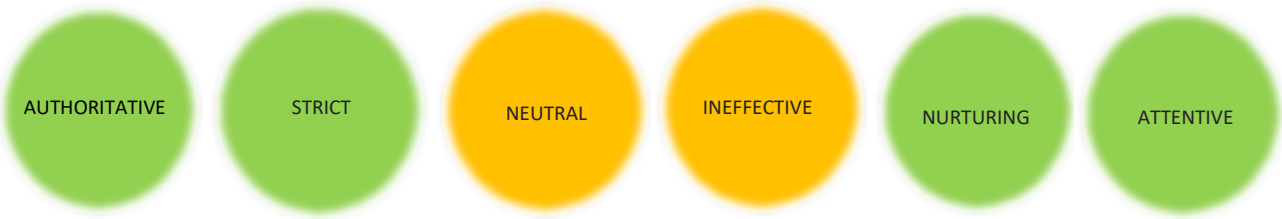
Positive behaviours of any kind should be matched with positive consequences. These can be:-

- Immediate verbal praise.
- Physical praise in the form of a reassuring hand on a shoulder.
- Highlighting to others the positive actions of an individual.
- Reward for positive behaviour. It is recommended this is not to be material or monetary but 1-2-1 time with a key individual.
- Recognition at an award ceremony.

The way individual professionals work is often personal to them, using their individual personality to best effect. It is my observation that when it comes to being effective against challenging behaviour there is a spectrum that can be considered.

Again, quoting Britain's strictest head teacher, "Strict works if its wrapped in love".
Whilst I would like to address the issue of love in more detail, it is represented on this spectrum in the form of nurturing and attentiveness.

Spectrum



Being strict makes children feel safe and secure but it only works if it is equally balanced with nurturing, attentiveness and a feeling of being cared for or loved.

Likewise, if a child feels loved but knows they can walk all over you this is counterproductive as the child connects the affection with an abusive relationship. In this situation they are the abusive dynamic. It is never helpful if this is reinforced.

Those that are only able to be strict may be perceived as a bully, with all the negative connotations that go with that.

There is a saying which I support which is, “it takes a village to bring a child up”. Meaning to raise a happy, healthy, positive child it takes interaction from all kinds of people with all types of skills in different contexts. In our context it takes a community.

Those that are unable to be strict, unable to uphold standards and don’t like to get involved in challenging behaviour may have an ok relationship but don’t offer to much of themselves. Their contribution is limited to ‘taking care of and the passing of time’. Simple care work.

Whilst we need all kinds of personalities to contribute to our organisation, simple care work isn’t going to help children with challenging behaviour, get better. If you are the kind of person described above, whilst your contribution may be limited it is important to recognise what others are doing and ensure you are able to support them in this process. It is very clear that to help children with challenging behaviour you need to be strict, uphold standards and be very nurturing and attentive all at the same time.

I have often drawn an analogy with the training of puppies. Puppy dog training is often how I will refer to it. As one eminently respected K9 trainer once said to me

“Dogs are like kids they need discipline and love, more love than discipline but don’t forget discipline.”

Love:

In 2022, The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was published. This was written by Josh MacAlister. Within the report Josh makes it clear, in his view children in care must be loved. This is quite a bold statement let alone a challenge to live up to.

Love is a deep, emotional hormonal reaction brought about by certain unique factors falling into place at a certain time. A baby's first cry as an example. Love is not something that can be ordered or put into someone's job description.

Within residential care we are often tasked with taking children from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The child that you are suddenly told to look after may have committed sexual offences against younger children, present challenging behaviour and want to fight you! This is not likely to create those emotional hormonal responses. If they did, I would be extremely concerned at a safeguarding level.

What I think Josh and his team were alluding to is that children in care deserve quality trained individuals, who can be nurturing and attentive and ensure all children feel loved. A very different expectation and one which I hugely support.

How can we make children feel loved?

- Be kind.
- Present a warm welcoming caring disposition.
- Use reassuring physical contact at the right time.
- Go out of your way to do something important.
- Know the child well, what they like and don't like.
- Prepare special meals.
- Take an interest in their lives, go to parent's evenings, support activities, see them do well.
- Spend quality time and enjoy shared experiences like days out and holidays.
- Always have something positive in the diary to look forward to.

How can we be strict and caring and get the balance right?

Once again we can rely on:-

- Systems and routines.
- Presence and personality

System and routines in Residential Homes:

- Adhere to the household routines, getting up and going to bed at the right time.
- Insist on a contribution to household chores and domestic tasks.
- Insist on a tidy bedroom to reduce the chaos from previous environments and lives. This helps to ensure they get used to living in order as opposed to chaos.
- Enforce house rules.
- Have high expectations of table manners at meal times.

- Insist on maintaining order. Have chairs put back under the table when leaving as an example.
- Insist on wearing the correct clothes for the day, school uniform or correct weather conditions.
- Be prepared to follow up negative behaviour with consequences.

School classrooms:

- Greet students on arrival.
- Ensure correct uniform.
- Enter classroom and control the space - who sits where.
- Ensure lessons are interesting and at an appropriate level.
- Deliver lessons in a positive interesting and timely manner
- Insist on full engagement.
- Lessons should have a beginning a middle and an end.
- End lessons in a structured way with all materials put away and classroom clean and tidy.
- Maintain order in between lessons.
- If there is disruptive behaviour, it is important that residential staff who are present for behavioural support, deal with this. If necessary, they should remove the child from the lesson to ensure the teacher or instructor, can remain in charge of the remaining group and focus on continuing the lesson with minimum disruption. This means the children being positive continue with their learning and receive the teachers' full attention. This you will note is the opposite to the example I gave earlier of my observations in a special school).
- Be prepared to follow negative behaviour up with consequences.

Working environments:

- As above in every respect. Recognise that the working environments are your classroom and you need to control the space. With it being a working environment with relevant health and safety issues present at all times, maintaining order is much more important if not vital.

Presence and personality:

- Have good physical body posture. Never look submissive, fragile or defensive. This will be perceived as weakness and undermine their confidence in you. They may consider you to be a victim, which they will relate to, but for the wrong reasons. It may encourage abusive or disruptive behaviour.
- Control the environment.
- Always look children in the eye, make a connection.
- Follow up with appropriate physical contact. A formal hand shake is a lesson in social skills and not to be understated. Hand on shoulder gives a reassuring confidence.
- Speak firmly and with confidence.

- Focus on the positive.
- Give clear instructions. Avoid ambiguity.
- Avoid changing your mind. Sometimes it is better to follow through with a plan than to change it.
- Have positive body language and actions. Walk with a purpose when approaching difficulties. Don’t run!
- Be prepared to engage strongly and decisively. Avoid showing weakness or lack of confidence.
- Conclude your interaction at the end of an incident, or the end of a shift positively and give reassurance you will be back soon and you are looking forward to it. Talk of forthcoming events you will be part of.
- Don’t speak of relishing your time away and reluctance to return. It may be work to you and this may be normal working banter but it’s their lives you are dipping in and out of.
- Be prepared to follow up negative behaviour with consequences.

Further analysis:

'Britain's strictest headmistress' has identified the same important principals I had over thirty years ago.

- Children feel safe and secure in an environment where the grownups are in control, they don't feel safe if they are not.
- Children respond to a behaviouralist approach and thrive in that environment.
- Children with behavioural problems don't improve unless they are in such an environment.
- The absence of a behaviouralist approach for children with behavioural problems, is likely to compound and increase their difficulties.
- Children are better prepared for the working world beyond education in such environments.

Whilst the methodology of their school may be different in many ways to take account of their particular cohort, their basic principles are ones we share.

In that school they had seven principles.

1/ Adults must be in charge - if the teacher isn't in charge the bully will be.
2/ Gratitude needs to be taught and it starts with please and thank you.
3/ Insist on high standards. Don't make excuses, deal with the little things and the big things don't happen.
4/ Don't indulge in a victim's mentality. (So important from a therapeutic perspective as well as an educational one).
5/ Bin smart phones, give children a digital detox. In our setting we would change that to control and monitor rather than bin.
6/ Moral environment is crucial.
7/ Strict works when wrapped in love.

One point she makes is "60 years ago my grandmother knew this, and I didn't have to explain it. Today I do!" Which is exactly the starting point of this chapter, my own observations over many years.

Values

Our methodology has been to promote values. Latterly through the work of Dr Neil Hawkes in his book from my Heart: Transforming lives through Values, we have learned to remember the importance of using the language of values in our everyday lives. Again, a language almost forgotten.

It was indeed Dr Hawkes who pointed out the importance of using values to teach gratitude and the process starts with please and thank you at a young age.

A process identified not just by our grandmothers' generation but Aristotle, some two and half thousand years ago.

Our corporate Values are:

- Courage
- Integrity
- Responsibility
- Respect
- Kindness

As stated earlier if we are continually promoting these values and addressing the little things, it is much less likely the big things will happen and the whole issue of dealing with challenging behaviour, becomes less intense and less likely.

The most common praise I get from other professionals during visits to our school is that children are focused and engaged. Any issues are what are deemed by the rest of the world, as low level disruption. This doesn't happen by accident. It is a direct result of running an establishment that provides a behaviouralist approach and the reason we have minimal disruption is because most staff at Pear Tree, whether consciously or not, engage in the practice described above. It is because of your firm but fair, 'strict wrapped in love' methodology established thirty years ago, that it is so successful.

Kind regards,
David Bartlett MBE

Team Teach Information

Six Stages of a Crisis

	Stage description	Need for…	Behaviours	Positive handling responses
1	Anxiety/Trigger	Diversion, support and reassurance.	Low Level Shows signs of anxiety, hiding face in hands, bent over/under table, pulling at collar or hat, rocking or tapping, withdrawing from group, refusing to speak or dismissive, refusing to co-operate, adopting defensive postures.	Low Level Read the body language and the behaviour, intervene early, communicate; 'talk, I'll listen', Use appropriate humour, display calm body language, talk low, slow and quietly, offer reassurance, including positive physical prompts, assess the situation, divert and distract introducing another activity or topic.
2	Defensive/Escalation	Diversion, reassurance, clear limits, boundaries and choices.	Medium Level Displays higher tension, belligerent and abusive, making personal and offensive remarks, talking louder, higher, quicker, adopting aggressive postures, changes in eye contact, pacing around, breaking minor rules, low level destruction, picking up objects which could be used as weapons, challenges; 'I will not…' 'you cannot make me.'	Medium Level Continue to use level one strategies + state desired behaviours clearly, set clear, enforceable limits, offer alternatives and options, offer clear choices, give a get out with dignity, assess the situation and consider making the environment safer and getting help, guide the elbows towards safety.
3	Crisis	Possibly for restrictive intervention appropriate for the service user.	High Level Shouting and screaming, crying, damaging property, moving towards danger, fiddling with electrics, climbing trees, roofs, or out of windows, tapping or	High Level Continue to use level 1 and 2 de=escalation responses + make the environment safer, moving furniture and removing weapon objects, guide assertively, hold or restrain if absolutely necessary, ensure face, voice and posture are

			threatening to break glass, moving towards weapons, picking up objects which can be used as weapons, hurting self, grabbing or threatening others, hurting others, kicking, slapping, punching.	supportive, not aggressive., use help protocol and save face by changing face.
4	Recovery	Co-ordinated letting go and reassurance.	Recovery behaviours Can easily be confused with anxiety stage. People may sit quietly in a hunched position, the difference is they can revert to extreme violence without the build up associated with the normal escalation in stage 2.	Recovery positive handing responses Support and monitor, this may not be a good time to touch as it may provoke a reversion to crisis, give space, look for signs that the person is ready to talk.
5	Depression	Observation, support and monitoring.	After a serious incident people can become depressed, they may not want to interact.	Depression positive handing responses Support and monitor, respond to any signs that the person may want to communicate, show concern and care but do not attempt to resolve residual disciplinary issues at this stage.
6	Follow up	Listening and learning.	Follow up Listening and learning, recording, reporting and communicating, planning to avoid similar events in the future.	• Listen to views of client • What can be learned from this? • Keep appropriate record of incident and responses • Share reports as appropriate – client's file

				• Appropriate professionals meet to discuss plan/risk assessment/care and control plan