

Understanding Behaviour in the Early Years

A practical guide to supporting each child's
behaviour in the early years setting

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SAMPLE PAGES



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Contents

Early years and behavioural learning	4	Thinking about social learning	35
How to use this book	5	Social competence	36
Thinking about behaviour as an area of learning	6	Friendships	37
Early intervention	6	Conflicts	37
Each child's view	7	<i>Example: Mediating children's interactions</i>	38
Engaging with families	8	Thinking about emotional learning	41
Principles and values	9	Communicating emotions	41
First conversations	9	Regulating emotions	43
Families' views	11	<i>Example: Finding out about emotions</i>	44
Building families' confidence, building educators' understanding	11	Thinking about behavioural learning	46
Creating a context for family members to help each other	12	Policy and practice	46
Positively engaging families	13	Influences on behaviour	47
<i>Example: Tuning into individuals</i>	14	Temperament	48
Research and theories about behaviour	17	<i>Example: Thinking about influences on behaviour</i>	50
Attachment	19	Using observation and analysis	53
Approaches to behaviour	19	Interpreting observations	53
Cultural considerations	21	Identifying the learning	55
Developing a setting approach to behaviour	22	Pretend play	55
Brain development	22	Using 'can do' statements	57
The human brain	23	Professional learning	
Scientific research	24	Additional needs	60
During pregnancy	25	Example: Purposeful use of observations	59
<i>Example: Really engaging with families</i>	26	Finding help and support	64
After birth	27	Additional sources of information	66
Emotional development	28	Notes	68
Psychology and neuroscience	29	References	69
Conditions for growth	30	Acknowledgments	71
Developing social understanding and empathy	32		

Early years and behavioural learning



Learning how the world works

As children are developing their sense of identity, they explore different aspects of it (physical, social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive), through their play and their relationships. (EYLF p. 20)

The purpose of this book is to offer both a starting point and a step to further learning about children's early social, emotional and behavioural learning. Working with young children can be fascinating and intriguing, but it is also challenging and frustrating. Children do not set out to upset the adults or children around them, but they are trying to make sense of how relationships and interactions work. When we are with children we are role models — showing them how things work. It is important to remember that children will not select only the aspects of our behaviour we want them to imitate!

In this book the term 'setting' is used to describe any early years service and includes family day care, preschools, long day care centres, first year at school classes, early learning centres, and so on. 'Educator' is used as an inclusive description of the professionals who work in early years education and care, regardless of their current level of qualification.



Having fun together

The word 'family' is employed to signify the child's main carers, as it is recognised that there can be many important people for children in their homes, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles as well as older siblings.

It is for educators, with their knowledge of the individual child, to understand the valuable relationships that exist and to nurture each child's development. Ultimately, as professionals it is for educators to be proactive in establishing and maintaining a positive partnership with all families. In their role as advocates for each child, educators will seek out ways to build families' confidence in supporting their child's learning and developmental progress.

Educators have a responsibility to deepen and broaden their own understanding of each child's social and emotional development. A key part of this process is to recognise the way in which our behaviour is affected by our emotions and social understanding. Children's (and adults') behaviour is a complex topic and there are many aspects which deserve considerably more attention than can be afforded in this book.

How to use this book

This book is designed to be read from cover to cover or to be dipped into as necessary. It can fulfil several roles — for instance, as an introduction to some of the current issues related to our understanding of young children’s behaviour. It is also an opportunity to develop your practice, based on the main text in each chapter, but supported with points for reflection and links with your practice to help identify specific methods of improvement. It can also be a starting point for further reading, research and learning about different aspects of children’s behaviour. This includes theoretical perspectives, and specific influences such as emotions, social interactions and behaviour.

There are some consistent themes throughout the book:

- the importance of engaging with families as you develop your understanding of each child’s behaviour
- the need to build a shared understanding among staff members of the core values and beliefs about early social, emotional and behavioural learning
- the importance of building on this shared understanding to articulate the key messages that will be communicated through your daily practice and interactions with both children and adults
- the acknowledgement that as adults it is our role, especially in early years setting, to scaffold children’s learning and work with all involved adults to give each child the ‘best possible chance’ to positively learn about and understand about themselves and others

The examples of practice in this book are the result of observations and reflections with educators during training sessions as well as visits to early years settings. The examples are composites, sometimes from more than one visit or setting. They are intended to give a realistic flavour of how the main text can be used to inform real-life situations and effective practice. They have been selected because they illustrate ways in which educators have worked with families to resolve some issues related to behaviour that are a regular feature of conversations with educators.

The books recommended for further reading are readily available through local or TAFE/university libraries and various online bookstores. Journal references can be followed up via the internet (Google will find most of them) or alternatively local or TAFE/university libraries will be able to access them.

The process of learning for both children and adults requires opportunities to receive new information, think about the relation to existing knowledge and communicate to others. Deep level learning needs engagement in each of these stages in order to really make changes in our thinking and understanding.

Reading this book is a first step, and will either affirm or challenge your current thinking and practice. The second step is to think about and try out some of the ideas, returning to the text to reflect on the responses received. Finally, sharing your experience with other adults enables the development of thoughts into articulation which facilitates the process of real learning.

Learning is a core part of making sense of experience and gaining confidence in our own competencies. As an adult learner, it is useful to find out what helps your learning and enables you to build the confidence and skill that will improve your practice.

1. Thinking about behaviour as an area of learning

Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families. (EYLF p.12)

Of all areas of learning, the one that raises most concern and most celebration, especially when children are very young, is behaviour. However, adults frequently seem to think about the word 'behaviour' as a mainly negative concept. A particular focus of this book is to think in some depth about behaviour as a normal part of children's early learning and development.

Perhaps the easiest way to begin this thinking is to acknowledge 'behaviour' as everything we do and everything we say. A baby's first smile, first step, giving something to another, are all behavioural milestones which should be celebrated. A baby's cry, spitting out something that tastes unpleasant, reaching for a toy held by another, are also important behavioural responses.

Fundamentally, our behaviour is a means of communication, and for children who are not yet verbally confident, it is their major means of giving messages about their needs and emotions.

'Behavioural learning' is a phrase that describes the learning that takes place and helps us to understand how we can change and use our behaviour, as well as the impact it can have on situations and relationships.

Generally in society, there is concern about the behaviour of children and young people. Through television, the internet, magazines and newspapers we are made very aware of negative child, teenage and adult behaviours. As adults we often have an interest in such information in order to highlight how 'good' our own family members are and how well they behave. However, such information can also raise anxiety, particularly for families with young children as they set out to prevent their children from developing such negative behaviours.

In each of our early years settings there are likely to be individuals and groups of children whose behaviour already causes us concern. For a variety of reasons they may respond to others in ways that you do not consider to be appropriate.

Although the home learning environment has been shown to have most impact,¹ some of our young children spend up to fifty hours per week in long day care, so the influence we as early educators can have on young children's behavioural learning is significant. If we can work positively with families to support their child's developing understanding about behaviour, this influence is increased considerably. The more we can engage with families, the more effective our support for each child's learning and development will be.

Early intervention

We hear a lot about early intervention being effective in preventing future difficulties in all areas of learning, particularly in the context of behaviour.² However, it is not always easy to work out what that 'early intervention' might look like on a daily basis in our own setting. In order to think about this constructively, it is important to reflect on what we know about how children learn to behave.

We all experience behaviour every minute of every day, and we cannot avoid being influenced by the interactions we come across. Each young child especially is looking to those bigger than them, both adults and children, to learn how the world works and what is important for them to know. Early intervention is about providing opportunities for each child to experience and learn from positive relationships and supportive adults to help them gain understanding that will enable them to establish and maintain their own positive social connections.

The experiences each child has help to build a picture for them of how people relate to each other. As children get older, patterns of behaviour emerge and become characteristic ways of responding.

Early intervention is not just about intervening at an early stage in life, but also at the point that early signs are noted that may indicate emerging difficulties. We can all understand that prevention is better than a cure, and this is particularly true when supporting behavioural learning. If we invest in and create an environment that enables positive learning about behaviour, we can show children effective and appropriate ways of interacting.

However, this is often easier said than done as it involves all educators demonstrating what this looks like in their interactions with children, family members and colleagues consistently every day. In addition, this positive approach needs to be applied to more difficult situations, such as sorting out conflicts and the inevitable squabbles which are all part of learning how to get on with each other. If this is done well it is likely to reduce the need for children to escalate to more challenging behaviours in order to communicate their needs.³ It will also help children to understand that, when we do not agree or if we want the same thing at the same time, there are many ways to resolve the situation. In essence, we will be helping each child to see situations from different perspectives and recognise the emotions that may be involved.

A crucial part of learning about our behaviour and the way in which we interact with others is to recognise our own perspective and to develop our understanding of how others may see the situation. This is a very complex process and it develops gradually as children experience different relationships and learn about how the world works. Such understanding of others' thinking is not really fully developed until children are about 5 years old.⁴

When children and adults experience sensitive and empathetic engagement to resolve conflicts, they receive important messages about understanding others' feelings and vocalising emotions appropriately.

Each child's view

In early years settings, our first approach to making a positive impact on each child's behaviour is to try to see the experience of coming to our setting through the eyes of the child. For some children this will be a happy and exciting experience, for others it will be filled with anxiety and fear, but for most it will be a mixture of the full range of emotions, sometimes on a daily basis. As educators, we need to be learning about the ways in which each child expresses these emotions. The best source of knowledge is a combination of listening to families' observations of their child and sharing our own observations with other educators.



Being sociable with others



Learning from adults

Families begin learning about their child from the moment they are born, and by the time their child comes to attend an early years setting they have an extensive amount of understanding and knowledge about their child. However, on meeting professional educators, families can often undervalue the extent and importance of their own specialist knowledge. It is key to establishing a positive relationship that educators enable families to recognise that their insights are valued and help to inform the approaches and strategies that are used to support their child's learning in the setting.

Recent research suggests that there may currently be patterns of communication between families and educators that change over time. For example, when children are younger, about 2 years old, families and educators have been found to agree in their views of positive behaviours, but not negative behaviours. But at 3 to 4 years, agreement was related more to negative behaviours.⁵ One possible explanation is that as children are more able to have positive interactions, adults talk more about the exception of the difficult behaviours that occur. Alternatively, it could be that the focus in the setting is more about noticing and commenting on negative behaviours. Through reflecting on our current practice in communicating with families, we can be sure to maintain a balance between talking about positive and less positive behaviours.

Engaging with families

Through their earliest observations of each child's interactions and by listening to families, educators are able to develop an awareness of how children may be feeling at different times.

Understanding emotions, as well as talking with families and colleagues about possible ways to respond, really helps to give each child consistent and supportive messages about their behaviour. This is true of encouraging positive behaviour as well as helping to change specific negative behaviours.

Considering that behaviour and interactions are so complex, it is amazing that the majority of children will, for most of the time, behave in ways that we consider to be appropriate for their age and experience. This mainly positive experience also allows the adults a sense of being in control of the

situation. However, as soon as a child demonstrates behaviour which for us, as individuals, feels beyond our expectation, we can easily feel overwhelmed, deskilled, frustrated and at a loss as to the best way to respond. Systems of support between adults are a significant positive influence on the emotional environment in which children learn about relationships and caring for each other.

Problem-solving about what might be leading to a particular behavioural response or which might be the best way to react should not be left to any one individual. It is much more effective if done together with all the adults who care for the child. Initially, this would be members of the room team and family members but may be extended to include the Early Years Intervention Services, leaders or managers (see Chapter 6 for ideas about collating information and engaging with other support agencies).

As adults we can often struggle to make sense of our role in relation to children, both in families and as professionals. This is particularly true when thinking about behaviour and making decisions about which levels of control are appropriate at different times.

Today there are many sources of information about children's health and development with a vast array of advice and guidance. Information is available via the internet, but also from friends, family and sometimes complete strangers. The result can be a confusing muddle of contradictory messages, very few of which actually take into account the characteristics and circumstances of the individual child. By working together and by building a shared understanding of the unique child, and their strengths and capabilities, families and educators can benefit from each other's knowledge of the child as they learn to respond to the very different social demands of home and setting life.

It is essential to engage with families from the first contact to make them feel welcome and set the scene for a constructive relationship to develop. A regular review of routines for answering the phone, showing family members round on visits, as well as daily arrivals and departures is a useful way to continually improve relationships with families. Finding a variety of ways to ask family members for feedback about how it feels to come to your setting is also really important in improving your practice.

Principles and values

For general interactions to be consistently positive with all family members, staff will need to understand and recognise how to communicate the principles and values of the setting in all their interactions with families. Underpinning this is the belief that engaging and supporting positive communication with families is crucial for each child's wellbeing. It is all too easy to start off this process positively, but as soon as there is a difficult interaction, to consider the family as not interested or unhelpful. As professionals, it is our role to make an effort and to maintain and build relationships with all families.

Marion Dowling points out that all families are different, but helping them to feel confident in their upbringing of their children is of great benefit to young children.⁶ The start of this process could be making practical decisions about how the communication will take place. The preference of some families will be for the full range of forms of communication: email, text, letter, face-to-face, photographs, and slide presentations. A major part of communication with families is about working out which is the best method for particular purposes.

Establishing different ways of communicating with families includes negotiating times, method and purpose of daily, weekly, monthly or yearly contact.



Do we value all learning?

It also involves considering how the method of communication is influenced by the purpose — for example, celebrations, talking about difficulties, one-off or ongoing issues. Communication is, of course, a two-way process and it is important to make sure that it is effective, whether initiated by families or educators.

Knowing your families is crucial to maintaining good relationships and as an investment for when you need to work positively through any difficult times. Building on your local knowledge of the area through talking to individual families can help you to understand why certain situations are more challenging for some families than for others. Through this understanding, it is much easier to complement the home-based relationships and provide more appropriate support for each child.

First conversations

The beginning of this process is based on information collected through your usual admission procedure. Rather than just collecting basic information, this is an opportunity to communicate how much you value the knowledge families already have about their children. It is most effective if this is part of a conversation rather than a structured question and answer or form-filling activity. Open-ended questions focused on an understanding of each child's current experience can be helpful to begin a shared awareness of how the child might react to attendance at the setting. For example, the things that might be helpful to talk about before Alesha begins attending could include:

1. What is a typical week for Alesha?
2. What are her favourite places, and why might she like them?
3. Which of her extended family are particularly important to her? Given a choice, who does she like to be with?
4. What opportunities has she had to play with younger or older children in ones, twos or larger groups? Is she more at ease with smaller or larger groups of children her age?
5. What sorts of indoor activities does she like?
6. What sorts of outdoor activities does she like?
7. Which local parks, libraries, swimming pools is she familiar with?

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

What is working well in your contact and communication with extended family members?

Think about the systems of contact and communication you have with families. Which do you think are most effective? In reviewing each one you may want to consider the following:

- Do families think the same systems are as effective as you do?
- Do you have regular, frequent and positive contact with all families?
- For the families you have least contact with, which way of communicating works best for them?
- For the families you have most contact with, what is it that makes it easier for both parties to maintain the links?
- Do you actively seek the views of families whose children have moved on from your setting?
- Do you actively seek the views of families who visited but did not take up a place at your setting?

From a family's perspective, deciding to bring their child to you can be a difficult and anxious time for all sorts of reasons. They will feel a wide range of emotions including some of the following:

- You, as the professional, will criticise their upbringing or their child.
- They don't know enough about childcare settings to be confident that they have chosen the right one.
- Generally, they are anxious about leaving their child.
- They have had a poor experience at a previous setting which they do not want to tell you about.
- You will not understand their child's means of communicating.
- You will not be an advocate for their child.

From these sorts of questions you can begin to build a picture of the situations and activities that are familiar to Alesha. This will help you to think with her family about which of the setting experiences are going to be most like or different from her previous experiences. More importantly, it especially helps to be able to talk to her about things that she has experienced and people who are important to her so that she understands you are interested and value these things too. There is no need for these to be questions on a form to fill in, or completed in one session; better for them to be a part of a conversation that can then be added to or amended over time as you get to know the family better.

To increase your understanding and insight about what it feels like for a family coming to your setting, it can be useful to ask for their reflections of those first few weeks when their child attended. There are a variety of ways in which this can be done and it is important to remember that it is the more detailed or less positive comments that often help to improve practice the most. For example, if a family member tells us that everything was wonderful it is difficult to understand which of the things we did were most supportive. We can also be left with a vague idea that we have got everything right and cannot improve, which is very unlikely to be the case.

Each group of families (and educators) is different and the ways they interact change as they get to know each other more. If we can make inviting feedback from families a frequent and regular part of our practice, we are more likely to consolidate respectful professional relationships. This gives families the message that we are willing to listen, consider and work together to improve practice.



Being together

Families' views

Possible ways to gather families' views include:

- individual conversations with educators
 - interactive display boards, such as an outline of how things are now – *'When new families come for their first visit we ...'*, *'We would like to make this a welcoming and positive experience – in what ways could we make it better?'* Sticky notes are then available for families and educators to add a quick comment or suggestion. This is best developed through educators also talking to families about the display board when they pick up and drop off children. If suggestions are offered in the conversation, educators can add them to the board.
 - comments box with blank postcards available to write on – most useful if there is a specific question or focus to prompt everyone's thinking. For example, *'We are planning an event for families to meet each other and hear about what goes on at the setting. What would you like to be included in the event?'* Some further prompts such as food, information, activities, length of time, day of the week with question marks can also increase family response. Do consider setting realistic expectations. For example, if you cannot be flexible about the day of the week, be sure not to ask for suggestions of which day suits families.
- voting boxes (ideally see-through) – one question such as *'Would you prefer to meet with staff to discuss your child's progress between 8:30 – 9:30 or 4:30 – 6:30?'* Tokens are then posted to register the family's preference. If the boxes are see-through, families are also able to see the majority vote which is likely then to inform your final decision.
 - inviting a couple of families to talk to and gather others' views about a particular issue
 - giving one or two educators time to contact families to gather views about a specific issue
 - establishing a family group or forum can help to ensure family views are being taken into account in your plans for improvement

You will no doubt use a variety of methods to gather families' views and it is always worth asking families how they would like their views collected. Many working families will have experience of market research or customer relations and be able to contribute suggestions of tried and tested ways to gather feedback.

Building families' confidence, building educators' understanding

Being a family is a very complex job and, like educators, family members are likely to feel more confident at some stages of the child's development than others.

A baby can be seen as predictable, totally dependent and manageable once routines have been established. Alternatively, they can be seen as the scariest, most fragile treasure for which you have total responsibility. Similarly, toddlers, preschool, and school-aged children can be lively, interesting and exciting to be with or frustrating, challenging and exhausting.

Educators often have some degree of choice over the age range they work with, but families have to develop confidence and skill to contend with all ages. Families may begin with very clear ideas about what their experience will be like and their approaches to the inevitable challenges of supporting their children's learning and development. However, many influences – such as



Appreciating each other's skills

changes in circumstances, sleep deprivation, unsettled crying babies and the range of advice and suggestions which bombard new families — can quickly lead to feelings of being overwhelmed and confused. These feelings may be temporary or longer lasting.

Talking with families about observations of their child and encouraging them to contribute their own observations is a very effective way to develop a shared understanding of both the child's behaviour and the family's confidence at the current stage of development. There are various ways to begin this discussion including:

- using a photograph of the child engaged in an activity and talking through the context, learning, interactions and responses of the child
- reflecting on a series of observation notes related to a child's particular interest to highlight progress over a short time
- building on a family's description of an outing or event and using sensitive questioning to highlight skills the child is developing

Creating a context for family members to help each other

Most families are very busy and would find committing a lot of time regularly to activities in the setting very difficult. However, some will be willing and happy to support other families as an occasional or one-off event. For example, when families first begin to attend the setting, contact with another family to talk through concerns or organisational problems might be useful.

Using display boards and noticeboards with prompts such as photographs, learning journeys and questions about the local area are easy ways to start families talking to each other. It is also helpful for families to share knowledge about local facilities and amenities, for example:

- A map of the local area showing parks and playgrounds can easily be downloaded from the internet (often on local council websites or through web-based searches). Families are then able to add sticky notes about their visits, offering useful information about buses, cafes, toilets and ranges of equipment for younger or older children, etc. An outing led by the

educators might also encourage a family new to the area or anxious about going alone to come along. Sometimes families will also begin to arrange trips together to share the responsibility and enable children to play together with friends.

- No one setting can provide all the support a family might need, so it is really important to explore and be aware of local sources of support for families. A good starting point is to develop a relationship with your nearest Children's and Families' Services Centre and share with families the activities and support they can access.
- Check out and establish a contact with local libraries, GP surgeries, health visitors, local settings, speech and language therapy groups, dieticians, midwives, additional needs support teams (ECIS), families information service, local schools, local park activities, and family-friendly activities and spaces. Remember, not all families need all the available information all of the time, so it is important that they are clear about how to access support from educators, and for educators to be sensitive in signposting services and support.

The local area around your setting is usually the area of most interest to the families who bring their children to you, so developing your knowledge about what is available can be very useful. If your families tend to choose your setting because it is



Family and friends teach us about relationships

close to their work, their view of the area may be different, so it may be useful to add to local information with a map showing where families commute from so that there are opportunities for families to make links if they wish.

Positively engaging families

It can be helpful to think about what might be the 'magnets' to attract families to events and encourage closer involvement with your setting. The obvious one is, of course, their children, but others such as food, refreshments, new experiences and shared activities can come a close second.

Early years settings, particularly in cities, often find that there are many nationalities and ethnicities represented in the families who attend their setting. A successful way of encouraging engagement in the setting community is to offer a range of food for all to try and share. Ideally, some families will be involved in the planning and the sourcing of the food. In most cultures, food and eating serve a social purpose and can be a good opportunity for developing conversations.

Events provide a useful opportunity to talk with families about mealtime expectations of children, and to respectfully compare similarities and differences between home and setting. Educators' attitudes will play a key role in building the confidence of families and positively supporting interactions between them to make an event a success.

All adults feel confident and are good at something and most, with a little encouragement, are willing to share this with others. For example, an educator in a children's centre discovered that a mother had good dressmaking skills. Through discussion, the mother agreed to make some clothes for the children to use in their role play. Rather than the family doing this at home, the mother was invited to come to the setting so that the children were aware of the work being done. As a result, the children were engaged in discussion with the mother about sewing, making things and shared experiences of members of their family who made things too. This also provided an opportunity for children to just sit and engage in conversation while the mother was sewing — a real treasure for young children when adults often seem so busy.

LINKS WITH YOUR PRACTICE

Although behaviour is an area we get most concerned about, it is also often the topic we find it most difficult to talk about. This may be because we tend not to talk about it until there is a problem or because we are not sure what we need to be discussing.

Sometimes our everyday conversations with families can be reduced to a list of food, nappy changes/ toileting and if the child has had a good, bad or indifferent day overall. In some ways this is a safe, easy list, which both families and educators can feel comfortable with and becomes a regular routine that rapidly loses significance. While it is important that families are well-informed about such things, what is significant is when there is a change or unexpected difference in a child's eating or toileting — for example, a child who normally eats every meal with enthusiasm is suddenly reluctant to eat or only eats a small amount. Further discussion and ideas about working in partnership with families and effective communication methods can be found in a range of books.⁷

Using daily conversations to build up a picture of children's individual social connections and experiences with families can really help to reduce families' anxieties and consolidate their trust in you. Through sharing developments in engaging with others, pretend play skills, social language and resolving conflicts, families become involved in understanding how complex this can be for children. They are also helped to recognise realistic expectations of children at particular moments of development.

Finally, opening up the conversation provides an opportunity for sharing concerns about social interactions which may occur at home. This shared problem-solving can be very supportive of children's learning in the early stages of developing positive social connections.

EXAMPLE: TUNING IN TO INDIVIDUALS



Interacting is a fundamental aspect of learning

Family day care

Marina was working with a young mum whose toddler (Aaron) was very interested in keys. He had begun to pick up keys wherever he saw them, hiding them, holding them and sometimes giving them to Mum. Marina had also noticed his interest in keys. Through discussion, Mum and Marina realised what an important feature of daily life keys must seem to Aaron. Adults were often looking for, holding, picking up, handing to each other or using keys. Marina listened in detail as Mum talked about the family routines about keys.

It seemed possible that Aaron could be included more in the routines, by using the phrase '*Where should we put the keys?*' when they came into the house each time and letting Aaron put the keys in the drawer. This was amended to '*Where do we keep the keys?*', and when it was time to get them out of the drawer Aaron was able to take them out of the drawer and give them to either Mum or Dad. Aaron was now being praised and cuddled for finding them, and this helped to include him in what was going on and give a positive purpose to the interest in keys. Mum felt that it was more effective than saying 'No' every time he went near the keys and highlighted Aaron's delight in being helpful and receiving praise.

Long day care

The long day care setting was alerted to the anxieties children were feeling about moving rooms during a family 'tea and talk' session. The families also told the educators that they found it confusing and that getting used to new staff took a little while. As a first step, the staff developed a new routine with the help of the families. When children were about to move into a new room there was a special hand-over meeting with families and both the key persons. This was an opportunity to talk about all the child's learning, but especially the important behavioural learning that had been achieved. Families and educators were able to think together about each child's emotional wellbeing and what might trigger anxieties.

A discussion which, although unplanned, became a core part of the conversation, was recognising early signals that the child was feeling anxious. The 'new key person' also set out the general developmental changes in behaviour that were likely to occur during the coming year. The adults shared experiences of things that families in the past had worried about and ways in which these issues had been resolved. They organised arrangements for regular sharing of ideas and progress. A key topic was finding the easiest way to indicate or

communicate the need for a discussion. This included email, text, phone call and a prearranged signal at the beginning or end of the day.

Preschool

At a preschool setting they started a 'beginning of year' meeting of 'old' and 'new' families with coffee and snacks. They talked specifically about ways of helping children to join in others' play and different ways to resolve conflicts. The families were encouraged to talk with each other about local parks they had visited and the activities their children enjoyed. This informal discussion led to several families meeting up at their local park and trying out some of the ways suggested to help their child join in games. Discussions developed about, how each child was approaching others to engage in play, which activities they most like to share with other children, and how families recognise if their child is anxious, sad or worried. Many positive messages about behaviour were shared which established a positive relationship. It also gave clear messages about the educator's interest in each child's development and understanding about the pressures of family life.

Primary school

One primary school invited a small group of families from year 1 children to meet the new first year class families. The first of these sessions was so successful in identifying and exploring families' and children's anxieties that the families asked if it could be repeated. Meetings were organised on a term basis for snacks, drinks and chat sessions. A variety of different days and times of day were used, such as the end of school day, early morning, and Saturday to accommodate as many families as possible. Each meeting also voted for a focus topic ready for the next meeting, e.g. mealtimes, bedtimes, internet safety, behaviour and resolving conflicts. There were no guest speakers arranged, but everyone tried to find out what they could bring to the next meeting to support each other. The school leadership team used some of the suggestions as topics for families' evenings with a guest speakers invited.

Extended family connections vary and are less close when relatives move to other areas to find work. As a result, new families can become isolated and lack advice from trusted experienced family members about childcare and other services. Opportunities through early years settings to talk about worries and celebrations can really help to build confidence for all family members.

Families are inevitably trying to do their best for their children and to make their lives better than the family's own experience. Sharing your knowledge and understanding of child development with families and looking together for exciting milestones such as rolling over, beginning to crawl, first steps creates a joint interest and basis for in-depth discussion about each child's progress.

A particularly helpful approach is to consider with families the sorts of learning and experiences that are significant for children at specific ages. What is it like to be 2, 6, 10 months or 2, 3, 4 or 5 years old? Sharing our knowledge of child development helps to give a context for children's responses and behaviours, and can increase the likelihood of adults seeing the world from the child's perspective and responding in a way that supports their learning. A practical way to support these discussions could be through photograph and comment booklets for each age range, compiled by families and educators.

Experienced educators have a clear idea of the range of behaviours and progress children are likely to make while with them during baby, toddler, preschool or reception stages. Talking with families about these expectations, in general terms, can help to reduce anxiety and build confidence for families. Some important things to bear in mind which often worry families are:

- Is my child late or early at developing this skill or awareness?
 - crawling
 - walking
 - talking
 - feeding
 - toileting
- Is my child normal? Do all children respond like this?
 - repeating actions over and over again
 - hitting out to make contact with others
 - putting everything in their mouths
 - crying when families leave them

- Why would children behave in this way?
 - copying actions they have watched others doing
 - refusing help to put on shoes then getting frustrated when they can't complete the task
 - throwing or dropping things from buggies or highchairs

There are many examples, and discussions with families will provide many more. Searching together for an answer through observation, reading or asking others can be as supportive as being able to offer an immediate explanation.

Using the approach of considering the described behaviour in its developmental context is an important first step. For example, making contact with others by hitting or touching is very common when children's language is at an early stage of development. If the child wants to play or engage with someone it is much quicker and more effective to make contact through touch rather than finding



Understanding you, understanding me

the right words and articulating them. Thinking with families about words or gestures that will not be interpreted as hitting helps to support children through this phase.

Working in partnership with families helps to ensure that the suggestions build on shared knowledge of each child.

KEY POINTS IN THINKING ABOUT BEHAVIOUR AS AN AREA OF LEARNING

- Building positive relationships with family members is important to each child's well-being and an investment for educators to increase the likelihood of continued positive support from families. It increases the shared responsibility and problem-solving as well as providing opportunities for celebration.
- Families and educators have unique contributions to make to a shared understanding of each child and their learning and developmental progress.
- First contact between families and the staff at the setting, whether school, long day care, preschool, family child carer or after school hours care, will set the tone for future relationships.
- Sharing progress is particularly important in understanding the development of positive social connections and behaviour patterns.
- Creating a relaxed, happy but purposeful environment helps behaviour and all learning.