Behaviour, belief and action.

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In one of my first teaching jobs I worked at a school for 'maladjusted children'. Even then I was distinctly uncomfortable about this label. The students were certainly challenging but most were responding to difficult situations in their young lives, including abuse, rejection and trauma. Some had powerful negative role models. It was these situations that were 'mal' and to label the children instead seemed illogical. Fortunately others agreed and schools for 'maladjusted children' eventually became schools for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Language influences how we interpret what is going on around us. Conversations are the means by which beliefs and ways of seeing the world become established. The way we talk about children and their behaviour determines how we think about it, which in turn suggests what we do about it, especially in the longer term. Such discourses can become powerful in a group and make it hard to challenge less helpful interpretations of behaviour.

Different ways of understanding

Sophie is struggling to put on her boots to go outside in the rain. She can't get one on and throws it in fury across the room. When one of the early years staff comes to offer help she screams at her to go away.

The language used to describe Sophie and this incident is indicative of what people believe is going on. One person may label this behaviour as disruptive, another as aggressive - perhaps deliberately hurtful or uncontrolled, while another may see it as determined or 'out of character'. Sophie herself may be described as defiant, uncooperative or insolent. Alternatively she may be thought of as independent, over-tired or distressed. Some may refer to broader aspects of the situation that have implications for others - such as Sophie lacking guidance or being hard-to-manage. There are many potential constructs. This is called 'positioning'. How you 'position' Sophie will imply how you are positioned yourself and this determines any action you take:

- If you see her as disruptive then perhaps you position yourself as responsible for maintaining order
- If independent - you will be acknowledging her developmental drive for autonomy along with the need for appropriate socialisation
- If defiant - perhaps you consider you need to re-assert control.
- If aggressive - your focus may be on protecting others
- If insolent - you may take this personally and consider you have to defend yourself
- If, over time, you position Sophie as 'not normal' you may focus on her differences rather than what she has in common with other children. You may also believe her problems are 'beyond the limits of your responsibility.'
- If you see the behaviour as a coping strategy you may help Sophie find more acceptable ways of responding to difficulties

- If you see her as having a tough day with Frustration getting the better of her, then perhaps you will be looking at how to make the day better and explore some ways of getting Frustration to quieten down.

Seeing the child as the problem

Sometimes adults see problems as existing within children. They get labelled with terms as 'attention-seeking' 'impulsive' or 'spiteful'. Occasionally the label suggests abnormality, such as 'conduct disordered'. This way of thinking is often referred to as 'the medical model' and it has its roots in deficit psychology. It looks to the child to 'change' or 'get treatment'. This is not a very helpful or hopeful way of understanding behaviour. Trying to 'make' others change has limited impact and we risk increasingly forceful methods or drug regimes. Children also tend to live up to labels. If a youngster is frequently told she can't do something she will learn to see herself as that person. If children are given positive labels by significant adults, however, such as 'helpful' or 'determined', they will do their best to meet these expectations instead.

Blaming the family

Another way of seeing difficult behaviour is that it is the parents' fault. Although this may be understandable, blame does not help. Families usually want the best for their children and do what they can with the knowledge, skills, resources and support that they have. Families often lack one or more of these vital ingredients for being effective parents. Professional involvement needs to focus on supporting parents for the sake of their children. One mother, faced with a litany of her son's misdemeanours summed up her sense of hopelessness, " *They wanted me to work miracles and I just couldn't do it*". The evidence indicates that when professionals look for competencies and possibilities families respond by being less defensive and more prepared to collaborate.[i]

Interactive perspective

This view acknowledges that there are things you can change and things that you can't. You cannot do anything about a child's history or past experiences, family, personality, level of development or innate characteristics. Early years professionals do, however, have choice over their perspectives, expectations, responses to needs and difficulties, what they say and how they say it, the use of resources and the facilitation of learning. A child's potential can be maximised by a supportive environment and constructive relationships. Small consistent changes have the potential for making big differences over time. Spending energy on what you can do something about is likely to be more fruitful and less wearing that focusing on what the child is not doing well.

Solution and strengths based perspectives

A solution focused approach is clear about the link between beliefs and actions and asks different questions about challenging situations..[ii]Instead of looking backwards to find out the details of incidents and why they occur solution focused approaches look for exceptions "What is going on when this is **not** happening and how can we get

more of it?" They also focus on the future; "What do we want to happen?" Is the goal that Sophie puts on her boots independently or are we more interested in how she manages frustration without losing her temper. What do we want her to be able to do? Once we are clear about the goal we can begin to look for exceptions such as 'when does Sophie manage frustration well?' What helps her? What can she do independently? How did she learn this? Once someone sees they are already part of the way to a goal their sense of optimism and confidence increases.

The problem is the problem

Another useful way of conceptualising behaviour is to see children having a relationship with a problem and 'externalising' it, We explore with children how the problem is getting in the way.[iii] For example we might ask Sophie to give her frustration a name - Mr Crosspatch perhaps - and help her think of ways of keeping him away. This approach is respectful of children and encourages their creativity in finding solutions.

Summary

- There are many different ways of interpreting behaviour
- The way you think about behaviour determines what you do about it
- You cannot change what a child brings to a situation
- You can only change what is within your control
- What you do and don't do makes a difference
- If you think you can make a difference you will, however small
- Labelling children negatively is likely to reinforce unwanted behaviour
- Looking for developing strengths and competencies is more effective than focusing solely on investigating problems
- "Externalising' problems so that you work on the relationship that the child has with a difficulty places the child as separate from the difficulty and is respectful to the whole person and their potential.

[i] Sue Roffey (ed) (2002) School Behaviour and Families. London: David Fulton Publishers

[ii] Insoo Kim Berg and Therese Steiner (2003) Children's Solution Work. New York: W.W. Norton and Company

[iii] Jennifer Freeman, David Epston and Dean Lobvits (1997) Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: New York W.W. Norton and Company