

When behaviour is challenging in a group environment

Behaviour such as talking out, wiggling, poking, space invading, not being able to wait or take turns and emotional outbursts can take a toll on a teacher and the group as a whole. These behaviours are ways of communicating that a child has an unmet need that they are not able to communicate.

For example, a child may be hungry or thirsty, but not have the ability to recognize the signals from their body. The task they are being asked to perform may be too difficult, they may not understand the instructions, or they may be feeling uncomfortable because the activity is making them feel emotionally or socially vulnerable. These challenges are often easier to overcome when working one to one with an adult, compared to working in a group of peers.

Tips

School or Centre wide

- ✓ **Create a culture of inclusion and respect for self and others** – say Hi and use student and colleagues names – show respect, even when times are challenging. Behaviour is not the child, it is a response from a child that indicates they do not have the skills to respond in a more appropriate way. They need to be taught.
- ✓ **Walk to talk** – Smile at someone and ask them to pass it on
- ✓ **Be mindful in all activities you do.** Practice yourself and teach children to slow down and be mindful. This takes time!
- ✓ **Understanding how co-regulation supports children.** Many children do not self-regulation until well into the intermediate grades. If a child is having challenges being calm and focused in the group they rely on the adults and peers around them to help them regulate by staying calm, supporting with problem solving and modeling.

In classroom or group

- ✓ **Co-create a simple set of group rules with the children.** Some of these rules may include: take turns talking; everyone actively listens and participates, respect everyone's physical space, respect everyone has an opinion and their opinion might be different, what's talked about in group stays in group, have fun!, etc. Your group should have no more than 3 to 4 rules. You may need to explain or give an example of the rules. E.g. have the group discuss what respect mean and ways you would act that would show you are respecting others. Make a poster and have everyone sign it.

- ✓ **Post a sessional schedule.** A simple schedule that lets children know what the group will be doing *first / then* is helpful for children. Sometimes a visual schedule might be more helpful than a written schedule. Keep it simple – 3 or 4 main points with no more than 4 or 5 words per point. Review with children at the beginning of the group.

Depending on the type of group a handout might be helpful for the child to take home with them, so parents understand what the children did in group today. Alternatively, a child could have a communication book that they write in, but ensure you have something already written or are prepared to scribe for children with written output challenges.

- ✓ **Ensure you establish a routine that signals the start of the group session.** This could be the use of a chime, or a song or chant, clapping, hands-up. Be creative. The more the children are engaging the more effective.

- ✓ **Managing energy levels in the group.** Some children have difficulty adjusting their energy states by themselves. Having a routine that can be used with the whole group to reduce energy can be very helpful. Make sure that the group knows the name (be creative) of the routine/activity and its purpose. Usually an intense movement activity is helpful to release excess energy. For example, a stomp and clap response, or stationary jumping to the moon that is fast and intense. Remind children of the group rules such as keeping our bodies safe and not invading others' space. Ensure you check in with the children after the activity by asking them how their body is feeling after the activity – do you feel calmer. If not, is there another

activity someone could suggest. Build several activities into these movement breaks. Movement breaks can be used as the energy in a group escalates, or diminishes, or can be built into set times during the class.

Some children might have low energy levels. Again, movement activities can help, but also check in with children about whether they need a drink of water or a snack. Some children might need a quiet space break by themselves. The culture of the group should always include acceptance of what children need to regulate their energy levels. Part of the process is teaching children about their own emotions and feelings (body states), so they can build the skills to eventually calm or energize themselves.

- ✓ **Using group meeting or team huddle to resolve challenges.** When the group as a whole is struggling you can use a group or team meeting to discuss specific challenges and co-create solutions. When children are involved in problem solving they are more likely to use the solutions agreed on by the group. In addition, they learn skills that help them with conflict resolution and problem solving. Children will get used to the idea of using the structure of a group meeting or team huddle to solve problems, which in turn should reduce challenging behaviours.

Call a meeting. Discuss the one challenge that is impacting the functioning of the group the most. Start with “I have been noticing that.....” e.g. the group has been having a hard time with taking turns ... what’s up with that? or when everyone is having a hard time with not waiting or taking turns I get frustrated because I know that it can be hard to wait for your turn....does anyone have a suggestion about what we could do to make it easier to wait?

- ✓ **When individual children struggle.** Sometimes individual children may struggle in a group. These challenges might be related to a neurodevelopmental condition that includes different ways of learning. For example, if a child has challenges with working memory or processing information they may need to have fewer instructions or may need more time to process information as they learn. Some children have challenges with sensory input and might be more sensitive to light, sound or textures. The inability to manage these challenges can look like challenging

behaviour. In some cases it might be that a child can't do what they are being asked without adaptations. Taking the time to ask a child if they have ideas about what might be helpful, rather than making assumptions about behaviours is critical to working with children who have extra needs.

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