Children's Behaviour

an emotional response gone awry

By Wendy Forster

When a child consistently presents with behaviours that are challenging or puzzling, our first response is often instinctive. This response is based on our own experience as children and/or as parents. This initial response may be unhelpful bringing with it a complex web of relationships, values and expectations that hold little relevance to the child and their situation.

Wendy explains that:

If you always do what you've always done, you always get what you've always got...

As we worked through the process of reviewing our Behaviour Guidance Policy, it became clear that if we wanted to have a better understanding of children's behaviour, we needed to view it though a new lens. It made sense to focus our attention on Attachment theory. In particular the 'Circle of Security' model (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002). This model translates attachment theory (which is complex) into a working model for both parents and childcare staff to apply to their daily practice. For more information about the circle of security please see the resources on the following page.

In essence, the model involves staff:

- **Managing roles so that there is always an adult physically and emotionally available to children.**

- **Being aware of where children are on the circle, and what intervention is required to help them manage their emotions.**

- **Providing *safe hands* for each child – a refuge for when their emotions are too big for them to manage.**

- **Reflecting on how we can support all children to effectively use the circle, at the same time teaching emotional regulation.**

We're developing a deeper understanding of the behaviour of the children we work and of ourselves. We can identify:

> **Situations that challenge us emotionally and thereby impact on how we respond to children's behaviour.**

> **The difference between connecting with children and behaviours that seek to control.**

> **Those children or others that we find most difficult to work with. When this occurs, we need to be honest and plan as a team to ensure that we build positive relationships.**

Sally was working with a group of nearly three year old children. Among them was Charlie. Charlie was exhibiting a range of behaviours that were challenging for staff, including tantrums. He was generally non compliant at the most difficult moments. His mother was experiencing post natal depression and Charlie's behaviour was unpredictable.

Sally was at her wit's end. She was honestly feeling helpless and beginning to see her relationship with Charlie disintegrating. This was at a time when Charlie most needed a pair of safe hands to help him regulate his emotions.

Sally needed to look at Charlie's behaviour through a different lens. She realised that Charlie used mainly the top half of the circle, rarely coming in. This meant that Sally only noticed him when his emotions had gotten too big and he found himself in trouble.

Strategies were put in place to help him manage his emotions before they overwhelmed him. At the same time, Sally began to work hard at strengthening the relationship with Charlie's mother. Over time, Sally began to describe Charlie's behaviour differently. Words like 'difficult', 'unpredictable' and 'uncontrollable' were replaced with reflective questions and observations that supported connection. With increased emotional support, Charlie's behaviour modified, his mother also came into the circle and Sally was more aware of the signals that he needed help.

Children are sensitive to the significant adults in their lives and build their self-understanding upon the interactions they have with their parents, teachers and carers. When these attachment figures have a deeper understanding of the children in their care, they can provide a foundation of emotional well being and security that enables children to thrive. (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004)

Change is never a loss — it is change only.
Vernon Howard

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Siegal, D., and Hartzell, M. (2004). Parenting from the inside out:
How a deeper self understanding can help you raise a child who thrives. New York: Penguin

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Early Childhood Australia: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/rips/rip0704.pdf