

How to Write about Children's Negative Behaviours

The request for this article has been long coming as I consistently hear from parents about how they receive information from their child care centre, and what emotions it causes in them. We need to take a step back and decide what it is exactly we are imparting and what our intended outcome of this information sharing is to be.

The first order of business is not to see the behaviour as negative, but as communicating something. If we hold that the child was acting negatively, it is easier to see the child as bad or in need of punishment, but if we hold that the child was struggling with a big emotion, which quickly became a big behaviour, then we see the child as needing some assistance from us, instead of us having to do some action against the child. When we attend to the underlying emotion, we are in position to assist, rather than combat or teach. These are caregiving moments, not teaching moments.

Manage the child, not the event. Often, I see things written down where the focus is on the event; a sort of what she said/he said type of thing. Parents of verbal children will take that story home, grill the child, who will then likely deny the episode the way it was portrayed, because the child does not want their parent also disappointed in them; and the parent is more likely to return the next day disputing the event. The child might now not trust the ECE who wrote the report if their parent is feeling this person portrayed their child in poor light. The event is not as important as the people involved in the event, so keep the focus on the child and what their experience was. A story could therefore change from 'Xander hit another child across the face today' to 'Xander was struggling with waiting for his turn in the game today, and as his excitement and frustration mounted, he lashed out at the person in front of him and hit him across the face.

When I first hear about a child, I am often described the details about the child, but rarely do I hear about the work the staff are doing for the child. Instead, I will hear, "We are doing all that we can", and when I push for more details, I often hear either staff are not being helpful to the child or I hear the staff's helplessness come through. Parents often pick up on that as well and will ask me what they are expected to do with the information they receive, so be clear. Is this something you have dealt with at your facility, or do you need the parent to do a piece of work at home? Are you feeling there is something wrong with the child? Are you saying their space at child care is in

jeopardy because of this behaviour? The last place is exactly where most parents dash to. They fear losing their spot, which will implicate their ability to work, which in turn, will affect their livelihood and home. All of that in a heartbeat.

Have the staff shine! I think a number of things can be achieved when we pay attention to what is being written about an incident or about a child. Supervisors have an opportunity to not only hold their staff accountable by seeing what the ECE did for the child, but how that ECE portrays the child to the parent. For instance, if we read something like, "Jaxon was told not to do this, but then he did it again 2 more times", we are not hearing about a staff person helping Jaxon, and our reaction is to get mad at Jaxon. This could be rewritten as "Jaxon has a tough time waiting in line during our transition, and sometimes gets into play fights that turn into bigger fights, which bring me back to him. Knowing this is hard for him, I often pick him out of the line-up and have him help me with something. This keeps him busy and keeps him near me, where he feels safe." Now, as a supervisor, I am reading about a very capable staff, and as a parent, I'm relaxing and not only feeling like my child is well cared for, but I'm learning a little bit about what to do for my child as well! I call these **dropped seeds**, and parents can take them, replant them and see them germinate at home.

Another version of this could be, "Olivia grabbed a toy from a friend today and scratched that child on the arm. I explained to her that we don't treat our friends like that". When I read that, I see that the ECE used an explanation (logic) on a child that might be either too little for logic or too aroused to comprehend, and ignored the arousal the child had. Now I know I have to help my staff understand her role better so that the story could then go like this. "Olivia struggles with sharing the toys and fears she won't get her turn. When I see her struggling, I sit with her and her friends, and I narrate their play so she knows she will get a turn, and trusts that I'm helping manage their play. As Olivia grabs for a toy, I was able to gently hold her hand and let her know I know how excited she is to have it, but that we had to wait a little bit longer. My validating Olivia's feelings helped her not lash out." I call this the **97/3 rule**. **Keep these messages to 97% of what a staff did, and 3% of what the child did.** And if you do this, you never have to have those books that go back and forth each day to home. Usually the parent doesn't write in them, and they wind up becoming a list of the bad things, plus they are a giant consumer of an ECE's time. An anecdote where

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warranted is helpful, but more importantly, keeping track of themes is even better, and doing that weekly or monthly. Themes can be around control, seeking help, accepting help, getting calm, etc.

Meetings. I recommend that each family have a parent/teacher meeting at least once a year where you have an opportunity to give a rounded picture of the experience the child is having, plus discuss how you are handling tougher moments. At these meetings, the family becomes the collaborator, and can join with you to talk about the way the child is progressing. Have more frequent meetings regarding children who struggle more.

Lastly, it is never as simple as keeping a tally of transgressions on a child, especially if you are considering needing inclusion support. It is much more beneficial to keep documentation demonstrating the work of the staff, so that you get a much clearer picture of what the staff are doing to either prevent or attend to moments of arousal in a child. Telling someone that Jessie hits 14 times and bit 3 times last week tells us nothing, because children do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in relationship.

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