

## HOW HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING.

**R**efusal to follow instructions, biting and kicking when upset, and clinging to parents are phases children may go through when they are still figuring out how to express themselves and interact with others.

Challenging behaviours such as defiance, aggression and withdrawal should be viewed in the wider context of children's social-emotional development. These behaviours are influenced by multiple, often overlapping, factors such as the child's needs, temperament and socio-cultural environment. While temperament may be innate, parents and teachers play vital roles in guiding and shaping children's behaviours in the early years.

"As educators, we recognise that children need support from adults to interpret their behaviours and guide them to express their needs in ways that are appropriate to the situation and environment," says Ms Lynn Heng, an Associate of the Early Childhood Education Programme at the S R Nathan School of Human Development.

“Positive discipline takes effort as we need to spend time having conversations with children.”

**MS JULIANA GEETHA, 49**  
Principal, Little Seeds Preschool (TSA – Bukit Panjang)



Singapore University of Social Sciences. "Depending on how behaviours are managed, guided and addressed, the quality of these interactions can either help or hinder children's development and well-being."

*Beanstalk* speaks to Ms Heng, educators and parents to find out how best to nurture positive behaviours in children.

### WHAT IMPACT DOES CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR HAVE ON THEIR LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING?

**Juliana Geetha:** Children who can regulate their feelings and are aware of the feelings of others are more focused during lessons and more empathetic towards others. They are able to express their feelings confidently and navigate disagreements with peers. As a result, they socialise in a healthy manner, and learning becomes more meaningful and joyful. Children who display negative behaviours are unable to regulate their emotions. For instance, when a child gets into a disagreement with the teacher or peers, this can affect the general mood and learning of the group.

**Nurhalafiah Binte Norhadi:** When children take turns to play, it reflects their ability to be patient, control impulsive behaviours and delay gratification. These traits play a key role when it comes to completing tasks and getting along with others. When children are learning to share, there are times when disruptive behaviours like meltdowns and snatching of toys happen, which can have negative effects on other children.

### PARENTS, WHAT ARE SOME POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE BEHAVIOURS YOUR CHILD EXHIBITS? WHY DO YOU THINK THEY BEHAVE IN THESE WAYS?

**Wilfred Teo:** Faith is respectful and greets her peers and adults by name. She plays with and takes care of children who are younger than her in preschool and in our church's Sunday School. Faith actively contributes to family discussions and apologises when she does something wrong. My wife and I role-model such behaviours as consistently and clearly as we can. As for negative behaviours, Faith struggles with keeping to her word. She also lashes out when she is angry and throws tantrums when she does not get her way. I believe a child's behaviours are windows to her feelings and thoughts. They communicate needs that we should seek to uncover and attend to appropriately.

**Farhati Binte Ahmad:** Fathiyah says "thank you" and apologises when she does something wrong. However, when it comes to play, she is unable to wait her turn and gets impatient. Sometimes, children resort to negative behaviour for attention. When this happens, my husband and I will gather the children to do something together, such as reading aloud from a book, to redirect their attention.

### EDUCATORS, HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE BEHAVIOURS?

**Juliana:** I focus on the behaviour instead of the child and praise positive behaviour. For instance, I might say, "Good job! I like the way you share your toys with your friend." This reinforces the behaviour and encourages others to follow suit.

“When a child displays negative behaviours, I speak to him or her away from the rest of the children and try to understand his or her perspective.”

**MS NURHALAFIAH BINTE NORHADI, 44**  
Teacher, Putra-Putri Kindergarten



### VIDEO RESOURCES

Casa Raudha has launched two educational videos titled *Safe Haven: Early Detection of Child Abuse for Preschools* as part of the Child Abuse campaign in partnership with ECDA and the Ministry of Social and Family Development. The videos aim to empower preschool teachers to detect signs of child abuse, intervene appropriately, and report any suspected cases in their centres. Educators can register their interest for the videos at [bit.ly/preschoolnarrative](https://bit.ly/preschoolnarrative) and [bit.ly/preschoolinformative](https://bit.ly/preschoolinformative).

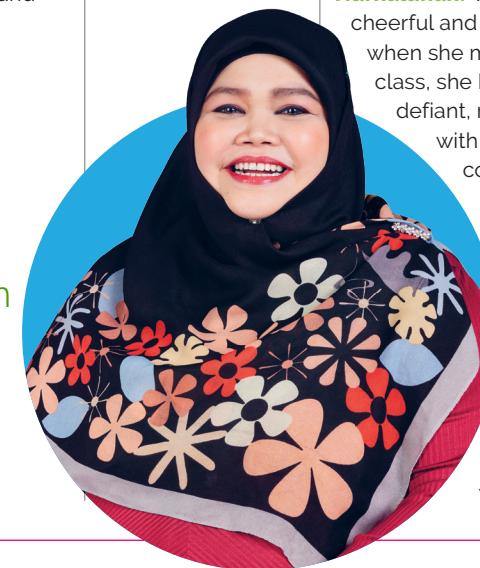
I also articulate how the behaviour has a positive impact on others, such as: "Look how helpful so-and-so has been; it has made our jobs so much easier." At this age, children are building their understanding of empathy. By patiently explaining how the child's behaviour has caused grief or hurt someone, it helps them understand how their actions have an impact on others. I also set clear boundaries on what is allowed and not allowed in the classroom.

**Nurhalafiah:** When a child displays negative behaviours, I speak to him or her away from the rest of the children and try to understand his or her perspective. We should not assume that children know how to cope with their emotions. It is important to stay calm and not be judgmental. It is also important to acknowledge positive behaviours. For instance, when children help clean the board, I thank them and ask the rest of the class to clap for them. The children feel validated and good about themselves.

### WHAT FACTORS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN ADDRESSING BEHAVIOURAL CONCERNS?

**Juliana:** Focus on understanding why children behave the way they do. What needs are not met and why? Is it because of the child's developmental stage and temperament, or a change in circumstances such as a new addition to the family? With a clearer understanding of the motivations driving the behaviour, we can set reasonable expectations for the child.

**Nurhalafiah:** We had an N2 child who was cheerful and loved to read. However, when she moved up to the kindergarten class, she became withdrawn and defiant, refusing to read or mingle with her peers. We shared our concerns with her parents. It turned out that she felt sidelined because her parents' attention was diverted to her sibling with special needs. While we worked on building her confidence in class by encouraging her to take the lead in some activities and express herself more, we also worked with her



THIS SPREAD On Juliana: Outfit Model's own On Nurhalafiah: Outfit Model's own



parents to support her at home. They began spending one-on-one time with her and delegated 'big sister' duties to her, so she felt more involved with her sibling. Over time, with support, she became more cheerful and started reading again. It is important for educators to work closely with families to identify and apply effective strategies to help children develop positive behaviours.

**Lynn Heng:** Children's behaviours, including challenging ones, are often an indication of unmet needs or interests. When we understand the causes underpinning a child's behaviour, we can employ appropriate strategies to decrease the negative behaviours and encourage more positive ones. In doing so, we are able to guide children to regulate their emotions and behaviours, as they learn and interact with others.

**WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF USING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES SUCH AS REINFORCEMENT AND REDIRECTION?**

**Juliana:** Positive discipline is about encouraging and teaching children to relate to others and situations positively. It takes effort as we need to spend time having conversations with children to understand their behaviours and motivations. But this is worthwhile in the longer term. We once had a three-year-old boy with language delay and a short attention span. He often threw tantrums and cried during storytime. The teacher redirected his energy to positive activities instead, by providing him with the choice of playing with trucks.

**Nurhalafiah:** Positive discipline is also about acknowledging children's

“ I respond to positive behaviour with praise, hugs and small treats to encourage appropriate behaviour.

**MS FARHATI BINTE AHMAD, 32**  
Nurse, mother of Fathiyah  
Azzahra' Binte  
Muhammad Azaad, 2



**GAME PLAN**

Playing games with rules is a good positive discipline strategy, Ms Heng notes. For example, 'Snakes & Ladders' and outdoor relay games require children to take turns, cooperate and follow certain procedures. It helps them recognise that breaking rules carries specific penalties.

emotions and feelings, such as anger or frustration, and setting limits. We need to communicate clearly on what appropriate and inappropriate behaviours are, as well as their consequences. A child once threw a tantrum because he was upset that playtime was over. I first acknowledged his feelings, then calmed him down before gently setting limits: "I will give you another five minutes to play and then you will have to put away the toys." The child agreed.

**Lynn:** Undergirding positive discipline strategies is respectful communication and interaction with children. Gently but firmly encourage children to reflect on their behaviours and think about the impact on themselves and others around them. Educators who take a positive discipline approach recognise and respect the child's feelings, while reiterating that rules must be followed. Imagine dealing with a child who does not want to pack away his toys after play. You might say, "I understand how you are eager to have lunch, but leaving toys on the floor is not what we do." Encourage the child to pick up the toys and suggest doing it together.

**WHAT ARE SOME CONSEQUENCES OF USING PUNITIVE MEASURES SUCH AS CANING AND THREATS?**

**Juliana:** Punishment may be a quick fix to stop negative behaviour, but it has a negative impact. It creates unnecessary fear in children and makes them feel stressed, hurt, rejected and angry. These feelings hinder the development of emotional and social skills. Scolding may stop a child's tantrums immediately, but it is a temporary solution. It can make things worse as the child would not want to reach out to the teacher again.

**Nurhalafiah:** I discourage parents from using physical punishment as it can scar children emotionally and lower their self-esteem and confidence.

**Lynn:** Research has shown that physical punishment is associated with increased aggression and anti-social behaviour. It affects children's emotional and mental health and can negatively impact the quality of family relationships.

**PARENTS, HOW DO YOU REACT TO POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE BEHAVIOURS IN YOUR CHILDREN?**

**Wilfred:** When Faith behaves in a positive manner, I praise and affirm the behaviour verbally, show joy by smiling or hugging her, and sometimes give a reward. If the behaviour is new to me, we will discuss that behaviour together. When Faith displays negative behaviour, I give her space to respond and express herself; tell her how I feel, especially if I am hurt; practise self-calming techniques if I am triggered; and role-model how to apologise and reconcile.

**Farhati:** I respond to positive behaviour with praise, hugs and small treats to encourage Fathiyah to behave appropriately. To counter negative behaviour, I am firm and explain why the behaviour is inappropriate. As parents, we should try to understand our children's needs. Solicit tips for responding to positive and negative behaviours, as well as feedback from teachers on the strategies we have used. More importantly, have lots of patience as developing positive behaviours takes time.

**EDUCATORS, HOW CAN PRESCHOOLS AND PARENTS WORK TOGETHER TO ADOPT A CONSISTENT APPROACH TO DEVELOP POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS IN YOUNG CHILDREN?**

**Juliana:** Have open and constructive conversations. Educators and parents can share with each other what is happening in preschool and at home. They can discuss the strategies that have worked for them and develop a set of common strategies which can be used in both settings.

**Nurhalafiah:** If there are concerns about a child's behaviour, educators need to observe and analyse his or her behaviours and interactions in different contexts (e.g., lessons, playtime, meals) over a period of time. Be mindful not to judge and jump to conclusions. Discuss your observations with peers and your centre leader. Be sensitive and considerate when you share your observations with parents and discuss strategies that can be mutually used to help the child. Also, encourage parents to practise routines similar to those of the preschool. This will give children a sense of stability as they know that their parents and teachers are working together. ●



“ A child's behaviours are windows to her feelings and thoughts. They communicate needs that we should seek to uncover and attend to appropriately.

**MR WILFRED TEO, 33**  
Youth Pastor, father of Faith Teo, 4

**DEEP IMPACT**

**Ms Suhana Binte Salleh, ECDA Fellow and Principal & Senior Specialist (Quality & Professional Development) at Iyad Perdaus Ltd, highlights how these common ways of verbally addressing children's behaviours can backfire.**



- **"IF YOU CONTINUE TO CRY, I WILL NOT PICK YOU UP FROM PRESCHOOL."**  
Avoid using fear-based parenting. Children who are raised in a fear-based environment will have difficulties forming trusting relationships. It can also cause them to feel anxious. Children take time to adapt to new teachers, friends and environments. Set expectations and rules by informing children what time they will be picked up. Encourage them to look forward to the activities in preschool.
- **"I SAY STOP IT!"**  
Parents feel that children will pay attention if they raise their voices. This will not work in the long run, and children will start to think that shouting is normal adult behaviour. When children misbehave, parents need to be calm, talk to the child at their eye level, and be very specific about why their behaviour is not acceptable. Screaming at the child will not instil discipline. It can cause emotional distress and exacerbate behavioural problems.
- **"IF YOU DON'T EAT YOUR VEGETABLES, YOU WILL NOT BE CLEVER."**  
Most parents struggle to get their children to eat vegetables. At this age, children start to exhibit independence in their food choices and tastes, and may even spit out their food or turn away when being fed. Parents must be patient and go slow. Introduce different types of vegetables. Do not give up if your child rejects a newly introduced vegetable.

THIS SPREAD On Farhati: Outfit Model's own. On Fathiyah: Outfit Gingersnaps, Shoes Model's own. On Wilfred: Outfit Model's own.

# UNDERSTANDING TEMPERAMENTS

**DR REBECCA ANDREWS HELPS EDUCATORS NAVIGATE THE MANY FACETS OF CHILDREN'S REACTIONS AND RESPONSES.**

'Temperament' refers to a child's typical arousal level and characteristic way of responding to people, stimuli, events and the environment. Temperament characteristics are present from an early age.

Researchers Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess studied how temperament qualities influenced adjustment throughout life. They developed a widely recognised framework for understanding temperament in children. This framework identifies three broad categories of temperament:

**1 EASY.** Refers to children who are happy, adaptable and regular in their routines.

**2 SLOW-TO-WARM-UP.** Refers to children who are shy, withdrawn or cautious, and take longer to adjust to new situations.

**3 DIFFICULT.** Refers to children who are characterised by irritability, irregular habits and intense reactions. They are also frequently impulsive.

Thomas and Chess determined that the above categories hold relatively stable over time and can be used to predict a range of outcomes, including children's social and later academic success.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND STRATEGIES

While their research suggests that temperament is mostly influenced

by genetic factors and therefore relatively stable, other factors such as parenting, cultural background and educational opportunities also play a role in how temperament evolves across childhood.

Educators should be conscious that regardless of temperament, their role is to scaffold each child to his or her full potential. The following tips can be applied when working with children.

➤ **Create a supportive environment.** When working with children with a "slow-to-warm-up" temperament, provide a safe environment that makes them feel comfortable and secure. Respect the child's preferred pace and do not push the child into situations he or she is not prepared for.

➤ **Be nurturing.** Encourage exploration by gradually introducing new experiences and people to children in a supportive and nurturing way. When a "slow-to-warm-up" child eventually approaches a new experience or person, provide positive reinforcement in response to the child's positive behaviour.

➤ **Set clear expectations and be consistent.** When working with children who exhibit a "difficult" temperament, set clear

expectations. Children with this temperament type often have high energy levels, so opportunities for physical activity and play are vital. Provide support for self-regulation by enabling consistent routines, offering limited choices, or asking the children to use words to express their feelings.

## LANGUAGE AND LABELS

It is important for educators to be mindful of the language they use when communicating with or about children, as labels can be detrimental. For example, if a child is labelled "aggressive", other educators may view the child as being more likely to be the perpetrator of aggression in the future.

Labelling can also limit expectations for children. For instance, if a child is labelled "shy", educators may assume the child is not interested in socialising. Yet if supported, the child may happily engage with a new peer or in a small group.



### DR REBECCA ANDREWS

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Dr Andrews' research investigates social interactions, emotion knowledge and memory in early childhood. She also has expertise in devising and implementing successful mentoring programmes for pre-service, early-career and experienced early childhood teachers.