Top Tips for Responding to Behaviour in Young Children

Children need a safe ‘container’ in which to grow and thrive. We help provide this by creating a stimulating and challenging environment in which they can learn and test safely. We further support this by setting appropriate limits, appreciating behaviour we like and ignoring minor behaviour we don’t like.

Language is an important tool in responding to children’s behaviour. We will also want to observe, get to know a child and their family and consider what might be likely triggers for different behaviours.

**Say what you do want, rather than what you don’t**
For example: “I’d like you to walk on the pavement” *rather than* “Don’t walk in the road!”, “Let’s sit really quietly ... like tiny, wee mice!” *rather than* “Stop shouting!” or “Stop that Noise!”

**Yes rather than No**
Speak in the positive, for example: “Yes, we can have a story time, once we’ve cleared up the lunch things” *rather than* “No, not yet, we have to tidy up first”. Young children respond much better to yes than no. Aim for 10 Yes’s for every No.

**Limited choice**
“Would you like to walk, or ride in the buggy?” (This would be a good choice if you can’t carry a child, as you have two older children who are walking and you need your hands free). Or “Would you like milk or water to drink?” And as a parent: “I need to go in five minutes, shall we say our good-bye here or by the door?”

**Ignore the bad, notice the good**
Invest some time noticing and telling children when they do something you like. This is called Positive Attention. For example: “Great hand washing!”, “Who tidied all these toys away? Good job!” or “Thank you for keeping quiet while I talked to Sarah”. Appreciate good behaviour whenever you can, however small and be specific.

Share positive comments like this with a child and their parent(s).

Any attention is better than none. Some children learn that to get attention, they have to behave in a negative way, although this is more usual with children aged 3+. Good habits should start early, so letting babies and very young children know when they have achieved something, or managed a new piece of behaviour will stand you in good stead.
**Actions speak louder than words**

Calmly removing a toy that 2 children are fighting over and providing alternatives might be more productive than if you make the decision, or leave them to fight.

Similarly, if a child hits you or another, give your attention first to the child who has been hit. You might encourage the child who hit, to make amends in some way, i.e. by giving the crying child a stroke (you will need to model how to do this) or by fetching a tissue for their tears. Hitting or violent behaviour will be a message. Look for the meaning behind the behaviour. It may simply be that a child is struggling to get what they want, due to lack of language or social skills. Our job is to model and teach children appropriate social skills and help them to practice.

**Get support**

Talk with colleagues, and if a parent, other parents, friend and teachers, ask for help, how do they do it? Share difficulties and concerns. Just as it is important to help children let off steam, we need to do this sometimes too. We can’t be perfect, but we can aim to try our best.