

# The secret to decoding children's behaviour

## *The challenges faced by adults*

Many adults caring for children would fail to disagree that their time is always pressed. Unfortunately matters can and are often made worse when some children behave in a manner that is not conducive to the benefit of all those who live or play with them. When children's behaviour tests limits, adults can find themselves challenged and feeling at a loss. So what's the answer to fixing behavioural problems?

The sad truth is that there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Why? Because some strategies work for some children and not for others. Added to this fact, children's misbehaviour can be the result of a developmental delay or potentially the result of in-home circumstances such as family breakdown, violence, poverty, or learnt behaviour. The upside in this picture of doom and gloom is that there is an extraordinary snippet of knowledge that can help you to turn children's behaviour around.

## *Decoding children's behaviour*

To be able to understand where children's behaviour comes from and what motivates behavioural choices we need to delve into the neurobiology of the human brain. Years' worth of university degrees will inform you that the brain is a complex organ and has too many functions to make it practical for the everyday lay person to understand. To simplify matters let's break it down into two simple parts. For all intensive purposes let's agree to forget about the other parts unless we need them down the track.

The first part of the brain needed to be understood is the part located at the front of the brain, or in other words, the part just behind the forehead. This part of the brain is called the prefrontal cortex (PFC), and it is pretty smart. It is also responsible for setting humans apart from other species because it is the part that makes things like problem solving possible. Opposite to the thinking part of the brain is the lower part of the brain. Touching the index fingers to the temples and then running them about halfway towards the bump in the back of the skull gives an approximate estimation of its position. This part of the brain, known as the amygdala, is the exact opposite to the PFC. It could not care less about making smart choices, learning, listening or even doing what it is told. Instead, imagine that this part of the brain is the most argumentative person you'll ever have the pleasure of meeting.

Once there is an understanding that the front part of the brain is the co-operative listener and that the lower part of the brain is all about promoting the 'fight/I'm doing it my way' factor in children, we are better able to figure out when and what behaviour management strategies to implement. Matching the right strategy to the right part of the brain will work miracles, for example, if a child is having a tantrum then they are in their lower part of their brain, thus meaning that the strategy of ignoring (when appropriate) or giving them time to cool off before trying to fix a problem will undoubtedly work better than trying to reason with them. Remember, trying to talk to the lower brain is fruitless because this part of the brain doesn't think talking and problem-solving is a worthwhile activity. On the other hand, if a child has had time to cool off and they are back to speaking nicely to others and playing contentedly then we know that this is the time to get them to fix whatever problem had occurred. Similarly, negotiation, problem-solving and discussing options of how to get what the child wants becomes the perfect strategy once the PFC is back on line. Obviously, if a child is doing something dangerous or poses a risk to others then there is a need to ignore the above and act quickly to make sure duty of care is upheld.

## *Applying knowledge*

Becoming more proficient at behaviour management is a long and winding road. Understanding how the brain works can support adults to overcome behavioural challenges. Knowing the PFC (the front part of the brain) is all about co-operation and thinking helps adults know that when a child is acting from this part of the brain they can better solve and overcome problem behaviours. Alternatively, if a child is in fight or resistance mode then it can be assumed that the amygdala (back/lower part of the brain) is in charge. When the amygdala is dominant there is limited chance that a child's problem behaviour can be overcome in that moment. Instead, waiting for the child to calm down and the PFC to be back on line will help the adult to get the child to behave in preferred ways.

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