



Reasons For The Things You Say And Do

By Wilson McCaskill

Of all the Life Raft concepts none troubles some junior primary teachers more than the one inscribed on the *blue poster*.

Namely:

***If you don't know why you're doing something
then don't do it because it's most likely wrong.
Have reasons for the things you say and do.***

Accepting that we want children to be the masters, not the victims of their feelings, this concept asks children to think before doing and to be rational and responsible in word and deed. By doing so, they contribute to the safety of their classrooms and school communities and are in a position to assess, explain, validate and justify their behaviour.

*"It's reason that makes a child responsible, and responsible
children find many reasons to do the right thing."*

Invariably, when children behave in a way that contradicts expected codes of conduct the questions asked of them are, "What are you doing and why are you doing it?" Too often the answer is, "I don't know" which prompts a command to stop or the inflicting of punishment or reprimand to some degree.

The concern of junior primary teachers is that asking young children to find the reasons for their behaviour is too difficult, perhaps even too confusing for them, if only because much of it is subconsciously motivated. Emotions are powerful motivators of words and actions and some will say that young children are emotional bundles that frequently lack the language, skills and development to probe beneath the surface of their own behaviour. Hence, management of their behaviour is the appropriate developmental course of action and made more effective when the line of questioning employed by adults takes the form of questions like, "What should you be doing now?" and requests like, "Please don't play with the toys and come and sit on the mat."

As management is the main objective, any objections by the child are quickly dismissed, thereby instilling the belief that doing as you are asked to do is more important than being asked, why you're doing what you're doing.

Yet, even the youngest of school-aged children get frustrated and annoyed when adults adopt command and control techniques that show little regard for the reasons, motives and desires that propel their behaviour. They may comply but often with considerable complaint.



“Cooperation breaks down when children believe their voice doesn’t matter.”

It is fair to say, the younger the children the more management is required and it would be unrealistic to ask teachers to flesh out the reasons behind behaviour for each and every child, on each and every occasion...in fact, it would be absurd.

However, seizing the teachable moments that help children discover the motives behind their actions can build the self-awareness that leads to improved self-control. It is not easy work and made harder if children lack the language development that facilitates understanding and self-expression.

***“Invariably, if you don’t have the skill to fit in,
you will employ the behaviour to stand out.”***

I have witnessed many junior primary teachers, with a behaviour education mindset, use their creativity and considerable communication skills to help little ones make sense of complex situations. They have carefully guided young children through the emotional steps that may have resulted in a particular outcome and helped them retrace the actions and reactions that led to a given situation.

These teachers have asked for reasons and not expected an immediate answer. They were able to sit in the silence that immediately followed a child’s initial response of, “I don’t know.” They asked caringly if the child would like to find out. They avoided the tones of upset and judgment and instead adopted those of curiosity and concern. They proposed possibilities and said things like; Do you think..., Were you feeling..., Maybe you thought..., Perhaps it was because..., Tell me what happened just before..., Take a little time to think..., Maybe there is another reason., I’m not sure I understand..., Try telling me again., You mean you..., So, you were feeling upset and that’s why you...

These teachers were realistic. They knew that even the best of exploratory techniques might not lead to clarity but they believed in the value of the process. They believed that in trying to find the answers the neural wiring that leads to self-awareness was being strengthened. They accepted that the curiosity and inquiry they were trying to foster, to tackle the complexities and confusion of literacy and numeracy, could be transposed to the understanding of behaviour. They were also comfortable with the emotional discomfort that frequently accompanies a child’s attempts at self-understanding. They trusted that the child would find the subject of him or herself interesting and that a deeper connection with the child was being forged by the mutual attempt to understand and be understood.

***“Behaviour is only the surface phenomenon. What matters
is the person who behaves and why she or he does so.”***

Additionally, these wise practitioners would often include other children in the discussion and turn a lesson for one into a lesson for several or many. They also dissected appropriate behaviour as often as they dissected inappropriate behaviour. In so doing, they made the discussion and dissection of behaviour, be it right or wrong,



an everyday part of learning. They understood that effective behaviour education was more dependent upon the quality of the lesson than the quantity of lessons.

It can be anticipated that children will use emotions to justify behaviour and any questions that explore motive will result in answers that point to one or more emotional states. Careful guidance by the teacher can help children discover and articulate the agenda hidden behind their words and actions.

SCENARIO

T = teacher. J = John

T: Can you tell me John, why you're not sitting with the rest of us and waiting for the bus?

J: Because I don't want to.

T: We know that "want" is a feelings word, so we know your feelings are saying, "Don't sit with the others." Can you work out why your feelings would be saying that to you?

J: No.

T: Not easy I know but I would like to help you try. Would that be all right? (*John, nods*) A little while ago you were sitting on the grass next to Emma. Do you remember? What were the two of you doing?

J: We were playing with her pony.

T: Her new one. She showed it to me this morning. It is another one for her collection of farm animals. It is a present from her grandma and right now it is her favourite. Did you enjoy playing with it? (*John, nods*) So you were enjoying yourself and enjoying being with Emma and now you are over here and looking upset and alone. Something must have happened?

J: Lisa wanted to play with the pony and Emma gave it to her.

T: And this upset you? (*John, nods*) Did you want to play with the pony for longer? (*John, nods*) Did you ask Emma if you could keep playing with it (*John nods again*) And?

J: She said, "No" and gave it to Lisa.

T: I can see why that might upset you but we must remember whose toy it is and have a little think about what you might do if the toy was yours. (*A pause*) If it was yours, do you think it would be all right for you to take it from one person and give to another?

J: (*A little too quickly*) Yes, but Emma snatched it from me and that's rude.



T: Oh! Now, I'm a little confused. Are you upset because Emma gave the pony to Lisa or because she snatched it from you?

J: (*Thinking hard*) Because she snatched it.

T: And even though you wanted to play with the pony for longer, you would have been all right giving it to Lisa if Emma hadn't snatched it? (*John, nods*) When someone snatches something from you it can make you think they don't care about you. And that can make you feel small and upset. Is that how you felt? (*John, nods*) And is that why you walked away? (*John, nods*) Tell me, when you came over here were you hoping a teacher would notice and come to speak to you, or were you hoping Emma would feel bad and give the pony back to you. (*John, thinks hard. A significant amount of time passes without John or the teacher saying anything. He is obviously unsure.*) It can be really hard to find the reasons why we do things but really important and good for us to try. Thank you for thinking through this moment with me but now we must do what is safest for you and the group as we wait for the bus. And that is for all of us to stay together. So, please give me one really good reason, even if you are still upset, for joining the group?

J: It is safer.

T: And the reason that it is safer, please?

J: Because you and the other teachers know where everyone is and they are safe.

T: Correct. Now, who will you sit with when we get back to the group?

J: Emma and Lisa.

T: That's interesting. Reasons, please?

J: Because Emma might let me play with her pony again. (*John, thinks*) She didn't snatch it. I just said that because I didn't like giving it back.

T: Thank you for telling me. You have just had a big *blue poster* moment and that makes you and all of us much safer. It's good to know why we do things isn't it? (*John, nods*)

“In any interaction with a child will my words or actions strengthen or weaken our connection.”

Pam Leo

A behaviour education mindset is an open one and willing to shift from the fixed mindset of command and control. It is not trapped by the pursuit of success above and



beyond process, nor is it stuck in the unfulfilling belief that a journey's value is measured by the magnificence of its destination.

Behaviour education can be messy. It walks a teacher into the unpredictability of a child's responses and reactions and asks her or him to be in the moment. It takes courage because it operates from a platform of knowledge and concern, not from a position of authority and power. It is attempting to guide by wisdom and not force. It seeks connection not control.

“The degree of cooperation a child gives a teacher is roughly equal to the degree of connection he or she has with the teacher.”

The *blue poster* asks students to, “*Have reasons for the things they say and do.*” I suspect that for some teachers the main reason for their classroom management practice is to make their day easier by conditioning children to comply, conform and please the teacher. They might argue that this facilitates the learning for all students and to some degree they are right. However, keeping children in their place does not liberate their full potential. Helping them attain as much self-realisation as possible, in the time we have the privilege of guiding them, liberates that potential; as does exciting them about their own capabilities, uniqueness and character.

It is important not to forget that the noble cause of education is to prepare children to become responsible and ethical contributors to and participants in democracy.

A democratic classroom allows children to be considerate of others while also doing what is necessary for themselves. It allows them greater responsibility over making behaviour related decisions, which in turn enhances their personal and social capabilities.

Teachers must train children to live in a democracy and handle all the freedom that will be afforded them, by giving them the opportunity to learn within democratic classrooms; classrooms where students have a voice and the freedom to stand up for their convictions in a way that does not infringe upon the rights of others.

The argument that children in junior primary are simply too young and underdeveloped to handle freedom only points to the need to skillfully create classrooms where as much rational and reasoned behaviour as possible is nurtured.

This argument has more weight if primary schools drive the objective of immersing students in democratic classrooms in junior and upper primary. Sadly, I don't often see primary schools committed to preparing children of any age for the weight, responsibility and rewards of liberty: quite the reverse. In too many schools, I see how children could believe that school is rigged in favour of the popular, the smart or the people in power.

If we can encourage and train four-year-old children to make age appropriate sense of words and numbers and the science of cause and affect, then we can guide them to make equal sense of themselves. It has been my privilege to see this in action.



Teacher/student connection, self-control, self-motivation, consideration, cooperation, responsibility, respect, wellbeing, freedom and behaviour in general are all connected to the self-awareness that the *blue poster* encourages children to develop. It may be that the steps in junior primary are small (though many would disagree) and frustratingly hard to take but that, in my belief, does not excuse us from trying.

“Teach children to think, reason and analyse because in the course of daily living the question asked most frequently is, what is the right thing to do? The answer invariably is, it depends.”