

“They aren't listening!”

Getting groups under control

When you are new to working with groups, one of the biggest challenges is getting children to do what you want them to do. Sometimes it's a small thing that you want, but then there are situations where a higher degree of control is needed e.g. roll call, crossing roads, supervising active play etc.

Even experienced staff members have to put in effort with new groups because children want to “test out” the adult. Seeing how adults react can give children a sense of security and after some initial tension these minor challenges can be the start of friendly and co-operative relationships.

The techniques in this resource focus on building co-operation as the basis for effective group control; it's also the foundation for children to develop self-control and the secret to a happy, humming programme. Things often run smoothly because the children want them to run smoothly and they have been given the chance to help.

Take a few moments to think of some co-operative behaviours that children practice at your programme.

Why don't they listen?

See it from their point-of-view:

BUSY, EXCITED CHILDREN: “I don't want to stop, I'm having lots of fun.” I haven't finished yet!”

TIRED, RESTLESS CHILDREN: “I've been bossed around by the teacher all day, now you are bossing me too.” “Whenever you talk to us it just goes on and on and gets boring.”

OLDER CHILDREN: “I've heard all this before and it's really boring.” “What's in it for me?” “I wish I could hang out at home like all my friends do.”

FRUSTRATED, UNHAPPY CHILDREN: “Adults have been telling me off all day. It's not fair.” “You aren't listening to ME!”

What works with groups

SET UP A FRIENDLY VIBE FOR THE AFTERNOON – greet children when they arrive; remember something about them: “How was your trip to the beach?”, “How is your new puppy doing?”

GET ATTENTION BEFORE YOU START TALKING:

- Learn the “attention-getters”, the ‘stop and listen signals’ at your programme, and use them.
- Use children's names to connect with those who haven't tuned in.
- Make random eye contact, use non-verbal signals e.g. thumbs up to children doing the right thing, point downwards for those who still need to be seated.
- Positive framing: “I like how..... is sitting quietly and paying attention.”

DON'T LET IT DRAG ON NEEDLESSLY. If you are coming together for a routine task like roll call, then the key is to keep the whole thing short and purposeful. Get children on board with this idea too: “Ok everyone, let's get this done in world record time, then we can all get on with.....” *the rest of the day/the fun stuff/ a cool activity that lots of the group are looking forward to etc.*

What works with groups (cont.)

MIX IT UP – keep things interesting. Call the roll backwards. Ask a puzzling question. Crack a joke.

Whatever works for you. Sometimes this might backfire and cause more disruption than you wanted, but children will appreciate that you gave it a go. Like everything here, it gets easier with practice.

IF THERE IS NOISE AND DISTRACTIONS – STOP. Don't try to talk over it. If you pause and wait, even in mid-sentence, this might be all it needs to get the chatterers to stop.

IGNORE IF YOU CAN – some children will continue to be inattentive, no matter how long you wait.

THINK AHEAD ABOUT THE MOTIVATORS FOR A GIVEN SITUATION. "OK Sally, thanks for paying attention. You can be first on the....."

Other tips

IN ANY SITUATION, BE AS DIRECT AS POSSIBLE – polite, but direct: "Take that outside, thanks." "Johnny. This way, please." Use a firm tone – say it like you mean it, but don't shout or threaten.

SOMETIMES YOU JUST NEED TO CALL IT AND MOVE ON. "No. The bus is arriving for the trip soon. You need to finish and get your bag now please." (*Then move away, and get on with your tasks.*)

"QUESTIONS?" Be careful about holding up a group task for too long to take questions. Instead ask: "put up your hand if you understand that." If enough have got the idea, then move on or get going with the activity/task. Work out the rest as you go, or take questions one-on-one afterwards.

What doesn't work

UNDERMINING: when a staff member asks for attention, support them by modelling the behaviour yourself. If you ignore the request for attention, children are likely to do as well.

ARGUING: children can be very resourceful in trying to reason and argue: "but Billy was allowed to yesterday." "Why can't I?" It's incredibly time-wasting, not to mention a poor example for others. Don't get side-tracked from what you are asking. [Refer to our other resource on behaviour guidance: "Tips for Keeping Your Cool".]

STANDING OVER CHILDREN UNTIL THEY DO IT: better to walk away if possible and give the child some space and time – they will often just give up their defiance or move on with the task of their own accord.

MORE PERSISTENT MISBEHAVIOUR. Some children will be off track with behaviour more often and persistently. Other consequences need to come into play (e.g. being moved to the front of the group, by you). Avoid a direct battle with these children in a group situation: "Ok Ben. That's the third time I have had to speak to you about talking while I'm talking. I will see you after we have finished here." *Always follow through on what you have said will happen.*

It can be very frustrating and discouraging when things get out of control: you can always ask for help and then keep trying. Give these techniques a go and always look for ways to turn situations around, so that children are working with you, rather than against you.

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