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| Practice guide: Behaviour planning to best support children and young people in out-of-home care |
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| policy icon | **Link to policy** | Guide to the emergency use of physical restraint in out-of-home care |
| person icon | **For attention of** | Carers: kinship care, foster care, lead tenant and residential care  Out-of-home care service providers including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations  Child protection practitioners |
| calendar icon | **Date of issue** | March 2018 |

# Introduction

For carers and workers, supporting and managing the behaviour of children or young people in care can be a challenge. Behaviour may be developmentally appropriate (seen in children of similar age) or may be impacted by factors such as trauma, disability, mental health, drugs and alcohol and a child or young person’s environment. Providing sensitive and responsive care is critical to improving positive outcomes for a child or young person. For more significant behaviour, a range of tailored and planned supports are needed to keep children and young people safe and to effect positive behaviour change.

This practice guide provides information on the relationship between trauma and behaviour and outlines elements of best practice to address more significant behaviours (referred to as behaviours of concern) through the use of behaviour support planning. The practice guide supplements the department’s *Guide to the emergency use of physical restraint in out-of-home care.*

# Overview

Childhood trauma, including abuse and neglect, poses a serious threat to a person’s health and development. All carers and workers responsible for children and young people in out-of-home care should understand the ways in which trauma and neglect impacts on a child or young person’s physical, cognitive, emotional and social growth, and may manifest in changes to their behaviour.

Best practice in behaviour support planning for children and young people requires:

* Current and comprehensive assessment of the child or young person including disability, mental health, strengths and abilities and other aspects of a child’s development, as well as the impact of trauma and neglect, for the individual child or young person.
* A positive and proactive approach to behaviour support.
* Including children and young people in the development of a plan and appropriate responses; and
  + Minimising responses that might re-traumatise a child or young person through the use of punitive or restrictive responses.

Positive behaviour support is an approach to assist carers and workers to understand and address the factors that impact on a child or young person’s behaviour, as well as to improve skills and long term outcomes for children in care.

# Understanding the impact of trauma

Trauma can impact on a child’s body, memory, emotions and relationship systems and the way children interact with the world through their behaviour. The effect of trauma depends on the nature and severity of the trauma and the individual child or young person.

Understanding the impact of trauma and neglect on brain development and the impact of cumulative harm and harmful stress responses is important for effective behaviour support planning. For Aboriginal children and young people, it is important to consider the added impact of discrimination, transgenerational trauma and disconnection from culture.

The behaviour of children and young people in out-of-home care may be impacted by a range of factors including difficulties with:

* Relationship skills – the ability to engage with others, trust and resolve conflict.
* Learning and decision making – solving problems or tackling challenges; attention, concentration and organisational skills, making safe choices and an awareness of danger.
* Managing emotions – the ability to stay in control, identify feelings and regulate emotions.
* Social awareness – understanding of social rules and empathy towards others.
  + Self-awareness – knowing one’s strengths and limitations.

# Behaviour support planning

## What is positive behaviour support?

Positive behaviour support is based on an assumption that **all behaviour happens for a reason**. Each behaviour serves a purpose (or function) for the child and young person and communicates a message.

A behaviour of concern is used by a child or young person to get a need or want met. Often this is because they may not know another, more appropriate way of doing this– they are not wilfully ‘bad’. In some instances, they may have learnt through their experience that these behaviours help them to cope or stay physically and emotionally safe. In order to change the behaviour, we must first understand the message. Each behaviour is influenced by a number of personal and environmental factors that must be understood before developing appropriate supports.

A trauma informed positive behaviour support approach focuses on firstly understanding the behaviour for the child or young person in the context of trauma, attachment and child development theories, and then providing supports in a number of key areas including:

* Developing an environment that supports the child or young person.
* Teaching new skills to reduce the need for the behaviour - teaching the child or young person what TO DO in a safe and appropriate way.
* Promoting recovery from the impact of trauma.
  + Providing positive responses to minimise the impact for the child or young person and others, when a behaviour of concern occurs.

In this way, positive behaviour support is concerned with a person’s overall wellbeing and not just decreasing behaviour.

Title: Summary image - Description: Behaviour has a message.
I am sad! I am scared/confused! I need extra attenion! You hurt my feelings!

## Why use positive behaviour support?

The benefits of this approach include:

* Focusing on increasing the child or young person’s quality of life.
* Promoting positive connections and building trust with carers to assist in ameliorating the effects of a child or young person’s experience and to minimise the possibility of re-traumatisation.
* Preventing further behaviours of concern by helping children develop skills to communicate, engage in activities and understand their feelings.
* Providing an environment that best supports a child or young person’s needs and development.
* May break down barriers to talking about difficult topics and advocate for needs.
  + Promotes safety skills.

## Elements in the positive behaviour support process

Positive behaviour support includes three main steps:

* Understanding the person: Getting to know a child or young person (age, gender, culture, disability, developmental needs, strengths and abilities and history) across different settings (for example, home and school ) and with others.
* Understanding the behaviour: Assessing the function or message of the person’s behaviour.
* Addressing the function: Develop a plan that includes a range of supports and strategies for the child or young person to prevent behaviour occurring (for example, changes to the individual’s environment, teaching skills to increase independence and reduce the need to use behaviours of concern, looking for opportunities to encourage and recognise appropriate behaviour) and to quickly and safely respond to behaviours that occur.

A positive behaviour support plan may include a range of strategies or actions such as:

| Changes to the environment/ environmental supports | Teaching skills for children and young people | Use of short term strategies that promote rapid change |
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| Making changes to the environment based on information about the child (for example: background, interests, strengths) in order to provide:  increased opportunities for access to a variety of activities  focus on tasks and opportunities that build on a person’s strengths  increased positive interactions with child/ young person  sensitive and responsive caring  ‘balanced lifestyle’  predictable environment  consistent routines  improved interactions and realistic expectations. | Problem solving and decision making skills (for example, helping a young person put a problem into words, brainstorming solutions and making plans).  General skills development (for example, teaching a person to do more things for themselves).  Effective communication skills (for example, teaching a child how to seek help or attention from others if needed).  Managing unhelpful thoughts (for example, to address the way a person thinks about themselves, others or the world around them).  Coping skills (teach the person what to do when feeling angry, how to put words to feelings and emotions, calming skills such as controlled breathing). | Building skills of carers to use strategies that readily support the learning of new skills or positive behaviour responses such as:  reinforcing specific ‘positive’ behaviours (this includes an understanding of reinforcement, identifying resources and how to use reinforcement to promote behaviour change)  avoiding things you know upsets the person (triggers) and increasing things which elicit positive responses.  responding to behaviour early and quickly  consistency in carer responses  strategies to increase engagement of children and young people. |

## Immediate response/ de-escalation strategies

These strategies minimise risk to the person and others by attempting to de-escalate or manage a serious episode of behaviour. De-escalation strategies recognise that behaviour often escalates through stages prior to crisis, providing an opportunity to intervene early so as to prevent behaviour from progressing. The aim of these strategies is to REDUCE HARM – this is not a time for learning or promoting change. Strategies include:

* + Responding to early signs of the behaviour – identify warning signs or triggers of behaviour and intervene early (for example, using space, instructions, active listening, humour).
* Redirection (for example, ‘distract’ the person by offering another activity)
* Talk to the person and find out what the problem is- this includes hearing and responding to the child’s issues while remaining calm.
* Work out what the person’s behaviour is trying to communicate – then respond accordingly (i.e. meet the need).
  + Provide praise and encouragement when you see signs they are trying to calm themselves.

Prevention and de-escalation strategies should be used prior to consideration of other interventions, such as physical intervention. The use of physical force and/or physical restraint is subject to policy and legislative requirements. More information is available at the department’s [out of home care webpage](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-out-home-care-services):

[<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-out-home-care-services>](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-out-home-care-services)

## Strategies following behaviour

Reflecting on behaviour after it occurs is often an important learning and healing opportunity for all involved. Remember conversations can only occur after a child or young person has returned to a calm and engaged state.

Children and young people are often able to identify some of the triggers, thoughts and feelings that impact on their behaviour and reflect on how response strategies worked in a given situation. Carers and workers should consider what was actually happening for the child or young person at the time and place the behaviour occurred.

Carers and workers should also reflect on their own experience of the behaviour and opportunities for future strategies to prevent behaviour occurring. Policies and procedures are in place to outline administrative and/or reporting obligations to be followed after particular behaviours of concern.

## Creating a Behaviour Support Plan (BSP)

Children and young people have the right to receive appropriate behavioural support to meet their individual needs and to develop the skills they need. Development of a behaviour support plan takes time and should occur within an individuals’ Looking After Children Care and Placement Plan and Cultural Support Plan.

Carers and workers may require help to understand:

* the difference between age-appropriate behaviour and behaviours of concern
* how trauma impacts on behaviour
* the function of specific behaviour
  + how to develop positive behaviour supports to assist in the long-term outcomes for the child or young person.

Key factors to consider in the planning process:

* Children and young people should be provided with the opportunity to consent, participate and have their views taken into account in positive behaviour support planning processes to the full extent possible, having regard to their age and ability to understand.
* Collaboration with the child/ young person, their care team, significant others and/or professionals who are involved with the provision of care/support should take place to ensure an agreed plan of action for implementation.
* For Aboriginal children and young people, connection to country, culture and community is essential for their well-being. Aboriginal people should be involved in the development of a behavioural support plan, therefore consideration should be given to consultation with an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation as part as part of the development of the plan. This will ensure the cultural appropriateness of the plan and that culturally appropriate supports are in place or planned to support the child. The child’s Cultural Support Plan can provide guidance on organisations to engage as well as existing cultural supports that could be utilised as part of the behaviour support plan, which are culturally responsive to the unique needs of the Aboriginal child.
* Take time to gather a range of information from many sources – developing strategies that are not based on a thorough understanding and collection of information may result in the child or young person’s needs not being met. This includes understanding the child’s behaviour in a range of contexts (i.e. when the behaviour does and does not occur).
* A child or young person’s safety plan or crisis plan should be included as part of the behaviour support plan.
  + Monitoring of implementation and review processes.

Specialist training may be needed to support carers and workers to develop behaviour support plans. You can talk to your case manager or a child or young person’s care team for further support or information on ways to best support children and young people in care.

### More information

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| information icon | **For more information** | An example template to assist with development of a behaviour support plan is available at [Program requirements for out-of-home care services](https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-out-home-care-services) <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/program-requirements-out-home-care-services> |

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