

Impulse Control, Behaviour & Consequences

Connected with attention, executive functioning, information processing and personal boundaries, poor impulse control can place children in risky and dangerous situations. It is also linked with stealing although from the child's perspective; the action may be more about finding something interesting.

Without the capacity to stop and think about ownership, where or what to do with the object or to understand how their action will affect others, "the object has been picked up, pocketed, and forgotten as...attention is diverted to something else."¹

Emotional outbursts may be another observation. Feelings attached to an impulse to hit another child, to take and break a toy is sometimes a passing moment. There seems little connection to the parent between the emotion and reaction however, the rule breaking are apparent. This kind of behaviour results in not being accepted to join in games with others, to result in parent caution about having friends come to play or visits to friends' homes.

Importantly, this child cannot adequately explain the intent behind the impulse (whether to steal or an emotional outburst) nor is there an understanding to cover anything up. The child will most often be caught out and it is this child who will be most often punished even though the action and its consequences are not apparent to the child.

As described with impulse control, making a connection between behaviour and its consequences concerns the ability to understand cause and effect. Impulsively eating half the birthday cake on the bench in the kitchen just before the party has no connection with the parent's anger, to the cost of time and ingredients, to the child's nutrition nor to the fact that this was Susie's birthday cake and that there is now not enough for everyone to have a piece of cake.

For the child, this is not her/his fault and the parent's anger and explanation of what the child has done makes no sense. Punishment which might be applied will be of little value to this child.

For most children, learning rules becomes second nature by the time they start school. For this child, rules need to be retaught sometimes every day and in every different setting. This is about the lack of connection experienced in respect to behaviour towards others and its consequences, of how others might be affected or how they are affected themselves. "They fail to realize their vulnerability and frequently place themselves in dangerous situations."²

RULE OF THUMB: Be realistic and reduce your expectations. Emotional and developmental immaturity means the child is expected to behave and feel about half their age.

¹ Mc Creight 1997:20

² Mc Creight, 1997:22

Strategies

- Anticipate behaviours (watch for warning signs) and try to help the child avoid unwanted consequences.³
- Try to set the environment to prevent unwanted behaviour occurring in the first place, for example, don't leave the birthday cake within their reach.
- Try and find the source of frustration and plan realistic routines that will avoid 'acting out'¹⁵ (for example, don't take them to the busy shopping centre late in the day when they are over tired).
- Use short-term clear and consistent consequences specifically related to the target behaviour. If withdrawing privileges, make sure it is something which the child really cares about.¹⁵ Unless it is an immediate privilege they usually don't make the link (eg it's no good saying no swimming this afternoon in response to inappropriate behaviour in the morning because by the time the afternoon comes and they can't go swimming they don't make the link to the behaviour that occurred earlier in the day). Adding a chore that can be implemented immediately is usually a more effective consequence than taking away a privilege. (eg the chore can be as simple as picking up ten leaves in the backyard or putting the cutlery away)
- Establish small achievable goals – sit through a meal, pack up toys. Even if they don't manage to sit through the whole meal or pick up all the toys remember to give praise for what they did do rather than focus the attention on what they didn't achieve.
- Provide skills training and use role play
- Time out can work for some children but may need to be supervised, be short in time and boring. The rule of thumb is one minute per age of child – 8 minutes for an 8 year old.¹⁵ These times are appropriate for a child without FASD but too long for a child with FASD – need to remember that child with FASD is behaviourally about half their chronological age. Generally time out is ineffective after about a minute because the child with FASD forgets why they are there. However time out may be useful to enable the parent to calm down.
- Offer a quiet space which is different and not associated with discipline to which the child can go to be alone.
- Work out some gestures/signals (hand signal, touch, cue like a little bell) to communicate that behaviour is escalating and needs to slow down.

³ Sharing Stories, Finding Hope Module 2; p.1

- Redirect activity and suggests options to see if child will follow. Asking for behaviour change will not usually work. (eg a child at school who pushes and shoves when in line can be asked by the teacher to help by carrying some books or the teachers bag into class
- Reward completion of tasks (or even the partial completion of the task). Rewards should be immediate and relevant to the behaviour and need only be as simple as a stamp, a small sticker a thumbs up or a large smile.¹⁵
- Never use humiliation¹⁵ as a disciplinary strategy. Children are very sensitive to reading (and misinterpreting) body language and voice intonation.
- Be consistent in schedules and routines – same day of the week, same time (e.g. after lunch break on Tuesday) Give plenty of warning and allow for transition time for any expected change in a routine or schedule.
- Provide plenty of opportunities to be physically active.
- Try ‘physical grounding’ – for example: feet touching the ground, rough textured blanket, cool face washer, plastic comb to run finger across, swaddled in a soft blanket.
- Seek opinion on the use of medication.
- Whatever is learned first often ‘sticks.’ Think the situation through before you decide to teach a new concept.
- Look for and make the child aware of their strengths/special talents. It is always easier to believe in the negatives.
- Seek help and advice from specialists.
- Low sound alarms (or a special transition song) can be effective to indicate ending an activity or moving on to another.
- Don’t underestimate the power of role-modelling. If a parent/carer is “at the end of their tether” it is important to remove themselves to calm down before further interaction with the child.