



An Empowering Way To Guide Behaviour

By Nikki Grazier

One of the reasons I love working with children is that they see the world afresh each new day. They approach it with curiosity and wonder. After teaching for over twenty years this helps me to also see the world in this way and to try out new learning. Something that I came across recently, along with the RIE course, has changed the way I view those times when children are engaging in negative behaviours.

I want to share this because as a parent it also helps a lot.

A lot of the media and some parenting books put a lot of focus on what happen after certain behaviours to reward or punish, which leads us to concepts of sticker charts, timeout, naughty chairs etc. These I find treat children as an object and either leads to children behaving in a certain way to get something - external motivation, (which only lasts for a short time) or creates a power-over scenario. I also find that timeout etc is being used for younger and younger children when they have absolutely no concept of what it is and what it is trying to do. This can lead to confusion and frustration for parents and children.

This new approach focusses on what happens before those tricky behaviours appear and I have found that this focus dramatically decreases or stops the behaviours altogether. I think that as parents of infants we do much of this instinctively, however toddlers continue to develop their wonderful 'will' power, which can then lead to power struggles.

This approach is called HALT, and it calls for us to stop and be mindful of what is going on for the child as most behaviours occur because of one of the following reasons.

H - Hungry (are they hungry/thirsty?)

A - Angry (Why? Leading to conversations about emotions.)

L - Lonely (do they just want some attention - time together? (emotional restocking))

T - Tired (are they tired, or over tired?)

Guida and I added an S as well...

S - Sickening and/or needing Space

When children, and adults, are feeling hungry, tired, lonely, angry or sick then they often don't make the best of decisions.

Young children who are still developing their verbal communication skills find it very hard to tell us what this 'strange' feeling is that they are being overwhelmed with. By careful observation and knowing the children well we can have some

clues as to what is happening and make moves to address them. However, if we miss the cues children can quickly get into a state where they move from their cognitive thinking brain into the limbic brain which is all about senses and emotions. I find that with toddlers, this switch can happen very quickly and it is so much better to anticipate and remedy than to resolve the above issues with an increasingly upset toddler.

Just a quick note about angry - HALT doesn't mean giving in if you are setting limits and boundaries - but about being mindful and talking with them about how they are feeling. Since undertaking the RIE course I have learnt the crucial importance of letting children experience emotions and just sitting with them calmly, being fully present while they do so, without distracting them away from the emotional process.

We can't always meet the needs of children straightway, but this approach allows for empathy and understanding and talking to toddlers and older children about waiting and reassuring them that their needs will be met soon.

Recently we had a child engaging in some negative behaviours in our room and in our discussions with his parents, also at home. We used this approach (and RIE) to observe carefully to find out what was really going on before the behaviours. We quickly noted that he was requiring some space, and then that loud noises were distressing him and making him angry. This along with some other cues led me to suggesting that he get his ears checked and the doctor confirmed he had glue ear. This in turn has changed our practice with him, ie moving him away from noisy situations and now we have, for the most part, a happy and helpful child again.

This approach also places a lot of importance in knowing children really well, and reminds us that the parent/teacher communication about what has been happening at home is crucial. TLC has a lot better system for this than most centres, however we all need to make sure that the flow of information continues as children get older, especially about children's sleep, breakfast eating, parent's being away, very busy weekends and illnesses etc so that we as teachers can include this information into our knowledge of what is going on for the children.

Toddlers are renowned for pushing the boundaries, this allows them to know where the boundaries are in order to feel safe and secure. It

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is part of their development of will. They also have the most amazing amount of growth and development going on in their brains and bodies, so much learning about self, others, self regulation, movement, language, and learning itself. By using the RIE approach, and other approaches like HALTS approach we can all continue to work alongside and guide children from infancy through to childhood.

Scientists believe that the experience of emotion is located near the base of the brain, in an area called the limbic system. This part of the brain is developed early in neonatal life and is a primitive organ that responds to emotional stimulation. The limbic system does not “think” about the emotions, but simply responds and possibly stores emotional memories. When we are infants and toddlers our limbic systems are very active, responding every time we are cold, hungry, wet, lonely and scared. Since our brains have no way yet to know what to do with these emotions, we rely on the adults taking care of us to make those negative feelings go away. As we move from toddler years into early childhood, our brains develop circuits from the limbic system to our frontal lobes, the part behind our foreheads. The frontal lobe is thought to be the part of the brain that reasons, organises, plans and anticipates. As our brain develops we become better at reasoning. At age 3 or 4 we can tell ourselves that even though we can’t play with the ball we want, we can stop crying about it and make ourselves just as happy with a doll. The more our frontal lobes are engaged in calming down our limbic stimulation, the better we learn to manage our frustrations and thus control our behavior.

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