

That BEHAVIOUR BOOK

THE SIMPLE TRUTH ABOUT
TEACHING CHILDREN

STEPHEN BAKER



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FOREWORD

On our journey through life, we are guaranteed to experience a range of emotions – excitement, tiredness, confusion, happiness and anger. If our school system is to be of worth, we need to understand that children are people too, and strive to lead all the people in our schools with empathy, love and a caring consistency. We must teach them the behaviour we expect. Teachers need to be leaders in their classrooms – and good leaders lead rather than manage.

The pressures on teachers to deliver content and good outcomes is immense. This can only be achieved if we build positive relationships with pupils, and this starts with solid routines. Rita Pierson says in her 2013 TED Talk, ‘Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like.’¹ There is a certain amount of truth in Rita’s statement; nevertheless, this book gives adults tried and tested strategies to build trusting relationships in classrooms that are genuine and safe.

In this book, Steve shares the lessons he has learned as a successful teacher of English and drama, as a subject leader and head of year, and as a behaviour and attendance consultant. The strategies are mined from the chalkface of the multitude of schools and classrooms he has visited, mostly in areas of high deprivation.

I have worked with Steve for many years, and I have seen first-hand how his support has developed new teachers and transformed the capacity of established ones, contributing to reduced exclusions, positive inspection reports and a sense that our school is better placed to serve our community.

Whether you are an early career teacher, a senior leader with twenty years’ experience or an adult working with young people in a different context, this book is essential reading. Schools simply cannot keep off-rolling pupils. We must learn to lead behaviour in schools, and Steve offers important insights into how we can achieve this.

Mark Ayres, acting head teacher, Appleton Academy, Bradford

¹ Rita Pierson, Every Kid Needs a Champion [video], *TED* (May 2013). Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion?language=en.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to help new teachers manage behaviour more effectively. I would prefer to say 'lead' than 'manage', but we will get to that later. My teaching experience was in secondary schools and you will find that reflected in these pages, but I hope that adults in every setting will find *That Behaviour Book* relevant and helpful. Also, you might not be new to this game; you may be an experienced colleague who feels the need to reset and refresh your approach, and if so, I trust that you too will find what you need here.

I have worked with countless teachers over the last twenty years and have watched them move from despair to delight. As children's behaviour improves, they begin to enjoy the job again, they sleep better and they go home with some energy left for partners, families and other interests. This, after all, is the stuff that adds up to having a life – precious stuff that is crowded out all too easily when worrying about the boys in 9FW fills every corner of your mental space, like expanding foam.

I will mention just one of these teachers, Anka, who had moved to the UK from Eastern Europe with her husband and was training to teach maths in Oldham. Her classes ate her alive at first. After visiting Anka's lesson one morning, I returned at the end of the day to share my feedback, only to find her sitting at her desk, silently weeping. It killed me to see Anka hurting so badly, but I set to work as coach, mentor and sounding board, while she developed the routines, the language and the persona that would put her, benignly, in charge of the room. Several weeks later, the transformation was incredible. Anka had gone from well-meaning doormat to empathetic, effective teacher. She was firmly in charge and enjoyed warm, productive relationships with classes that had once run her ragged. When I moved on some months later, she sent me the most wonderful note: 'I will never have the words to thank you.'

I would like to dedicate this book to Anka and the many others whom it has been my pleasure to support over these last two decades. I hope that, while we spend this time together, I can help you to reflect on your own practice, share some tips you can use straightaway and equip you with strategies

that will bring you success. There are 'Takeaways' at the end of each chapter that sum up the key points and also practical 'Now try this' activities to accelerate your progress. I hope that you will enjoy reading the book, that before long you will have your own stories to tell, and that you will enjoy sharing them as much as I have enjoyed sharing mine. Right now, though, let us start at the beginning.

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The nightmare scenario

You are standing in front of your Year 7 class. All you can see right now are gum-chewing water-bottle jugglers, blame-shifting work avoiders, back-chatting phone addicts, and note-passing gossip fiends. You have been told to expect a senior leadership team (SLT) 'drop-in' observation any time this week.

And you cannot get quiet.

'Listen!' you call, more in hope than expectation. 'Guys! Please!' Your appeals fall on deaf ears. The noise continues. Ewan is struggling to free his bag from Jake's grasp. Tamsir is out of her seat persuading Amal to go out with Elisabeth. David, who usually ignores your pleas for quiet, is today yelling 'Shut up!' at the class in a misguided attempt to help you.

The noise builds, billows and shrieks; this lot are out of control. You may as well try to stop a fast-flowing river. And your mind is racing faster still: 'This is only Year 7! I should be able to control this lot!'

Your chest tightens as your nervous system roars into panic mode. Why won't they listen? When you finally raise your voice at a boy on the nearest table, he turns and with a frown says, 'Chill out, guy!'

Oh, dear ...

Evolution has left your body unable to distinguish between an irritating 12-year-old boy and an Earth-bound asteroid about to vaporise you, your house and family. Drowning in adrenaline, your brain screams 'Fight!' or 'Run!'

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But you cannot do either of those things. In that millisecond, the general noise, the sneering boy, the threat of imminent SLT observation, your harrowing sense of inadequacy and your own biology have you rooted to the spot. You try to think ... but you may as well try to sprint in lead boots.

It is your move.

What you do will depend on your answer to several questions. What do you believe about behaviour and about young people? What is your purpose as a teacher? How should young people be disciplined? Are you confident in your own ability? Are you in a good place emotionally?

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After seventeen years of teaching, this kind of experience is a vivid if not particularly cherished memory for me. It is still the daily waking nightmare for many teachers, and the purpose of this book is to help the adults who read it to put themselves back in charge of behaviour.

Of course, there are those who seek to put teachers back in charge by giving them big sticks to wield. They set up rigid systems that lead to pupils being sent out, detained, isolated and, ultimately, excluded over issues that could have been sorted with a little empathy and good grace on the part of the adults. In the face of this inflexibility, some children simply vote with their feet.

This book assumes that we need to teach *all* the children in our catchment area, that children need our help the most when we may feel they deserve it the least, and that with consistent adult behaviour based on values, beliefs and principles, we can lead behaviour in an entirely new direction.

My idealism was not fully formed when I started out, by the way. It has been informed by experience and has grown stronger over the years. I taught my first lesson as a trainee teacher in a grim Portakabin, squatting in the yard of a West Yorkshire comprehensive. For some reason, I thought I would try to be gruff but fair. Ha! After five minutes, I found myself in a 'Yes-you-bloomin'-will/No-I-bloomin'-won't' confrontation with a lad called Wade Booley. In that moment, it felt like a matter of life and death; me or him. Wade was a few inches taller than me so I cannot say we were nose to nose; more nose to Adam's apple. I do not remember what I told him to

do, just that he point-blank refused to do it. He stood his ground, smirking at my laughable attempt to get my own way, while my heart thumped like a jackhammer.

You hear people say, 'my blood boiled'; well, it felt like that. Fight or flight? Flock or freeze? Funny how all those words start with an 'F', like some others I wanted to use. I was stuck in a hellish cul-de-sac and the only available gear was reverse. This was my first climb-down and my most painful. I know it was painful because, and I am deeply ashamed to admit this, I awoke next morning utterly horrified, having dreamt of thumping the poor boy.

At least I only dreamed of doing it. The teacher whose class I was standing in front of (I will not say 'teaching') told me that he regretted the passing of the good old days when 'we could take them behind the Portakabin and give them a good hiding'. Who said *Kes* was exaggerated?

The subject tutors on my PGCE course taught me little about teaching English and less about behaviour. We were told to be keen and smiley and the kids would love us. There is a grain of truth in that, of course, but enthusiasm will only get you so far. Behaviour leadership is all about trust. How was Wade Booley ever going to trust me on day one? Like all young people, he will have been craving the company of relaxed, empathetic and authoritative adults, and I clearly did not fit the bill. Thirty-seven years later, I can laugh about all this, and write in this book the advice I would have given to my younger self.

In a nutshell, behaviour improves when teachers invest in relationships, establish robust routines and speak calmly to children. It improves when they explicitly teach the behaviour they want to see (just as they teach maths, phonics or geography), when they teach it by means of their own good example and when they teach it by highlighting good behaviour when they see it. Oh, and by the way, in order to safeguard the privacy of pupils, I have changed their names.

I hope you will find this book helpful.

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The first question to ask yourself is, what do you believe about children and behaviour? How your classes behave will depend to some extent on how *you* behave, and that will depend on your mindset. This chapter sets out the values, beliefs and principles that I believe are essential if we are to achieve positive and productive relationships with young people in classrooms and around school.

What is your mission?

Why are you doing this job? I drifted into teaching because I wanted to be an actor. I told the Fellow in Theatre at Bradford University of my ambition to act and, by way of letting me down gently, he suggested a postgraduate drama teaching qualification at Bretton Hall (home of the wonderful Yorkshire Sculpture Park), and then? Well, 'See what happens ...' Plenty of acting careers were launched at Bretton but, sadly, mine was not among them. Instead, I stayed the course and, hey presto, I stumbled on a career that became my passion.

Many secondary teachers have told me that they chose teaching because they did not know what else to do with their degree, and there is no shame in that. But teaching is a very demanding job, so you will need a sense of mission to sustain you; a higher purpose that goes above and beyond the mere delivery of facts to young minds. You might think this advice is a little obvious, but I have met countless teachers who have lost that sense of mission. Ground down by workload, the relentless nature of the school timetable and the pressure for results, they have ended up just getting through the week, which becomes just getting through the day and just getting through the hour. You need to hang on to your idealism at all costs, as it will sustain you.

Your content or your audience?

New teachers face some sobering experiences. You may enter the classroom proudly bearing aloft the precious gift of Mozart, maths or modern languages ... and collide with a brick wall of apathy. You may be left feeling angry, hurt and even a little insecure – were you right to devote your life to a subject that leaves these youngsters so stubbornly unmoved? Some staff never get over that sense of rejection. Accepting that you are there to educate the person as well as teach your subject is vital.

I have been known to announce to a roomful of teachers during a behaviour training day, 'We are now going to do some role play,' and you would think I had handed them an anthrax sandwich. If looks could kill, I would be dead meat. But I am not a sadist by nature and so I let them off. 'Only kidding!' I tell them. 'But hang on to that feeling. Announcing your favourite topic can cause your pupils the very same panic that you are feeling right now.'

Some of these adults lack empathy; they treat the prospect of role play as if it were botulism, but they cannot imagine why their pupils recoil in fear from fractions or French verbs. Children are not a different species, so why should we expect them to respond differently? Seeing the classroom situation from your learners' point of view is a vital skill. For some teachers, children are nothing more than little problems to be managed, but this prevents them from ever engaging with children and enjoying their company. If you can see that these young humans have a valid take on the world, you will be ahead of the game.

You have no control over the lives your pupils have led, the families who have raised them or their previous experiences of the subject you are attempting to teach, but all these factors will affect their readiness to engage with you. Being passionate about Spanish is a wonderful thing, but what will you do if your classes show no interest in languages whatsoever? Where will you start? How much empathy can you muster for those who reject everything you hold dear?

I ask these questions to point you towards the bigger picture. Great teachers find common ground with their pupils, and they do it because they know

that they are educators in the broadest sense first, and their subject content is secondary to that. As Mark Finnis likes to put it, 'connect before content'.¹

Another challenge to your confidence is the child's developing brain. Teenagers are designed to frustrate adults. They crave risk-taking and abhor responsibility. Everything we believe in seems pointless to them, and everything they obsess about can seem entirely trivial to us. This can fuel a lack of respect which destroys any chance of connection. We must be generous, leave our egos at the door and be prepared to meet the children where they are now, not where we would like them to be.

The staffroom

The staffroom can go two ways. It can be a welcoming oasis of brilliant ideas and mutual support, or it can be a dark, poisonous well. The devil has all the best tunes when it comes to the staffroom. Everybody likes a good moan, and there are often one or two staff who like to hold court, subjecting anyone within earshot to their negativity. I hear, with depressing regularity, pupils sorted into the 'good kids' and the 'bad kids', and I have concluded that good kids are those who will put up with dull lessons without complaint. As for the bad kids, well, whatever their circumstances, they seem to be fair game. I get told that so-and-so is a 'cocky little shite', that another child is 'a drama queen' and that is not the worst of it.

In my experience, the pupils who come in for this kind of abuse when their backs are turned have experienced literacy problems, broken homes, poor housing, domestic abuse, childhood trauma and endless other issues. It is simplistic and just plain wrong to label them 'bad'. This is what happens when teachers lose sight of the bigger picture and all sense of mission. They are taking young people as they are, which only makes them worse, when we should be taking them as they could be. It is our job to see the potential in every child, not to write them off before they get started.

1 Mark Finnis, *Restorative Practice* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2021), p. 7.

These staff like nothing better than a new recruit, so beware the staffroom cynics who would entice you into their web of despair. As Haim Ginott famously concluded in his book, *Teacher and Child*:

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.²

Your job as a teacher is to help young people build their futures, to assist them to thrive and to achieve their potential. You may be the first reliable, caring adult a child meets. What a responsibility! And the thing about children is, as any parent will tell you, they do not fall over themselves to thank you for the sacrifices you make: the late-night marking you do, the play rehearsals you put on, the break times you give up supervising their downtime, the social life that suffers while you overhaul that dated curriculum you inherited. Teaching is a wonderfully rewarding occupation, but it is also a very stressful one, and without a strong sense of moral purpose you can easily become lost.

Taking responsibility

You are responsible for behaviour in your lessons. There, I have said it. When we describe 'bad behaviour' in the classroom, we are talking about pupils *not engaged in learning*. You are responsible for engaging your pupils in learning, ergo you are responsible for behaviour. QED. This idea appals some staff. 'How can you blame me for what Kerry-Jo, Dylan and Jake are doing?' they cry, but, in fact, it is a liberating thought. If behaviour was solely the pupils' responsibility, you would be powerless, but you are not. Your pupils may bring the weather, but you set the climate. They might stomp into the room after a falling out in the yard at break time, but you create the space they stomp into. With clear routines, explicit positive

2 Haim G. Ginott, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 15.

expectations and a genuine welcome, you can make things better; you can create a climate that will vastly improve the behaviour of the many and make the determined poor behaviour of the few far easier to deal with.

When I was contemplating teaching as a career, I was lucky to know a wonderful man called Andrew Reid. A gentler soul was never born. Andrew was a school inspector, a Methodist local preacher and a former primary head teacher. Among all the advice he gave me, one sentence stands out: 'Your pupils must know that *Mr Baker cares*.' Andrew's life was tragically cut short by Hodgkin's disease, but his words have lived long in my memory.

Some staff send pupils out all the time. 'Go and talk to someone who's paid more,' they say. 'I'm here to teach.' One of the many things that is wrong with this approach is that it is self-defeating. If you send a pupil to see a member of pastoral staff with the attitude of 'bring this child back when it's fixed,' they may develop a decent relationship and perhaps even a strong attachment to your pastoral colleague, but none of this will benefit you. Next lesson, you will be back at square one.

When pupils get it wrong, you really can do your own repair and rebuild work, and you will benefit from doing it. Holding restorative conversations with pupils is essential to building trusting relationships. Schools have found that allowing staff to send pupils out causes more problems than it solves. The corridors fill up, those sent out go missing, on-call staff are overwhelmed and on-site resources are pushed to breaking point. Of course, now and again, something serious occurs in a classroom and, for safety's sake, a pupil needs to be exited from a room, but that is rare. I frequently hear from on-call staff who have been summoned because a child will not remove their coat; not exactly a situation endangering the survival of the species. The teacher could simply have logged the refusal, informed the child that there would be a consequence, which they would find out about later, and carried on teaching. This would benefit everyone concerned, and it would exemplify 'taking responsibility for behaviour'.

You do not need to refer everything up or send pupils out whenever they cross you. Instead of making the child pay, help the child to *learn*. You do not need revenge, you simply need to support the child to reflect on their behaviour. And you may not need an hour of their time. If they engage in discussion with you and see a way to doing better next time, five minutes or even two might be enough.

At this early stage, you need to know that I have, as they say, been on a journey. During my first year of teaching, I attempted to teach a boy called Rob. He was a classic naughty schoolboy, not a big hitter by any stretch of the imagination. His forte was the simple stuff: turning around, chatting, laughing. Nothing you would call serious, but for some reason Rob *really* got under my skin. I would frequently lose my rag and march him up to an office where Terry, the deputy head, sat glowering over his paperwork. Over and over this happened, lesson after lesson. I can only imagine Terry's joy, God rest his soul, as he heard my angry footsteps on the stairs, day after day. Did I think he owned a magic wand? Later, I would see Rob around school, still in possession of all four limbs, and I would moan to anyone who would listen: 'What's Terry done, eh? Just had a *chat* with him, I suppose?' What did I expect Terry to do? Tie Rob to a stake and burn him? Pull out his eyes and play swingball with them?

Looking back, I was blinkered. I did not see my classroom within any kind of bigger picture, such as the efforts of society to educate its young or even the life chances of young Rob, let alone a developing relationship in which I had a big say. Mine was just a gut-level 'him or me' response that Wade Booley would have recognised. I fess up to all this because I want you to know that the stuff that I bang on about in this book *can be learned*.

Behaviour is a form of communication

Focusing purely on behaviour does not make much sense, if you think about it. The way we behave is a symptom of how we feel at any given moment. Take me to a record store and I will behave very differently than if I am forced to spend time at a craft fair. (I have massive respect for people who embroider and crochet, by the way; it's just not my thing.) How we behave is a function of how loved and valued we feel at any given moment, plus how clear we are about what is expected of us. If I am told in advance that we need to visit a craft fair to find a present for our niece, I will be more cooperative than if I am suddenly dragged in there without warning.

Children are no different. Their behaviour is a function of how they are feeling, how clear expectations have been made and how well routines are established. Inappropriate behaviour tells us there is an unmet need

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somewhere. If we can change those feelings, we can change the behaviour. The 'nightmare scenario' class are telling you something. The message might be:

- We don't know you, so we don't trust you.
- We have had supply teachers for ages, so we feel neglected and we want revenge.
- You don't look like you want to be here, so we will give you a reason to be miserable.
- You haven't set a routine, so we aren't following one.
- The lesson is boring/irrelevant.
- The lesson is so hard that we have given up.
- The lesson is so easy that we feel disrespected.
- We have been told we are bottom set, that we are the bad kids, so we may as well act accordingly.

Most of these factors are within your control. You cannot do anything about what happened in the past, but what happens from now on is your business. So drip by drip, week by week, you can make a difference.

Another great piece of advice I was given about teaching came from my tutor John Atkinson at Bretton Hall in the mid-1980s: 'Working with young people is a privilege. The price you pay for that privilege is some very upsetting experiences.'

The access we have to young minds – our ability to shape futures – is a rare thing. Our classes need to see us enjoying that privilege. So, if you want to know what works with the tough classes, what breaks down the concrete walls that some young people erect around themselves, this is the answer: show them how much you enjoy the privilege of being with them. Act like you simply could not be taken away from this class, even if Tom Hardy or Anne Hathaway or ___ (insert your own object of desire) were at the classroom door holding tickets for a holiday in Mustique that no one would ever know about and begging you to join them. Your answer to this daydream has to be 'No! Go away, Tom! I want to be here with these kids!'

An essential book for every teacher, providing an engaging and unique mix of anecdotes, practical strategies and moral imperatives for successful and child-centred behaviour management

The pressure on teachers to deliver good results is immense. Building positive relationships with pupils, which starts with solid routines, makes that outcome much easier to achieve. *That Behaviour Book* looks at the values that will sustain you, how to build healthy routines and what 'positive expectations' really means, providing tried and tested strategies to build trusting relationships in classrooms that are genuine and safe.

That Behaviour Book is an essential guide for any teacher, from the beginner to the seasoned professional. Its unique tone and anecdotes drawn from years of experience as a pupil, teacher and trainer make this book a wise friend for busy teachers, providing a sense of connection, challenge and reassurance all at once.

Suitable for all teachers

I have worked with Steve for ten years and never fail to learn from him.
This book is your chance to do the same.

Paul Dix, Author of When The Adults Change, Everything Changes

An exceptional read.

Chris Dyson, Deputy CEO, The Create Trust

If you are a new teacher then this book will help you take those first nervous steps into classroom management. If you are an experienced teacher you may learn something new.

Dave Whittaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust

This book is an essential read for all adults working with youngsters.

Mark Ayers, Acting Head Teacher, Appleton Academy

This book will challenge you to confront yourself. Do not read it unless you are ready to go on a journey to being a better teacher and a better human being.

Paul Tinsley, Interim Assistant Director of Education, Calderdale



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