



What's behind the behaviour? There's always something.

Written by Hannah Beach (April 16, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/whats-behind-the-behaviour-theres-always-something/>

Imagine a wilted plant in a window. Your first thought to help it would probably be to determine what it needs:

Does it need more water? Less water?

Does it have enough sun?

Does it need extra care now because you forgot about it for a few weeks?

Is it a delicate plant that needs just the right conditions to thrive?

You would likely brainstorm the conditions needed to help it recover. You probably wouldn't think there was something wrong with the plant. With a plant, it seems obvious that with the right conditions, it can thrive. If it isn't thriving, it is because something in its environment or the way it is being cared for is not conducive to its growth.

With kids, it is the same thing. But somehow, we forget this.

The wilting tells us something

Just like the wilting tells us something about the plant's needs, a child's behaviour also tells us something. In fact, a child's behaviour is a gift that provides us with valuable information that can be incredibly helpful to us – even when that behaviour is troubling.

It can be really hard to re-frame challenging behaviour as a gift – I know I certainly struggle to remember this when amidst the chaos of challenging behaviours! – but that is what it is. Behaviour is a little window into a child's internal world. It helps us see when something is or is not working for a child.

When we remember that a child's behaviour is telling us something, it changes the dance. It helps us to explore what the child needs so that they can grow. Instead of punishing or getting mad at a child whose behaviour is off, it helps if we can remember that, just like a plant, what we see on the outside is telling us something about what is happening on the inside.

Seek to understand before starting to fix the problem

Sometimes, it can take a while to figure out what the right conditions are for each child, so that the change we hope to see comes from within as a result of a lasting internal change. Even shifting our mindset to approaching the problem this way can feel

counterintuitive, in a culture where the prevailing paradigm focuses on fixing surface-level behaviour, rather than seeking to understand what is driving that behaviour.

Picture again the wilted plant by the window. If we approached that plant through the behavioural paradigm, we would focus, quite literally, on fixing what the plant looks like to us. We might try to prop up the plant using a system of stakes and wire, or a trellis. Or, to take it to an extreme, we might tell the plant that if it just stands up straight, it will win an award for best posture! Or, we might literally yell at the plant: "Come on plant! Perk up! If you don't perk up, I'm not going to water you for another week!"

If you think this analogy sounds ridiculous, that's because this would be a completely ridiculous approach to a wilted plant that obviously is in need of nurturing and different care than it is getting! And yet, our culture currently approaches so many of the troubles that our children and youth are facing in analogous ways. We often set up complicated systems of rewards, bribes and punishments to teach kids not to hit each other, or to try to get them to listen to us or simply to "be good". These tactics might stop problematic behaviours in the short-term – but they do not help us to understand and address the root cause. Not only do these tactics not address underlying issues, but they also tend to require constant reinforcement, precisely because they do not solve the underlying problem.

Sound exhausting? It is. I get it. I've been there.

Instead of addressing problematic behaviours through a surface-level approach, I have found it extremely helpful to adopt the developmental approach. In the developmental approach, one looks at behaviour as a clue to what might be going on internally for the child. If a child hits someone, or isn't listening to us or is screaming at the top of their lungs, the developmental approach recognizes that the behaviour is connected to something. It's there for a reason. Like the wilted plant, the child's behaviour is telling us that they have a need that is not being met.

This doesn't mean that we let chaos reign. Of course, we have to do something about disruptive and destructive behaviours in the moment – but what we do should be informed by what the behaviour is telling us. Therefore, by seeking to understand the underlying emotions and/or environmental conditions that lead to challenging behaviours we have the opportunity to create real change. This tactic may take more time, but it addresses the roots of the problem, and in this way, leads to profound and long-lasting change. Not just stop the behaviour for ten minutes, or while we are watching!

When I first started to work within this developmental paradigm, I would write notes to remind myself to **seek instead of fix**. So, instead of telling a child to "Stop it!" or "Calm down," I would ask myself, "What can I change right now so that this child will feel more calm?" If my students were rowdy and scattered or not listening to me, instead of raising

my voice, bribing or punishing them, I would, as their leader, wonder, “What do I need to do to shift this dynamic? What does this group of kids need?”

Framing it in this way didn't mean that things always changed right away; but changing my mindset to focusing on what kids needed? Well, that changed everything. It changed how I saw the children in my care, and it changed how I saw my role as their leader.

But how do we know what they need?!

Each person is unique of course, but we all share universal needs:

- We all need connection.
- We all need room to express ourselves.
- And we all need a safe space to consciously feel our emotions.

In my experience, the most challenging behaviours in children stem from one of these needs not being met. If we start with these universal needs, we can explore what a child needs more or less of. Remember, too, that healthy emotional growth in kids starts with a safe relationship with a caring adult, and providing them with a safe space to feel.

So, when we face challenging behaviours, we should start by just asking ourselves simple questions that can help us to discover what is needed:

- Does this child feel safe with me?
- Does this child need more connection time?
- Do they feel special and important to at least one caring adult in their lives?
- Do they have the space needed to express and digest big emotions?
- Is their day structured so tightly that there are no quiet, gentle moments of nothingness in which their feelings can surface?
- Do they need more opportunity for expression and release through play?
- Do they have a safe space to feel their very tender feelings?

These questions might feel very overwhelming, especially in our current cultural context and approach to education. And even if we are used to asking ourselves these questions, we can feel at a loss for the answers. I have been there myself. In fact, it is because of my own experience that I decided to co-author *Reclaiming Our Students*, a book to help all educators understand what is behind the troubling behaviours we see and to reconnect with the fundamentals of relationship, play and emotional safety in the classroom. These fundamentals are essential to our students' well-being – and, in fact, to our own.

Becoming gardeners

Over time, I have come to see myself as a gardener. And to remind myself of this, I have taped on my wall this quote:

*“The gardener does not make a plant grow.
The job of a gardener is to create optimal conditions.”*
—Sir Ken Robinson

I'm not a perfect gardener by any means. There are still many plants I have not figured out how to help grow. But what I do know is that just like plants, every human is born with potential, and given the right conditions, they will thrive.

As caretakers of children's hearts, we need to hold onto this knowledge, so that we don't give up on those that are slower to grow or that have experienced adverse conditions that have affected their growth. Lasting change takes time. A child's growth may still be small, budding, and fragile – but it will flourish in time, if we first seek to understand, before we try to fix.

Warmly,
Hannah Beach



Hannah Beach is an award-winning educator, author, and keynote speaker. She was recognized by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 2017 as one of five featured change-makers in Canada. She is the co-author of *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down Than Ever—And What We Can Do About It* (released April 2020). She delivers professional development services across the country and provides emotional health consulting to schools.

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