



### **Behaviour Management Systems – More Harm than Good?**

#### **Part One: Using the agenda**

I have spent more than 40 years working in schools supporting administrators, teachers and staff who devote their lives to educating our children. In my role as a school psychologist I am often asked to help with children who are having difficulty behaving.

Over the years, I have suggested many different interventions, but few have proven to be effective. Now my interventions are informed by an attachment-based developmental approach that is grounded in neuroscience and an understanding of the importance of strong child-adult relationships as the optimal condition for the developing child.

Through that lens, I re-examined the most commonly used behaviour management strategies being used in schools and have come to understand that some of them cause more problems than they resolve.

From a developmental perspective, I have come to see chronic “inappropriate” behaviour as a sign that the child is experiencing difficulty in certain aspects of his development, indicating emotional immaturity. Or, that the child is being affected by life circumstances over which he has little control and which are causing him to become over-reactive to situations that most children can handle. In both of these circumstances these children will not be able to correct their behaviour by “trying harder”. As a result, for many years now, I have discouraged schools from using the daily agenda for reporting a child’s behaviour to their family.

Many schools use green, yellow and red faces to indicate “good” “not so good” and “bad” days. At the end of the day the teacher or aide rates the child’s behaviour in their agenda.

Let’s consider how it must make a child feel to be bringing home a “red face” to Mom or Dad. None of us likes to disappoint those whom we love the most and upon whom we depend. Even as adults, most of us prefer NOT to confess our transgressions. Think about the last time that you received a parking ticket or traffic violation. Usually the last person we “fess” up to are our loved ones. We do not like to see the disappointment in their eyes, even if we know that their love is not dependent on how we park or how we drive. Our children, especially those who have a hard time behaving as we would like them to, feel the same as we do.

A parent whose child’s behaviour was being managed in this way told me this story: At the end of the day she had 15 minutes, during their walk home, to devote to her child. She wanted these precious minutes to be spent reconnecting with her son, no matter what had happened at school. Sadly, on the days when her son received a yellow or red face, he would refuse to hold her hand and interact with her, even though she had no intention of about talking about his behaviour. He knew, however, that when she opened the agenda on those days, she would be disappointed in him and so he hung back in anticipation of this reaction.

Upon hearing this, it confirmed for me that we do a disservice when we ask children to bring home these reports on daily basis to their parents. The anticipation of a parent’s displeasure is difficult for a child to bear. Some of them, in an attempt to avoid this difficult situation will “lose” their agenda (many go out the school bus window); lie about what happened; blame other students or adults at the school, or finally numb themselves out from caring. Then they get into even more trouble: for losing things, for lying, and for not caring.

Children need a state of rest and calm for optimal brain development. Worrying about how their parents will react increases stress hormones, which, if experienced in excess slow down brain development.

There is a second part to this situation: the parents. The expectation is that when the parent is informed about how the child behaved at school that they will be able to influence the child

to do better the next day. This can work, if the child's misbehaviour is an occasional event. But when the misbehaviour is due to immaturity, impulsivity or over-reactivity most parents are at a loss of what to do. They talk with the child, they cajole, they remind, they bribe, and they consequence. Unfortunately, none of these tactics can make a child grow up any faster.

A teacher told me this story: A boy in her class begged her one day not to send home another "red" face, even though he knew he deserved it. When asked why, he told his teacher that he would get into deep trouble with his father if he brought home another one.

I happened to visit this teacher's classroom that day and we discussed the situation. It came out that the boy had been abandoned by his mother and that his father was raising him on his own, but that he had been injured on the job and was now off work and recuperating at home.

I was struck with the thought of how desperate this father must be. He had tried everything he could do to "fix" his son and could only think of harsh discipline as a way to get his boy to act as he should. When I shared this thought with the teacher, her heart went out to this Dad. I asked her to not send any more behaviour reports home. She agreed and then we spoke of other ways of helping this boy to manage his days at school.

It then occurred to me how fundamentally this system disrupts the parent-child relationship. At the end of every day, we all want to be greeted with delight by those whom we love the most. We want to know that no matter how our day went, they will be happy to see us and that we can spend time basking in their affection for us. This is what prepares us to face the demands of the next day.

Unfortunately, when bad news comes home, no one can relax. Parents try desperately to do what they can to help the child to behave better the next day. Even if they don't add any consequences at home the fact that they are disappointed in their child has a significant effect on the quality of their evening together.

What can be done instead? For a child with chronic behavioural difficulties, the school and parents need to meet regularly to discuss how to best help the child cope.

The developmental approach does not promote children being allowed to do as they wish, but when conventional discipline does not resolve the problem, it is up to the adults to find a way to help the child to do better. Parents may need to put children to bed earlier and to find routines that help them to be better organized for the day.

Schools that have adopted a developmental approach look to see where the child is experiencing difficulty during the day. They try to find ways to compensate for immaturity and impulsivity. Some students are assigned to structured, adult supervised activities during recess time. Some are helped to avoid crowded hallways by staying behind until things are calmer. When a child has a particularly difficult day, an adult contacts the parents, independent of the child, to seek help with understanding why the day or week was so difficult. After such a day, the parent is encouraged to provide the child with even more TLC, after all, isn't that what we all want after a difficult day?

Ultimately, it takes time and patience when dealing with challenging students. Maturity cannot be commanded. Our role as adults is to provide a safe and caring environment for our children so that natural developmental processes unfold. Let's find a way to make every evening at home a good one.

<p>Eva de Gosztanyi, psychologist, 2017 Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management <a href="mailto:edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca">edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca</a></p>
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