

The  
*Kindness*  
Principle

*Making relational behaviour  
management work in schools*



Dave Whitaker

First published by  
Independent Thinking Press  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
[www.independentthinkingpress.com](http://www.independentthinkingpress.com)

and

Independent Thinking Press  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2021.

Edited by Ian Gilbert.

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#### British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135385-1  
Mobi ISBN 978-178135386-8  
ePub ISBN 978-178135387-5  
ePDF ISBN 978-178135388-2

LCCN 2021931059

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

# Foreword

I feel very privileged to have been invited to write this foreword. Dave's book is one of those rare gems: a really useful education book. It is a book that will take courage to read – and even more courage to apply the approaches advocated within it.

I am not a teacher but, having talked to schools as a neurobiologist and paediatric neurologist for over three decades, it is my experience that almost all of the hundreds of teachers whom I have had the privilege to meet are motivated by a single desire: to do their best for the children and young people under their care. It is to that high ideal that this book gives fuel and substance. We sit at a time when education is being split into two halves: old-style Victorian teaching methods and modern methodologies based on compassion and understanding. As an observer it is hard, at the moment, to see how any commonality can be found between the two. This book lays out ways of thinking about education which any teacher can engage with and then apply to themselves and the children and young people in their care.

To each and every teacher reading this I would ask you to think carefully about the principles and discussions in this book. Ask yourself, are the premises sensible? Do they contain that one essential: common sense? I think that you will likely say, 'Well, yes. This all seems very sensible.' I would agree. There is a depth of understanding in this book of how to successfully lead children and young people into that most important of things: self-motivated learning. It has always been my belief that an excellent education is one that produces exactly this.

The deeper principle that is also explicit in this book is probably the most significant one – if you, as a teacher, can develop and own the core principles that are set out here, then you will experience that most wonderful of things: a really enjoyable and often profound life. If you are experiencing that then your pupils will experience the wonder of having a great teacher.

**Andrew Curran**

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# Introduction: It must start with kindness

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.

Nelson Mandela<sup>1</sup>

Kindness is defined as the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. Affection, gentleness, warmth, concern, and care are words that are associated with kindness. While kindness has a connotation of meaning someone is naive or weak, that is not the case. Being kind often requires courage and strength.

Karyn Hall<sup>2</sup>

Kindness can sometimes be perceived as weakness and, when associated with behaviour management in schools, can be a real conundrum. Is it possible to use kindness in a way that leads to successful behaviour management? How is it possible for a school to have kindness as its basis for relational behaviour management and still have children who show respect, follow the rules and achieve success? It is hard to believe that kindness, as a foundation for behaviour management, could be questioned or doubted – but it is. If we aspire to be relational in our approach to behaviour management, then we must start with kindness. Kindness can mean being tough and fair – exposing frailties and weaknesses but doing it with warmth and compassion. To remain kind in difficult and challenging environments takes courage and strength.

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1 Address by President Nelson Mandela at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, Pretoria, 8 May 1995. Available at: [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/1995/950508\\_nmcf.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1995/950508_nmcf.htm).

2 Karyn Hall, The Importance of Kindness, *Psychology Today* (4 December 2017). Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/pieces-mind/201712/the-importance-kindness>.

We are living in an era of polarised views on managing behaviour. Fast-track school improvement is based on creating compliance at all costs. High levels of strict conformity are seen as a strength in many schools, even if the collateral damage is high exclusions and cohort change. Many schools across the country employ a system based on strict consequences and sanctions. They use this compliance, along with the threat of punishment, to successfully ‘control’ the behaviour of most of the children in their care. But what do we mean by ‘successfully’?

Exclusion<sup>3</sup> is viewed as an acceptable and inevitable consequence of a system in which, without compliance, there is no other option. It is regarded as an unavoidable and tolerable side effect of what are perceived as successful behaviour policies. Strict compliance at all costs is even viewed by some proponents as a positive life lesson that prepares children for adulthood and the ‘real world’.

However, surely a behaviour policy should only be viewed as successful if exclusion is not needed? Arguably, if a behaviour policy must rely on the cliff-edge sanction of exclusion, then it is not successfully changing behaviour for the better. If a school permanently excludes a child, then perhaps they are admitting defeat – that they aren’t able to manage their behaviour. This is inevitably going to provoke controversy, but the idea should at least be explored and debated. As educators, we should all ask ourselves the question about what successful behaviour management actually is. Permanent exclusion essentially means passing the problem onto someone else. It certainly is not a cure.

Should we, as education professionals, regard schools as successful if they do not do their very best to work with the most challenging and vulnerable children in society? Some children need additional support, guidance and flexibility in their educational journey. Some pupils have specific additional needs that cannot be met in a mainstream environment. Some need to move to specialist settings because it is in their best interests to do so. However, some are excluded because the system is failing them; they are moved from school to school because nobody is repairing the damage and making the adjustments that they need in order to be successful. Schools too often focus on dealing with the symptoms of challenging behaviour,

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3 At the time of writing, the Department for Education are looking determined to change the term ‘exclusion’ back to the old and antiquated term ‘expulsion’. They are also likely to bring back the term ‘suspension’ to replace fixed-term exclusion too. This seems like a backwards step and a totally unnecessary change, but one I would like you to note. Either way, all these terms still have an extremely negative connotation that we could do without.

not the causes. There is a small but seemingly ever-increasing cohort of children – if my experience is anything to go by – who are either excluded from education or trapped in a cycle of punishment, which seems to be considered an acceptable consequence of a widely used and highly regarded behaviour strategy. We must ask ourselves whether this is OK.

Behaviour management in schools begins with our choices as adults and our behaviour as professionals. Yes, we can write out our behaviour policy and have the rules, rewards and sanctions clearly displayed on classroom walls, but it is our understanding of, and ability to deal with, relationships that really influences behaviour. We all need to be careful with our choices as education professionals. We can, and do, choose where to work, who to work for and who to work with. This book will explore how kindness, strong relationships and an understanding of behaviours (of both adults and children) can lead to successful and happy schools in which children and adults thrive, struggle, laugh and cry together.

We are constantly influenced by those with whom we work, live and socialise. We all work with, or have worked with, leaders and colleagues who either inspire us or frustrate and infuriate us. We must always be willing to learn and develop by exposing ourselves to new ways of working and thinking. We must be led by our core values but also willing to adapt and change throughout our careers as we gain more experience, knowledge and understanding. In the modern world of fake news and social media, we are exposed to strong opinion and polarised views, more so than ever before. Educational debate, particularly on social media, can be both enlightening and utterly frustrating. We must be willing to listen to and learn from the wise. Wisdom is powerful, but it comes from genuine experience and not just from research and books. Books help, as does data, but there is no substitute for wisdom gained through experience.

After starting my career as a secondary school geography teacher – leading inclusion and special needs – and then moving into headship, executive headship and becoming a National Leader of Education (NLE), I found myself in academy trust leadership. This book is a twenty-five-year ‘learning walk’ through challenging, urban, disadvantaged primary and secondary schools, pupil referral units (PRUs) and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) – previously known as behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) – special schools, as well as academies and free schools, and the teaching, training, outreach, support and leadership that goes

with it. It may help you to make those challenging choices and find contentment in your job and organisation. But, whether content or not, behaviour management is never easy. It is a roller coaster of emotions and stress, which causes us to suffer constant highs and lows. It changes from class to class, week to week and year to year. You think you have got it sorted and then an hour later you think you are a failure. It definitely does not become easy – it just gets easier than it was. Working in challenging schools with complex children is both truly rewarding and exceedingly hard work. It relies heavily on your personal resilience, your ability to accept getting things wrong, and your understanding that when it does go wrong, it is not necessarily anyone's fault. It is about trying to do your very best for the children who need you – and never underestimating how powerful that need may be.

In 2018 *The Guardian* published an article about the school where I was lucky enough to be the then executive principal and the way in which we used kindness at the heart of our values and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Looking back, it seems incredible to think that being kind to children was worthy of making the national news – or any news at all. It is also amazing to think that the article received criticism from some for a style of behaviour management that was considered soft, and that I, as the head, was even considered a danger to the teaching profession because of my relational approach. It did, however, open up a debate which allows us to explore the values associated with managing behaviour. It allows us to consider in detail how we treat children in our care and to ponder what it is we are trying to achieve in our schools.

Although this book draws on some thinking from the worlds of therapy and neuroscience, I must be clear that I am neither a therapist nor a neuroscientist – I am a 'schoolist'. This book is written about schools and for the people who work in them – whoever you may be and whatever role you have.

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4 Josh Halliday, 'We Batter Them with Kindness': Schools That Reject Super-Strict Values, *The Guardian* (27 February 2018). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/feb/27/schools-discipline-unconditional-positive-regard>.

# Unconditional positive regard

## Don't smile until Christmas?

Before we delve deeper into the behaviour of children in school – the challenges it brings, the emotions it generates and the solutions we need – we should first reflect on the work of Carl Rogers, the author of numerous books focused on the humanistic approach to psychotherapy. Rogers believed that:

For a person to 'grow', they need an environment that provides them with genuineness (openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood). Without these, relationships and healthy personalities will not develop as they should, much like a tree will not grow without sunlight and water.<sup>1</sup>

Rogers was an American psychologist who pioneered a person-centred approach to understanding human relationships. His work is widely used in the fields of psychotherapy and counselling but less so in modern education. However, if we look at the following quote, I think you might be able to see why it may be applicable for us:

The therapist experiences a warm caring for the client – a caring which is not possessive, which demands no personal gratification. It is an atmosphere which simply demonstrates 'I care'; not 'I care for you *if* you behave thus and so.' [...] It involves an acceptance of and a caring for the client as a *separate* person, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences, and to find his own meanings in them. To the degree that the therapist can

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<sup>1</sup> Saul McLeod, Carl Rogers, *Simply Psychology* [blog] (5 February 2014). Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/carl-rogers.html>.

provide this safety-creating climate of unconditional positive regard, significant learning is likely to take place.<sup>2</sup>

If a therapist can do this, then surely a teacher can too?

So, Rogers coined the term ‘unconditional positive regard’, which can be emotive and generate polarised views and misconceptions. It is being used more and more in schools and can form the starting point for developing values and a relational ethos for working with children. For us, this outlook is the bedrock for developing relational behaviour management. It is a term that, when used in a school context, should make us think about our relationships with children and adults alike. It is often unnecessarily overcomplicated. ‘Unconditional positive regard’ should be taken in its most simple interpretation, applied to all, and lived on a daily basis. Therefore, let’s look at what this means in practice and at how a school can use unconditional positive regard as a method that sets the tone and values for a relational approach, to drive the behaviours of the adults and act as a point of reference and safety for difficult decision making.

- **Genuineness:** Children know when adults are fake. In fact, adults know when other adults are fake. Genuineness in our own actions, decisions and behaviours begins to build an authenticity in relationships that can be used to drive behaviour at all levels. Genuineness builds trust. It champions honesty and transparency. Self-disclosure, as difficult as it may seem, supports the authenticity required to be genuine.
- **Acceptance:** Everyone needs to be and feel part of something. As adults, we know that. Many children struggle to find acceptance in a group, in a school, or even in a family. Unconditional positive regard can provide the foundation for acceptance. The children in your school need to feel accepted and understood. Acceptance allows them to build self-esteem and to trust others. We must not assume that acceptance happens automatically at school, even for the most well-rounded children, with supportive families and happy childhoods. Some schools demand conformity as a prerequisite for acceptance, so this is often a barrier that is difficult to break down for those who struggle to understand their place in school. As adults, with the power to influence

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2 Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), pp. 283–284.

acceptance, we must not let our preconceptions of conformity prevent our acceptance. We must be highly aware of children who may be struggling to feel accepted. If we do not spot this, then we are in danger of letting pupils slip through the net. They may develop school-based anxiety or even stop attending. If children stop attending school because they don't feel accepted, it will be very difficult to repair the damage and get them back. This can lead to long-term school refusal, high levels of anxiety and significant problems with transition to the next phase of education.

- **Empathy:** It is important that we do not mistake sympathy for empathy. Sympathy, which is often important, is a feeling of pity or compassion for another person. Yes, this can be invaluable, but empathy is what helps us with unconditional positive regard. Empathy, in this sense, is stronger and allows us to understand another person's feelings and identify with them. Genuine empathy can be challenging, and it's something with which many people struggle. Avoiding pity and putting ourselves in the place of the other person is a much more powerful stance.
- **Self-actualisation:** We must each try to be our ideal self, even if the environment – the school, the conditions in which we work – tries to prevent this. The type of person you wish to be is the person your behaviours should portray. This is where we must again be authentic, and our ideal self must fit our actions. If you are not careful, you can get trapped in a system that does not match your values, does not allow you to express yourself fully and restricts you in being your true self.

The use of unconditional positive regard in a school setting is sometimes misunderstood and, in some cases, used in a negative way to criticise and condemn a school ethos and an approach to behaviour management. Taken without understanding, or without seeing it in practice, it can be interpreted as being soft, ineffective and unproductive. However, the truth is very different. A great way to frame unconditional positive regard is to relate it to your own children, or those of close friends, or your nieces, nephews or grandchildren. You expect them to behave and you challenge and support them to do so. They test you and pull on your emotions. They can make you laugh and cry. They frustrate you and at times even anger you. But you never stop loving them. You give them a fresh start every day, you love them

unconditionally and will do everything in your power to give them a happy and successful future. Is that being soft? Is that being ineffective?

Using unconditional positive regard as a starting point in your thinking about behaviour management in school will help you to understand the power of relationships. It becomes an excellent way to examine the importance of adult behaviours, authenticity and a genuine understanding of the children we often struggle with in our classrooms. It allows you to think about the person and the professional you want to be – your ideal self. It is not, and never will be, an excuse. It does not mean low expectations, or having a lack of rigour, or letting children ‘get away with it’. It certainly does not mean having cosy cups of tea and chocolate biscuits with pupils, rather than holding them to account. It does not mean that we compromise our standards and allow poor behaviour.

It does, however, mean that we aim to truly understand the children we teach. It means that we, as adults, need to be aware of our own behaviour and the impact this has, not only on the children but on our colleagues too. It also means that we understand that successful behaviour management starts with a set of values and principles that we believe in, and an ethos upon which we can build our policies. Without this belief in what we do, this approach will not work. Relational behaviour management relies on true belief and authenticity, and on every adult working together for the genuine good of the children, whatever they do. That is the hard bit. Being judgemental about children and families is not helpful in forging strong relationships. We often hear – even now – about new teachers being told to be firm and strict: not to smile until Christmas. Well, how about being warm and kind? Working to develop positive relationships from day one, without feeling like you need to be anything but your true self, is vital. This will give you the start to your career that sets the tone for years to come. If you get this wrong, become a nasty teacher and not your true self, then you will turn classes against you. Pupils will not warm to you and that will be the reputation and image you have to live with each day.

The more I can keep a relationship free of judgment and evaluation, the more this will permit the other person to reach the point where he recognizes that the locus of evaluation, the center of responsibility, lies within himself.

Carl Rogers<sup>3</sup>

So, our values take over and steer our behaviours. In an ever-changing, highly pressured education system, we will constantly find ourselves tested.

## An example from practice

Faye would arrive at school every morning to be greeted at the front door with smiles and warmth from the staff. She was young and vulnerable. As a ten-year-old she was exposed daily to things that most of us would not hope to experience in a lifetime. Neglect and poverty had been her reality since the day she was born; she knew nothing else. She lived in a constant state of anxiety and hypervigilance, both at home and at school. She was naturally defensive, having spent all her young life living with low-level threat and a constant sense of fear. She had been excluded from mainstream primary school and did not have a secure, safe place or relationship in her life. On arrival at school she struggled with being met with the warm greeting and personal reception that she did not receive anywhere else. When staff welcomed her with a cheery ‘Good morning, Faye’, she simply replied – under her breath and without looking up – ‘Fuck off’. Was this an act of defiance from a naughty child who was looking to make a stance against authority, or was this the response of a lonely and troubled girl who wasn’t willing or able to form relationships, because that would mean letting her guard down and risking rejection?

Faye responded like this every morning for over a year. Not once did the staff stop offering a warm greeting to Faye. They did not reject her, and those closest to her would constantly encourage her to stop telling everyone to fuck off. They told her she did not need to push us away, because we all cared about her. Eventually she began to realise that the school community was not going to reject her. She had

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3 Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, p. 55.

been in many scrapes and incidents that year and yet she had not been excluded like she was in her previous schools. Faye changed her morning greeting to a simple muffled grunt and dropped the aggressive swearing. This continued for some months but eventually the real change came. When greeted with the customary warm welcome from the staff, Faye now responded in her own trusting way with a simple 'Morning, sir' or 'Morning, miss'. Faye had learnt that the welcome she received every day was genuine. It was authentic and caring – if she let her guard down, she would not risk being rejected. Faye said good morning to the staff every day from then on. She left Year 11 with her GCSEs and went to college happily. She still went home every day to neglect and poverty, but school was safe, and the adults genuinely cared. Do not let the term 'unconditional positive regard' scare you. Embrace it and use it.

I was first introduced to unconditional positive regard by the late Josie Thirkell, who was my head teacher when I first worked in special education. She was the executive head teacher of Barnsley PRU and Springwell Community Special School, where she persuaded me to leave mainstream and become her deputy in 2008. She was also the founder and first CEO of Wellspring Academy Trust. Josie was an inspiration then and remains so now – a true mentor and sadly missed, dear friend. I often reflect on how she introduced me to a simple behaviour policy which, as her deputy, she needed my help to instil in a new BESD school and a struggling PRU. The policy was, and remains, very simple: be kind to the children, build relationships, understand them well and support the staff to teach great lessons. Unconditional positive regard was to become our joint mantra for the next five years – and mine for the rest of my career. Yes, we looked at the work of Rogers and at his background in counselling, but that was not our focus.

## Simple, influential leadership

Josie was a head teacher but she was also a trained counsellor. She felt that a therapeutic approach was invaluable when supporting vulnerable children and, although she didn't practise as a counsellor, it was a way of working that leant itself to school life and to a relational approach to leadership – I was sold. The focus was simple: compassion, empathy, kindness and fresh starts. She never once accepted anything less than high expectations and high standards of behaviour but insisted that we

In an education system that too often reaches for the carrot-and-stick approach to dealing with poor pupil behaviour, an approach built on kindness and compassion might just provide the cure.

*The Kindness Principle* begins with the idea that relationships should be at the heart of behaviour management and culture, and sets out the ways in which the adoption of relational approaches can help create safer and happier schools. Schools where all staff and learners are valued and understood, where expectations and standards are high, and where kindness and acceptance matter.

Dave Whitaker explores why it is so important to understand children – offering techniques, advice and guidance on how to work effectively with all children (even the most challenging and troubled ones) without resorting to zero-tolerance, no-excuses and consequence-driven practices.

Dave also shares a wealth of real-life experiences from some of the most challenging schools in the country, along with research-informed insights that will help teachers understand children's behaviour in a new light.

**Suitable for teachers, school leaders and anyone working with children.**

Between these covers, you'll find everything you need in order to become a school where teachers love to teach, learners love to learn and where curiosity and empathy turn adversity into opportunity.

Dr Pooky Knightsmith, expert on child and adolescent mental health

Authentic, credible and from the heart, *The Kindness Principle* is a rich resource for any teacher or leader.

Paul Dix, behaviour specialist, [WhenTheAdultsChange.com](http://WhenTheAdultsChange.com)

I'm asked regularly, 'What should teachers and leaders learn and replicate from the schools in challenging circumstances who succeed with the most complex children?' Finally, here's a book to answer that question.

Kiran Gill, CEO, *The Difference*

*The Kindness Principle* should be read in every school because above all it teaches us that excellence and kindness are not mutually exclusive. We can and should strive to achieve both.

Fiona Millar, education journalist, *The Guardian*

I hope all school staff read this book with an open mind, because it's time we questioned the purpose of an education system which is apparently 'successful' yet is making so many children and young people unhappy.

Fran Morgan, founder of Square Peg

Dave guides the reader along a path of deep and profound humanity where compassion, personal responsibility, the individual and the community are held in a coherent and thought-provoking tension.

Stephen Tierney, Chair, Headteachers' Roundtable, and author of *Educating with Purpose*



**Dave Whitaker** is an Independent Thinking Associate and the Director of Learning for the Wellspring Academy Trust. As a former executive principal of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs special schools and alternative provision academies, he now has responsibility for several such academies across Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. He is also a founding member of the Headteachers' Roundtable think tank and is a regular speaker at conferences, as well as being an active campaigner for educational change.

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 [independentthinkingpress.com](http://independentthinkingpress.com)

ISBN 978-178135385-1



9 781781 353851

Education Teaching of students with  
emotional & behavioural difficulties