

Changing Perceptions

Deciphering the language of behaviour

Graham Chatterley



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Foreword by John Cosgrove

What if, instead of insisting that children are 'school ready' we asked schools to be 'children ready'? What if, rather than trying to eradicate undesirable behaviour by punishment, we attempted to understand where it was coming from and treated the causes as well as the symptoms? What if we thought as much about the unconscious messages we give in our responses to children as about the ways they challenge us?

In medieval times, part of the examination for master of education at the University of Cambridge involved the candidate being presented with a birch rod, a small bat for smacking hands known as a 'palmer' and a boy. When the child had been soundly beaten, he was paid a few pence for his essential part in enabling a future teacher to demonstrate the skills needed to survive in a classroom. It sometimes seems that we have not moved on very far. The tools of control may have changed but perceptions have not.

Pupil behaviour management has been a concern for teachers from the dawn of time. If a child will not listen and follow instructions, it is very difficult for learning to take place. The trouble is that whilst we may no longer hit children with canes or paddles, we still too often approach behaviour from a purely punitive stance, with demerits, detentions, focus rooms, isolation booths, exclusions and expulsion. What if, instead of seeking to 'manage' behaviour, we taught children how to behave appropriately?

Graham Chatterley is an experienced teacher, school leader, trainer and consultant. In this important book, the fruit of many years working with children, teachers and schools, he challenges everyone involved with education to re-examine the most basic assumptions we make about our work. He explores some of those 'what if' questions and, using examples from his personal experience, shows how the latest research can inform our practice and how all our dealings with young people can be informed by empathy and respect.

Some years ago, a head teacher from a different continent came to visit the school I led at the time, a large multicultural primary in what I always

describe as 'a challenging urban environment'. As I showed him round, he was particularly interested in the work of our specialist resource for children with autism. Later, over coffee in my office, he told me with a sad smile: 'I am ashamed to say that in my country we don't have special needs. We just beat children.' He didn't add – but we both knew – that the beatings achieved nothing. They were not a solution; they were because that head teacher and his staff, just like the masters of education hundreds of years ago and the proponents of isolation booths today, did not – and do not – know what to do instead.

What is important, of course, is not that we shame or blame teachers and schools, but that we show them the better ways of doing things. We challenge and change perceptions. Which is exactly what Graham does in this book.

Acknowledgements

It has certainly been a journey to get here, a finishing line I wondered whether I would ever reach. I would like to thank Mike and Kerry, without whose leadership, guidance and opportunity to develop my training this book would not exist.

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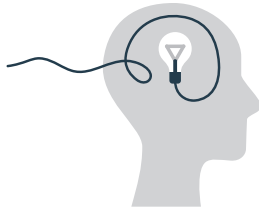
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The most important thanks goes to all the children, including my own, who have taught me so much and continue to do so.

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Introduction

I started my teaching career completely unprepared. The messages I had taken led me to try to be an authority figure, but I lacked that personality. I looked around at experienced teachers, attempting to emulate their classroom management. I bought into the idea that if my pupils sat still and conformed, that was a measure of my teaching capabilities.

Every day was a struggle. I left each day thinking that I couldn't do it, my lessons weren't interesting enough, I wasn't firm enough and I wasn't liked or respected by my pupils. I was very close to failing my newly qualified teacher (NQT) year and even closer to calling it a day. In fact, in my head, I had made that decision; I just hadn't told anyone.

Then a strange thing happened. I relaxed, I stopped putting myself under so much pressure and, in order to make a little bit of extra money to save up for when I wouldn't have a teaching salary, I signed up to do three extracurricular clubs. (Yes, there was once a time when teachers got paid for extracurricular activities.) A new laid-back me engaging in activities I enjoyed gave the children an opportunity to see the personality I had been working so hard to hide because I was under the illusion that it would damage my authority. The side effect was that behaviour in my lessons improved, which prompted some overdue reflection about what I had been prioritising.

That reflection led me to analyse my teacher training and focus on the experiences I had been ignoring. I had got it all wrong: authority isn't the reason why children conform. Experienced staff don't have well-behaved pupils because of what they are doing now, but because of what they have done before. The children are conforming to their high expectations

because the groundwork of building relationships and earning respect has already been done.

I had believed that the successful teaching practice I'd had in my final year was down to what I had done in the classroom, but it wasn't. It was down to the brilliant Jamie Hallett, my fellow trainee at the same school, who had dragged me onto the yard at break and lunch times to interact with the children, and also to the good luck that my teaching practice coincided with a school residential, further allowing the children to see my human side. I had been oblivious to it, but those little interactions had been my currency for better behaviour in the classroom. It was a currency I didn't have during my NQT year because the children had never seen it, but I was now building it in those extracurricular activities when I was getting out and interacting outside the classroom. I started to play to my own strengths and to be authentic, and I actually began to enjoy teaching for the first time.

Now, some people reading this will probably think that I was a bit slow to catch on, and they are probably right, but I got there in the end. I have been reflecting and learning ever since. I have taught at primary and secondary level and pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and I look back with horror at some of the mistakes I made both as an inexperienced and as an experienced educator. It was a journey from shouty NQT to occasionally putting on a performance to not shouting for the last decade. My approach has probably gone from too unfriendly to too friendly and back to the middle, hopefully balancing Kim Golding's (2017) two hands of discipline and parenting (i.e. emotional connection and nurture in one hand and discipline and boundaries in the other) to the best of my ability.

Meanwhile, I have tried to learn everything I can about the reasons behind children's challenging behaviour. I have worked to support colleagues and share my experiences whilst doing outreach support for a decade, and I devised the training course that I wish I'd had when I was training. If I'd had a better understanding of child development, additional needs, self-esteem, emotional regulation and trauma, and if I had realised the importance of safety, trust, co-regulation, belonging and happiness, I would have started out as a better teacher. I am confident that the training course has helped more staff than I can count, so now I have written the book I wish I'd had when I was starting my teaching journey.

There are a lot of books on the market from teachers supporting teachers from a strategic perspective. Equally, there are lots of books from academics exploring trauma, neuroscience and additional needs. My hope is that this is a book that bridges the two. I was a teacher first (I guess you could even call me overly traditional in style), who has searched and researched to understand behaviour. I have read extensively about the science of behaviour, each time prompted by incidents when we weren't successful with a child.

I will consistently repeat the message throughout this book that behavioural mistakes are learning opportunities – and that doesn't just apply to the pupils. If something isn't working, it is time for us all to reflect and improve. My hope is that this is the book the 22-year-old me would have picked up and read, and saved myself from feeling like a failure. It happens to too many new (and experienced) teachers, so we need to ensure that they start their careers armed with as much information as possible.

This book contains practical strategies, but on their own they will never be enough, especially if we want to be inclusive. We must have a solid understanding of the 'why' before we settle on the 'what'. The first three-quarters of this book are designed to explain the 'why' and the last quarter the 'what' and 'how'. I will share examples of individuals who have impacted on me and led my reflections, as well as real-world examples of the processes being used in practice. Everything in this book is tried and tested and has been proven successful. It also contains some insights from my own personal life, and how supporting my own children's experiences with autism have further shaped my journey.

The aim of this book is to explore every avenue of children's experiences to help us to react differently when faced with behavioural challenges. We will look at all the aspects of the conflict spiral and equip staff with the skills to de-escalate and repair situations that would otherwise deteriorate.

The purpose of school

A few years ago, I found myself in the role of parent sat across from my own child's head teacher discussing the main purpose of school. The head teacher said: "The most important thing is the learning." I replied: "No, the most important thing is well-being." So, what *is* the main purpose of school? The question has been asked and debated for a long time, and is at the root of many discussions amongst educators. Of course, teaching, and therefore learning, is the fundamental job of a school. I have no desire to dispute that, but are we talking about academic learning or more holistic learning? Are we prioritising academic grades to achieve a higher league table position, or to produce successful adults with good jobs and happy families? Does a school see the child first, or the academic grade they can achieve?

It is very easy for academic grades to take precedence because that is what the system dictates. Children are too often viewed as their potential achievements rather than who they are. If something isn't measurable in a standardised test, then it is easy to see it as less valuable. Many school leaders don't buy into this narrative, despite the fact that it is how their school will be judged. If the priority is the individual, then we need a holistic approach for each child. One that equips them not just to contribute to society through whatever job they have, but also by providing them with the ability to be good parents, partners and friends, and to have a positive impact on their community beyond financial contribution.

See the child, not the grade. See the child, not the behaviour. Don't get me wrong: these aren't mutually exclusive (as some would have you believe). For example, my son's school didn't ignore well-being; the leadership and ethos was very inclusive. However, deciding on what is the most important thing, and making it central to everything you do, is what makes that a genuine ethos. If the most significant factor is academic learning, then there will always be a percentage of children who fall by the wayside because they don't have the necessary foundations in place – safety, trust, belonging and resilience. If what is most important is well-being, however, then inevitably those foundations will be essential elements of the teaching.

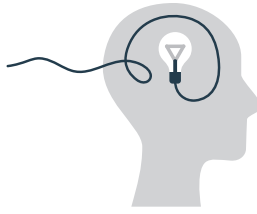
The big question is, do we want a house that looks great but is rushed and built on weak foundations, or do we want a house that might need

some furnishing and decorating but is built to last? I think every educator knows the answer to that question, but the system is designed for show homes. The strength and quality of the foundations are less important than how it looks. The current system puts pressure on schools to plaster over the cracks or hang a strategic picture. The problem comes when those fissures start to show and rebuilding the house is too big a task. Children can be taught for the test and to have great grades, but academic grades are a tiny part of what children need to be successful and happy adults. Without the foundations of safety, trust, belonging and resilience, children will find adult life challenging. I want schools to give the children an education that is built to last, not just good for show in the short term.

We can call it compassionate leadership, relational practice or progressive education; it doesn't really matter. It is about putting the well-being of the child first, and knowing that if you do so then the grade will come. It is about the individual being more important than the whole. It is about every child mattering. Making the children's well-being a bigger priority than their academic learning doesn't make learning unimportant; it is about building the house properly with solid foundations before we decorate it.

Many educators will say that the foundations are the job of the parents. I can't argue with that. However, for a multitude of reasons, it is a duty that some parents haven't done. If our task is to meet the needs of our children, then it falls on educators to give that child a chance because, as Marie Gentles (*Don't Exclude Me*, 2021) observes, 'If we don't do it, who will?'

I will give some examples throughout the book of where rebuilding those foundations has been done with great success, both in my SEMH setting and whilst supporting mainstream schools. Children's names have been changed in these instances to protect their identity.



Chapter 1

Relationships

Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.

Bruce Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised As a Dog* (2008)

As great as it would be for every staff member to love every child, I don't think it is possible to love all the children we teach. I often joke that in secondary schools we will settle for like! Love is a word that divides education. The educators I train often feel uncomfortable with the idea of loving their pupils, as it makes a comparison with their own children and they don't feel it is the same. However, for me, it isn't about the word, it is about the feeling. 'Do you love your pupils?' and 'Do you want your pupils to feel loved?' are viewed very differently. How a child is made to feel is what is important.

If, as parents, we go to our own child's parents' evening and get the feeling that the teacher doesn't really know or doesn't like our child, how does that make us feel? We may have spent five minutes with someone and our feelings towards them are negative; we don't want to listen to what they have to say and we are probably quite defensive (or aggressive, depending on how we choose to defend our child). If pupils have the same perception, and as a result feel disliked or unwanted, this is not a good foundation for learning. Children who feel this way will be less likely to reach their potential because they will always hold back.

If we want our children to invest in us and in the lessons we teach, then we must invest in them first. I am not suggesting that we can love (or

like) every child equally. Human nature means it is unlikely that we will love every pupil who enters our classroom. Indeed, many children behave in ways that make it very difficult to feel anything positive towards them – they know exactly what buttons to push. But, if we can find a way to convince the child that we are still going to like them, no matter what they do, then amazing things can happen.

Feelings stick

If you think back to your own time at school, you probably won't remember subjects or lessons, but you will remember individuals. You won't remember the content of classes, but you will remember how you felt in them. The teacher who showed so much enthusiasm for their subject that you couldn't help but get swept away in what they were doing. The teaching assistant who was kind to you when you hurt yourself in the yard and comforted you until your mum arrived.

My outstanding memory of high school was the head teacher who came and sat next to me after I was given out in the school cricket final. I was desperately disappointed and giving myself a really hard time, so I had gone to sit on my own. I have no memory of what the conversation was about, and he didn't attempt to make me feel better or fix what had happened. He just sat with me and talked. Nothing spectacular. No grand gesture or lesson that had taken three weeks to plan. It was a simple connection that helped at the time, and 20 years later I still remember vividly how it made me feel. It was Year 10 and this was the only one-to-one interaction I ever had with Mr Wright, who sadly died the following year, but it makes me wonder how many others he impacted on in the same modest way.

We get so caught up in systems and policies that we forget the most important tool we have. Human connection – how we make the children feel – is what ultimately makes the difference in a school, not what we do. There are no magic strategies to manage behaviour. I was a well-behaved child, but I wasn't a spectacular learner generally. However, I tried harder for some teachers than others, and if Mr Wright had taught me, I would have gone through a wall for him after that day.

Validate, don't fix

If we can validate feelings of anger, frustration, fear or any other emotion and not dismiss them or try to fix them, if we can show children that it is okay to feel that way but it will pass, and if we share our own experiences, then we can also show them ways to overcome negative feelings. If we expect behavioural mistakes to happen, but teach children how and why to respond to these occurrences, then we empower them.

Nobody wants children to become distressed. Nobody wants children to react with fear or to be fuelled by chemicals like adrenaline or cortisol (stress hormones that prepare the body for fight or flight), but they are part of life, not just school. These hormones regulate a wide range of processes throughout the body, but too much of them over time can cause significant harm.

Teaching children how to deal with fear and stress should be part of what we do in the classroom. If we can use our relationships to support and our connections to replace that cortisol with oxytocin (a bonding hormone that plays a huge role in connection and trust) and increase levels of dopamine (the pleasure hormone), then we reduce fear, drive connections and make young people feel loved. If we have pupils who feel good, and know the power of making others feel good, then behavioural mistakes will decrease naturally without the need for a specific behaviour focus. They will also be in a state that is more conducive to engagement and more effective learning.

Currently, many behaviour systems run the risk of creating an environment where behavioural mistakes are unacceptable and only perfect will do; anything less than this results in punishment, often in a way that has no link to the original behaviour. I will discuss later the dangers of perfectionism and how we can easily compound a child's narrative and shame cycle, especially when there is a reason for the behaviour. If we don't know why they are getting it wrong, how can we teach them to get it right? For example, a child who perceives a psychological or mental threat (and whose body is flooded with stress hormones) is likely to get into trouble because this type of active survival response isn't appropriate. The fight-or-flight response is millions of years old and evolved to keep us alive in dangerous situations. Thankfully, these kinds of threats are much rarer in today's world.

Don't ignore the mistake. Instead, see it as an opportunity to learn, connect, raise self-esteem and teach better responses. If someone has been wronged, a consequence will be necessary, but it must be linked to the behaviour and must give the child an opportunity to repair and redeem themselves. Without this, we feed into the child's narrative that they are bad and should be punished – a narrative that will become harder and harder to change if we don't challenge it.

Without supportive staff guiding the redemption, there is no connection and there is no oxytocin. Without the connection this brings, we are left with mistrust and disconnect. Just being given an unrelated sanction might be a deterrent, but it doesn't teach the child anything. It might give them a message that a behaviour or action is unacceptable, but it doesn't lead to potential repair. It doesn't show the child that something good can come from something bad, and it doesn't offer a satisfactory conclusion to the incident. I will discuss this further in Chapter 7.

Issuing a punishment for a mistake puts a full stop on things and informs the child that it is time to move on. We often say to children, 'Fresh start', and we do it with the best intentions, but this won't work if they don't feel that the situation has been resolved. Resolution gives the child a shot of dopamine that makes them feel good. Throughout the book, I will refer to the bell curve model, which starts at calm and ends at calm, followed by repair. In-between is the escalation to crisis and then recovery. Even in very nurturing schools, the repair often gets missed because having got a child to calm there is a temptation to avoid bringing the incident back up again, as it might trigger the child and take them back into negative feelings. It is a valid concern. Without repair, however, a destructive cycle is created: I am challenged and become dysregulated – I lose control – I am supported and calmed – I go back to class – I am punished – I am challenged and dysregulated – repeat. The adults have the power to interrupt this loop.

The process isn't this simple, and it takes time because we are often trying to change a child's narrative about themselves. When we are attempting to modify beliefs, we are taking the child on a journey through the unfamiliar, and unfamiliarity brings with it fear. Any challenge to the child's learned belief system will be rejected by them and likely sabotaged. However, if we can have faith in the process and stay with it, then we can teach children that although they may feel bad and do bad things,

Changing Perceptions gives everyone working with children a better understanding of the causes of challenging behaviour and what motivates it.

What if, instead of insisting that children are 'school ready', we asked schools to be 'children ready'? What if, rather than trying to eradicate undesirable behaviour by punishment, we attempted to understand where it was coming from and treated the causes as well as the symptoms? In this timely book, instead of seeking to 'manage' behaviour, Graham Chatterley aims to teach children how to behave appropriately in the classroom.

The causes of poor behaviour are many and varied: fear, stress, anxiety and the feeling of being overwhelmed can all take their toll. *Changing Perceptions* examines the motives behind challenging behaviour, detailing ways in which better understanding and empathy can make children feel safer, build their trust and consequently create more effective learners.

This book seeks to move the dial on the perception of challenging behaviour in the classroom. De-escalation is important but it is only part of the process: if we really want to change behaviour, we have to understand it.

Essential reading for teachers, school leaders and everyone working with challenging behaviour.

Graham's book demystifies complexities around behaviour and relationships between adults and children.

Sarah Johnson, President of PRUsAP, author of *Behaving Together in the Classroom: A Teacher's Guide to Nurturing Behaviour*

This insightful book raises awareness about what 'behaviour' really is. It is music to my ears!

Dave Whitaker, Director of Learning, Wellspring Academy Trust, author of *The Kindness Principle*

An essential read for everyone working in the education community.

Lisa Cherry, Director, Trauma Informed Consultancy Services and author of *Conversations That Make a Difference to Children and Young People*

Changing Perceptions is a must-read book for all who sit beside children and youth carrying pain-based behaviours.

Lori Desautels, Assistant Professor, College of Education, Butler University

Read Graham's book and behaviour will be better as a result.

Mark Finnis, Director of L30 Relational Systems

Graham Chatterley was a school leader who has since led training for thousands of educators across the North of England. He believes that adults play a pivotal role in the behaviour of students and that a culture of teaching children behaviour, rather than adults managing it, is key.

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