Children's Misbehaviour in Early Childhood: What Needs to be Done?

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Professor James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Science, who uses economic models to investigate the investment returns of early childhood education and the technology of skill formation to explain the evidence, stresses that both cognitive and non-cognitive skills contribute to the productivity of any individual. According to him,

> Achievement test scores are affected by IQ, schooling inputs, and noncognitive skills…. Noncognitive abilities and cognitive abilities affect schooling attainment and performance, and a wide range of behaviors. (Cunha & Heckman, 2006, p. 3).

The noncognitive abilities include motivation and self-discipline. Using Behavior Problem Index which was created by J.L. Peterson and N. Zill to measure the frequency, range and type of childhood behaviour problems for children age four and above, Heckman and Cunha (2006) observed that, among others, (i) both cognitive and noncognitive skills show strong persistence over time and (ii) noncognitive skills affect the accumulation of the next period's cognitive skills. The Behavior Problem Index has the following subscores: antisocial; anxious/depressed; headstrong; hyperactive; and peer problem.

This finding of Cunha and Heckman implies that the noncognitive skills acquired at an earlier period affect children's acquisition of cognitive skills in succeeding periods. This finding is obvious if we were to consider self-control. Without the ability to regulate one's emotion and behaviour, children can have difficulty in focusing on their tasks and establishing relationships, and they encounter peer problems. Associated with the inability of self-regulation are antisocial behaviour, disobedience, anxiety/depression and low self-esteem which can affect scholastic achievement.

Owing to the accumulative effects of noncognitive skills on later development, in particular cognitive skills, parents, early childhood educators and caregivers in children's homes must have the knowledge and skills to handle young children's misbehaviour or challenging behaviour appropriately. Failure to provide young children, especially infants and toddlers, with proper guidance can cripple their emotional intelligence development and promote anti-social behaviour.

When A Misbehaviour Is Not A Misbehaviour

Adults' responses to children's misbehaviour are critical as they can either help them learn and develop skills and strategies to regulate their behaviour or create stress, resentment, anger, unhappiness, guilt feelings and inferior complex. To respond correctly, adults, whether they are parents, child care providers or preschool/kindergarten teachers, have to understand their children and know the reasons for their behaviour.

Often what is considered as misbehaviour to adults is natural to children. To children with high level of unspent energy, running around in the classroom is as natural as going to the toilet when their bladder is full. Likewise, getting up to walk around the class is a spontaneous reaction of hyperactive children to ease their fatigued, tense muscles just as any sensible adult would stretch or get up and walk after a long session at the computer. Furthermore, children's perception and endurance of time differs from that of adults; to a five-year-old, a 5 minute-concentration on a task is probably equivalent to an hour's work of an adult, implying that unrealistic expectation of the adult can create misbehaviour.

Adults, whether they are parents, child care providers, preschool teachers or caregivers, need to realize that misbehaviour is the adult's judgment of a child's behaviour based on adults' perspectives and expectations. Consequently, children are confused when they are not allowed to do what they think is a natural response or even worse when they are punished for doing so. This confusion can lead to anxiety

and insecurity as they do not know how to react to their bodily responses. The feeling of confusion may culminate in resentment and rebellion if adults fail to handle children's responses to their bodily needs appropriately.

There are a number of young children's behaviours which adults deem as misbehaviour or misdeeds when they are not as perceived from the child's perception and stage of development. These include:

1. Poor Psychomotor Coordination

Poor motor coordination, due to physical immaturity, is the cause of many of the accidents among young children. Those with poor eye-leg coordination and estimation of distance frequently run into furniture and other children. Though unintentional, their peers, whose intellectual immaturity does not permit them to understand intentionality, are upset especially when they are knocked down. Their cries bring adults' wrath upon the offender. Spilling (such as spilling paints and drinks) and dropping things (such as food, paint brush that has just been dipped in paints) are more often than not due to the poor eye-hand coordination of the young child and not because of carelessness. Adults frown upon these mishaps, even those that happen in the child's eagerness to help.

2. Language Handicap

Some of the unacceptable actions of the twos and threes are the result of their limited vocabulary and intellectual immaturity. One of them is the snatching of things they like to have from their peers or taking things without permission (such as picking chocolates in supermarkets and eating them). They are not intentionally rude or immoral; they merely do not have the capability to verbalize what they want and ask politely for them. Furthermore, owing to their egocentrism, they consider it is right for them to take what they want from anyone.

However, this act of snatching what they want cannot be condoned. Yet it is wrong to punish them. Adults have to help the child verbalize what he wants by asking "do you

want to play with this car?" for instance. His nod of agreement should be followed by "Can you ask Sheila if she can let you play with this car?" and continue with "say to Sheila, 'can I have this car?'". If Sheila refuses, you can persuade Sheila to allow him to play with the car but you cannot force her to do so. The child has to respect Sheila's decision. His attention has to be directed to play with another toy or diverted to another activity. If he refuses and cries, his response has to be ignored.

There is no shortcut to teaching children moral values, social skills and management of emotions. They have to learn through guidance. But child care providers and preschool teachers in Malaysia tend to use quick-fix approaches such as making children share the toy or take turns to play with it to resolve contention. But quick fix should never be used as it does not help children to negotiate and resolve conflicts. Instead it encourages aggression as the aggressor achieves his goal whether it is in sharing or in taking turns. If the child continues to be successful in using this form aggression, it can develop into bullying tendencies.

Children, who lack the verbal capability or have not been trained to communicate their needs and feelings verbally, cry, hit, kick and bite to communicate their needs or to express their frustrations, anger and resentment. If adults scream or hit children for expressing their needs and emotions inappropriately, then the adults are, in reality, reinforcing the physical expressions of needs and emotions as well role modeling the use of these physical measures to exert power and authority.

In addition, children go through phases when certain behaviours are the means by which they learn about themselves or understand the wonderful but bewildering world around them. A well-known period is that of the terrible twos who say "no" to whatever the request in an attempt to test their existence of themselves as an entity separate from their parents. Some go through the "throwing tantrum" stage to assert their independence and demand to have their ways.

Infants persistently throw down things given to them to test the permanence of objects or doggedly struggle against efforts to deny them of their attempts to climb sofas, chairs and stairs to explore the world around them. While most adults are more indulgent towards infants and do not consider these acts as misbehaviour, nevertheless their responses have impact on children's intellectual and emotional development, especially their coping strategies for disappointments and stresses.

Managing Misbehaviour

It cannot be denied that children do willfully disobey to test the limits of permissible behavours, to attract attention or in sure devilment. Kicking, screaming, crying and biting are common among children at home, in child care centres and preschools. Handling willful disobedience, howling kids and other forms of misdemeanor is not easy but it is a critical task because the way parents, child care providers and preschool teachers handle this behavior affects the child's respect for adults, response to instructions, moral values and emotional intelligence development.

Adults have to help children manage their emotions and acquire self-discipline. Through guidance, children do not only attain self discipline but they also develop intellectually (such as learn to take the perspectives of others), emotionally (for example, learn to regulate their emotions), socially (through acquiring social skills and forming relationships), and spiritually (through internalizing moral values).

For parents and early childhood educators manage children's behavior effectively, they need to know the cause of the behavior. Some common causes of misbehavior are:

1. Health

When children are hungry, tired or not well, they are easily irritated or upset by others and are less cooperative. Hence, they scream, hit or bite if other children annoy or disturb them even if the intention is noble. To mitigate such incidences, the child care centre or kindergarten should set aside a quiet place where the child can go to relax and rest when he/she is tired or not well.

2. Unmet Needs

All human beings have physical and psychological needs and act towards the fulfillment of these needs. The way children respond to their unmet needs may constitute as misbehaviour because their acts may be harmful to themselves, disturb others, disrupt the class or are socially unacceptable. Among the unmet needs that are likely to result in misbehaviour are attention, approval, acceptance, power and success needs.

a) Attention Needs

Human beings have a great need to be loved. The attention and approval a person gets indicate that he/she is considered important and loved. Even infants cry when they need adults to pay attention to them. Quite a number of misbehaviour committed at home and in child care centre/preschools/kindergartens are caused by the child's need for attention. An often-cited instance at home is when the mother is engaged on the mobile or talking to the neighbour, the child tips the sugar bowl, tips the half-drunk milk n the floor or covers herself with flour to pull back her mother's attention which has been diverted.

Disruptive behaviour is a common tactic for getting attention in class. The disruptive behaviour can range from harmless acts (such as calling the name of the teacher, singing aloud or walking around the class) to destructive ones (such as overturning a jar of paint, spoiling someone's work or hurting another child). Those who determinedly set out to attract attention can be a great nuisance to the teacher and other children as class activities cannot be carried out smoothly. Despite being scolded or punished, the offenders persist with the attention-drawing acts because negative or punishing response is better than getting no attention.

Some psychologists recommend ignoring the offenders because their behaviour will be extinct when they are not achieving their goals. This may not be the best approach as the reason for the attention seeking is not addressed and some of

their acts cannot be ignored, being unsafe. As with all behavioural problems, the cause and not the symptom should be treated. Hence, the reason for their attention-seeking behaviour has to be ascertained and in some cases, the solution requires the cooperation of the home. For instance, the child's behavioural problem cannot be addressed successfully in preschool if the child's feeling of neglect or being unloved is brought about by the arrival of a newborn in the family or the child's feeling of neglect is due to the parents being wrapped up in their marital discord.

b) Acceptance Needs

Humans are social beings. Hence children need friendships and to be accepted by their peers and teachers. But some preschool children making friends and they are excluded from their peers' play. In their frustrations, they may push or shove the other children, force their way into the play, disrupt or destroy their play. Such actions alienate them further from their peers. Besides the lack of social skills, these children may have characteristics which do not endear them to the others. These include insensitivity, selfishness, aggressiveness and lack of perspective taking.

Preschool children, who experience difficulties with peer acceptance, need help with their social skills and play-entry techniques. If this problem is not overcome at the early stage, feelings of peer rejection will be carried into middle childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Anti-social behaviour is a consequence.

c) Success Needs

All human beings want to be successful as success is important to one's self-esteem. Failure to accomplish tasks assigned creates feelings of inadequacy which lead to feelings of insecurity. Owing to their feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, children may refuse to work on the task. They may instead walk around the class, disrupt the work of others or even attempt to spoil their work. The quiet ones may sit in their places but invest little effort in their work as they believe that they are

unable to accomplish it. Reprimanding them for their disobedience, disinterest or tardiness increases further their sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

d) Power Needs

Children perceive adults to have power and authority. In their desire to be like the adults, they want to be in control and to make decisions themselves. But the adults want them to follow the rules or routine or carry out the task the way adults want to be done. Inevitably, a power struggle ensues, resulting in crying, squealing, running away, kicking or tantrums.

Power struggle can be forestalled by giving them the choice but both alternatives lead to the same goal. For instance, to encourage children to eat vegetables, the options can be “carrots” or “beans” or to entice them to rest during naptime, the alternatives can be “lie down to listen to music” or “lie down to read a book”. Since children feel great to be given options, they seldom pass up the opportunity to make their choice.

3. Tempering Tantrums

Virtually all children go through the tantrum phase but the degree of the belligerence displayed varies; the emotional outbursts of some are quite mild and adults hardly bat an eyelid but others express their disappointments and rage with so much violence that it is possible for them to be injured. The intensity of the display of their anger or displeasure depends on the child’s temperament and genetic factors. When the outbursts are very violent or self-destructive and occur a few times in a day, the child may be having serious problem; the outbursts may be a harbinger of psychiatric and behaviour issues which warrant professional attention.

But for most children, tantrums are manifestations of anger and frustrations with adults for interrupting their activities, foiling them and denying what they want. These expressions of anger or rage indicate the two-year-olds’ developmental

progress that enables them to perceive themselves as individuals and act independently. Parents, child care providers and preschool teachers have to be firm and consistent in saying “no” as well as consistent in ignoring the tantrum unless the child is in danger of injuring himself/herself. Boys are prone to physical violence and if the highly physical behaviour is allowed to persist, they are likely to be violent at age 17 years (Reinberger, 2008).

Neuroscience Research and Misbehaviour

In recent years, the great advancement in scanning technologies has enabled neuroscientists to discover the impact the child’s environment has on his brain development. Fats, proteins and vitamins are not the only nutrients needed by the brain for its development; interactions with other people and objects are needed. These interactions and responses constitute the child’s experiences which affect the brain development in structure and way the billions of neurons wire to each other to form neural pathways.

The ways adults respond to young children’s behaviour will therefore affect the development of their brains and, in particular, their emotional development. Research findings on the body’s “stress-sensitive’ systems indicate that when children are faced with physical or emotional stress or trauma, one of these systems releases the hormone cortisol. High levels of cortisol can cause brain cells to die and reduce the connections between neurons in certain areas of the brain (Graham, 2008). Too much cortisol in the brain, indicating high stress level of the child, can make it hard for the child to learn and think. Stressful children also experience difficulty in acting appropriately in stressful situations.

Warm relationship that speaks of strong emotional bonding with parents and child care providers or teachers lowers the level of cortisol in the child’s brain. Thus, the high levels of production of cortisol during stressful experiences can be reduced when children are hugged, comforted and assured that they are still loved in spite of their recent naughtiness. Hence, when children run to the caregivers for comfort, the

caregivers should give the assurance of their love for them. But it is not uncommon for caregivers to push the child saying, “Go away, I don’t love you any more”. Even if the child clings and cries, the caregiver disentangles her arms and pushes him away. Instead of lowering the level of cortisol, the caregiver’s refusal to forgive stimulates further production of the cortisol in the child’s brain.

Children’s experiences affect the wiring of the neurons and provide templates for future behaviour. Infants whose cries for food and comfort are lovingly answered undoubtedly have different templates for development from those of infants whose cries are ignored or met with harsh words and rough handling. Loving, responsive care and supportive relationship with at least one adult establishes a foundation for emotional development which provides resources of security and safety that enable infants to explore their environment and help protect them from the many stresses they encounter as they grow. In contrast, the seed of violence is probably laid down in infants whose caregivers are insensitive to their needs and punitive or violent in their caring. Definitely insecure, distressed infants whose discomfort, anxieties and fears are not soothed, focus their attention on having their basic needs met, leaving them with little energies for exploring the world around them. Furthermore, with the high level of cortisol in their brains, they have difficulty in handling stressful situations. The seed of violence laid down during infancy may be manifested in toddlerhood and preschool period as difficult, belligerent behaviours.

Children who are traumatized by violence in the family, neglect or abuse (physical or sexual), especially those who have been maltreated for a long time, have elevated levels of stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol, even on days when nothing stressful is happening. This implies that their stress systems are turned on even though they need not. Children in these states are therefore tense and easily upset or irritated by other children; they are thus prone to respond by yelling, kicking, hitting and even biting. In short, they are susceptible to misbehave and be punished.

To reduce incidence of misbehaviour in preschool and later years, caregivers, including parents, need to provide infants with loving, sensitive and responsive care. Infants brought in an emotionally safe and nurturing environment have the confidence to explore their environment, develop cognitive and social skills, and learn to cope with their emotions. Experiences to regulate their emotions should be provided early so that young children learn self-discipline. Learning to comply with routines is one of those experiences that help children acquire self-discipline.

Parents and Misbehaviour

Parents are the child's first and foremost caregiver and educator. The care, love and experiences that children receive from their parents have, as the neuroscience findings, have disclosed, a profound effect on children's brain development. Thus these findings suggest that parents have a significant influence on their children's development and behaviour. This observation of neuroscience research is supported by numerous studies of psychologists such as that of Tremblay and his colleagues (2004). Their indicates that children who are at the highest risk of not learning to regulate physical aggression in early childhood are those whose mothers have a history of antisocial behaviour during their school days, whose mothers start childbearing early and smoke during pregnancy, and whose parents have low income and have serious problems living together.

The type of bonding formed between parents and the child also influences children's behaviour. For instance, Lyon-Ruth (1996) reviewed a number of attachment-related studies of early aggression and concluded that (i) in infancy, the risk factors are associated with disorganized attachment behaviours towards the caregiver characterized by signs of fear or dysphoria, irresolvable conflict between opposing behavioural tendencies and elevated cortisal levels after separation; and (ii) disorganized attachment behaviours, in turn, predict aggression in school-age children with other family factors controlled. Further support of the effect bonding has on children's behaviour is provided by Wartner, Grossman, Fremmer-Bombik and Suess (1994). They found that children observed at 5 years of age to be securely attached

were more competent in their play quality and conflict resolution, and showed fewer behaviour problems and less hostility at 6 than children classified as insecure. They also observed that those classified as disorganized were almost as often in the incompetent preschool behavior group as the avoidantly attached children.

Conclusion

Misbehaviour in the context of children is behaviour that is not acceptable to adults, particularly to parents, child care providers and preschool/kindergarten teachers. This judgment is based on adults' perceptions and expectations. It is not uncommon for the adult's judgment to be a misjudgment as the child's action is a natural response to his bodily needs. Some of the misbehaviours are mere phases that children go through in their growing process. The tendency to misbehave is not an inborn trait; the environment can make children more prone towards eliciting unacceptable behaviour which may be further enhanced by the treatment/responses received, resulting in their receiving more than their share of the teachers' scolding, frustrations and anger. For instance, a child, labeled as aggressive, reacts typically to his peer's disruption by hitting him and this causes his instigator to cry which earns him the wrath of his teacher while his tormentor receives soothing from the teacher.

With regard to misbehaviour, the primary goal of the caregiver, whether she/he is a parent, child care provider or preschool/kindergarten teacher, should be to help the child act in ways acceptable to society through guidance and not through admonishment or punishment. Professionals, whether they are child care providers or teachers, need to have a good knowledge of child psychology to understand children's behaviour, to be a very good observer to detect the antecedent of the child's act and to be blessed with good dose of patience and great love for children. The task of helping children understand their behaviour and appreciate moral values and social norms, as well as working with them to internalize the accepted behaviour is not easy, especially with children who have inappropriate or bad experiences for a long time. But, the task needs to be done because unless children succeed in managing their behaviour in

their early childhood years, the antisocial tendencies will be carried into adolescence and adulthood.

In the early period of the brain development, the brain is very receptive and malleable, thus implying that this period is both opportunity and vulnerability. While an experientially rich and healthy environment provides opportunities for optimal development, a stressful, impoverished environment that provides adverse experiences makes children vulnerable to anxiety disorder and/or aggressive behavior[1].
Loving, sensitive and responsive caregivers, who are capable of providing experiences that help infants and toddlers develop intellectually, acquire social skills and ability to regulate their emotions, have built a strong foundation for development. In contrast, children will have a greater likelihood of misbehaving in later years if their caregivers are insensitive, unresponsive and punitive in reacting to misbehaviour and thereby, providing stressful and impoverished environments for learning and developing.

Furthermore, the brain develops in a hierarchical manner, that is, later learning builds on the brain architecture which is the outcome of early experiences. Though the brain has the plasticity that permits the neural circuits and pathways to be changed, it is not easy to achieve. For instance, for a child to succeed in regulating his violent or aggressive responses and use instead verbal expression to communicate his displeasure or unhappiness, it takes a tremendous amount of efforts to get the result. In addition, the result may not be optimal, implying that he may still show evidence of his violence in difficult and very stressful situations.

As experiences in the early years have a significant impact on brain development, especially in emotional development, parents needs to ensure they spend enough time with their infants to establish strong, stable bonding that gives their children security and protection from stresses encountered during the growing process.

1 Interview with Professor Eric Knudsen who is Edward C. and Amy H. Sewall Professor of Neurology at Stanford University as well as a Council Member of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child in 2006. http://www.developingchild.net on 5 March 2009

Parents should also select their child care providers and preschool teachers judiciously as they can have a determining effect on the "child's developing brain architecture which is either a strong or weak foundation for future learning, behavior or health" (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007. p.2).

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