Classroom behavior: Why it's hard to be good

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Being seen as either well behaved or naughty at school is never entirely in the hands of the individual child, this study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council shows.

The research demonstrates that being good is not a simple matter. Once some children acquire poor overall reputations among teachers and other school staff, classmates and parents, it becomes difficult for them to be regarded as good. When young children start school they also have to develop interpretive skills to decode and negotiate mixed messages about how to behave.

This study of four and five year olds in reception classes was undertaken by Professor Maggie MacLure and Professor Liz Jones of Manchester Metropolitan University. They found that two broad types of behaviour in school cause particular concern: physical actions such as kicking and punching and persistent failure to comply with adults' requests. Repeatedly calling out or not sitting properly in class, failing to listen or being noisy in queues are all examples of conduct likely to arouse the concern of teachers and other staff.

Yet such behaviour does not always result in children gaining poor reputations. This is most likely to happen when a child's immediate conduct is regarded as a sign of a wider problem.

Children's reputations may be linked, for example, to teachers' views of their home background. Some parents risk being judged as neglectful,

indulgent, anxious, uncooperative or interfering, and therefore as failing to adequately prepare their son or daughter for school. This in turn feeds into teachers' perceptions of that child's behaviour as a 'problem'. Medical explanations such as undiagnosed autism or deafness are sometimes applied to explain behaviour, as are characterisations of particular children as lazy or manipulative.

The research shows that once such reputations are formed they will be used to read children's day-to-day behaviour and, when the reputations spread to classmates and other parents, it becomes very difficult for such children to be recognised as good.

"Once children's reputations have started to circulate in the staffroom, dining hall and among parents, their behaviour easily becomes interpreted as a sign of particular character traits," says Professor MacLure. "One of the main functions of the reception year is to form a crowd of individual children into a class and tolerance of diversity is generally low. Classroom discipline is a very public activity and children who do not conform to the rules will be publicly marked as different."

Young children must learn to perform emotions that are valued in the reception class - such as happiness, sadness, fairness, sharing, kindness and being nice - and accept that other emotions are regarded as less appropriate. They need to be able to negotiate mixed messages. Reporting the misbehaviour of classmates is an example of the type of mixed message which circulates in classrooms - while it sometimes earned teachers' approval it might also be interpreted as telling-tales, an unpopular practice with both children and adults.

"The research shows that classroom culture is an important factor in generating problematic reputations for some children, says Professor Jones. "Disciplinary practices that produce social order and forge a collective identity may marginalise a minority. Some cherished

principles of early years education may also have unintended consequences. The principle of strong home-school links, for instance, may contribute to certain families being identified as sources of their children's problematic behaviour."

Source: Economic & Social Research Council (news : web)

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