

Negotiation strategies to support misbehaving kindergarten children: The 'deal' strategy

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Purpose

To negotiate behavioural changes with children, while developing an attitude of personal accountability for progressing the kindergarten program.

Method

The child is asked about their favourite fruit, the name of which is then used as a code for a deal on a behavioural change. The child becomes excited to share what their favourite fruit is, for example, a banana. When this child misbehaves, a negotiation process commences that entails asking them to demonstrate an improved behaviour. The agreement will then be known as the 'deal banana'. Henceforth, calling out 'deal banana' prompts the child to modify the behaviour specified in the 'deal banana' agreement.

Each deal is linked to a specific behavioural change by a specific child, for example, 'deal watermelon' equals 'child X not to throw rocks at others'.

Results

Children were excited about the strategy and started negotiating their own deals with peers. Furthermore, they held each other accountable for their actions and behaviours, by reminding each other of the deals they negotiated.

Discussion

This strategy supports Outcome 2 of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as children develop an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active participation. Moreover, they become socially and emotionally competent, thus aligning with Outcome 3 of the EYLF, and preparing them for more challenging schooling encounters.

This strategy could be a modified example of Pavlov's classical conditioning. However, the learning process here involves some cognitive component and social negotiation where the child is given some power and the ability to choose. First, they choose their code, then choose to enter the behavioural modification agreement, and then decide to honour that agreement

when prompted by the deal call out. The process involves an elaborate set up, where several points of exit are available to the child to end the agreement. Yet, it has been observed that most children decide to honour the 'deal' and continue to demonstrate the modified behaviour agreed on. They quickly develop a sense of ownership of the decision and become accountable for the deal they formed.

The social context in which 'deals' are formed may have contributed to the success of the strategy. This is because children start to become aware of each other's deals, share stories about how they negotiated their behavioural changes, and their favourite fruits. They then start encouraging each other to adhere to their behavioural changes, mostly in a funny manner. They seem to have fun holding each other accountable by calling out the deals they formed.

Conclusion

This 'deal' strategy proved to be successful in managing children's behaviours, while involving them in a negotiating process. Children felt they were given the choice to decide, and they indeed would decide to honour their deal and adhere to the negotiated behavioural plan.

Furthermore, the strategy fostered a sense of collaboration and teamwork among the children, as they became more autonomous in collectively honouring the deals they negotiated, thus facilitating their daily routine and curricular activities.