

Behaviour and Boundaries

Manners were once instilled into children as habitual behaviour. For instance, as a child I was taught that 'children should be seen and not heard', to 'only speak when you're spoken to', to 'hold the door open for ladies', and to 'stand up on the bus for your elders'. If I did these things I was 'good'. If I didn't, I was 'bad'. Such lessons were so ingrained that children generally were praised only in terms of being a good 'habit-being'. The breaching of manners incurred wrath / blame / shame / punishment — often a 'clip over the ear'. As children we were repressed in the realm of life.

Something has changed, and it is a fundamental shift. It is also an important developmental change. People often comment that today children mostly seem not to be taught these things. In fact they often seem very rude. And if we try to repress or blame or punish them, their resistance is remarkable. There are many sociological theories that explain this. Rather than look at these, I intend to assume that 'it's just the way it is', and suggest another way of looking at and dealing with behaviour in children. It is summed up in the word 'boundaries'.

Children need a range of different boundaries, and they need them at particular stages. For instance, the baby learning to crawl and then walk needs *physical safety boundaries*. At a later stage they need behavioural *social boundaries*. A little later still they need behavioural *attitude boundaries*. At each stage they need an approach from parents and teachers that supports and encourages their development in self-esteem and, progressively, in self-management.

Mostly, whenever we talk about children needing boundaries, we are referring to their behaviour. And here I think it is interesting to consider the word 'boundaries' in the same way that it is meant in team sports, as an analogy for what takes place in the human 'life-field'. Our co-operative participation in the 'game' represents a more conscious attitude to behaviour than the enforcement of 'manners'. I find that boys especially can get hold of the parallel, and often we find it is boys who are really 'pushing the boundaries'.

Everyone knows that the game works best when everyone knows the rules and agrees to subscribe to them. Then the game can flow, and we can all enjoy it... Having to stop the game to teach or enforce the rules breaks up the flow of play, spoiling the game. However, not being aware of the rules is simply ineptitude and ignorance, not wrong-doing. And clumsiness in playing the game is not 'bad behaviour'; it simply is incapability.

Therefore, accidental breaking of the rules is any transgression that stops the flow of play. That's just the way it is. And clumsiness requires more skills practice. However, deliberate breaking of the rules is foul-play, leading first to penalties, with subsequent repetition to the 'sin-bin', and perhaps even to disqualification, suspension, or other punishment.

So in the game there is a distinction between 'trespass' and 'temptation'. The first can be forgiven, 'as we forgive them who trespass against us'. But if the rule-breaking is repeated we must decide whether the person is inept or malicious. If we conclude it is inept, a special training-session is required. If it is malicious, then we conclude the person has given way to 'temptation', and then 'sorry' is not enough — in fact even the promise to change probably is

not enough, and there must be amends, and perhaps 'time-out' for the person to contemplate their responsibility and its consequences, in order to reinforce the need for change.

I think it is important when we deal with children's behaviour to make a distinction between incidental boundary-crossing and deliberate boundary-flouting. This requires us to identify those actions arising from the more-or-less *unconscious asocial patterns* that are part of our 'habit-being', and to respond appropriately — usually in ways different to our response to those actions of the more *intentional antisocial reactions* characteristic of the 'attitude-being'. Both kinds of behaviour need refereeing and coaching, but there is a distinction here.

Particularly in the latter case, our approach needs to take into account the reactive nature of the emotional 'attitude-being' when challenged. This typically includes varying degrees of denial, anger, and compulsive bargaining. These reactions are what usually resulted in the 'clipped ear' or the 'belting' of the past, through which our 'good' behaviour was bullied into us. But there are techniques through which parents and teachers can get past this 'attitude-being' to engage the child's conscience. Everyone has within them this quiet witness to their own actions. If we let it speak, the voice of conscience is able to announce its own verdict. We can then engage it in conversation, and encourage it to dictate change.

Just as a good referee or umpire is able to support and guide the flow of play in a game, so we can support and guide behaviour. What I am introducing here is a 'no blame' approach to children's behaviour, which is relevant for dealing with instances of individual behaviour and for group behaviour such as bullying. It works equally well in the home, in the classroom, in the playground, and on the sports field. Some training is necessary, though, and the 'attitude-being' can need a work-out in the soul-gym. A 'no blame' approach is not a 'no action' approach; it is informed by guidelines and rules, and by clearly presented consequences.

~ John Allison

Summary:

Trespass: includes all breakdowns in the flow of play that result from clumsiness, ineptness, lack of understanding and / or skills, when the player may or may not know better, and may not be able to do better without support. Needs clear refereeing / coaching of understanding and skills — instruction, encouragement, practice — and the chance to have another go.

Temptation: includes all breakdowns in the flow of play resulting from negative, obstructive attitudes, spoiling the fun of others, deliberate fouls (including your own), when it's clear the player knows better and could do better. Needs clear refereeing etc as above but also a focus on the attitude issues — strategies include penalties, time-out ('dragging' / 'benching' / 'sin-binning') and suspension ('grounding'), tribunal, review and appeal processes, contracts etc — leading to a chance to have another go.