

Client: The Witherslack Group  
Source: SecEd  
Date: Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2009  
Page: 18  
Circulation: 50,000  
AVE: £10,814.70

# Supporting SEN children



**Tony Cousins**  
from the  
Witherslack  
Group of

schools talks about their approach to SEN and behaviour management

**B**EHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT is a fundamental issue for anyone working with children and young people. Furthermore, while resources for teacher training are undoubtedly increasing, research seems to suggest that the level and nature of challenging behaviours within secondary schools are also increasing.

Understandably, without solid behaviour management procedures in place, more and more teachers and pastoral staff are feeling insecure and ill-equipped to deal with pupils who exhibit challenging behaviour. Often they are unsure of what they are able to do and how to do it, and they need to know that they can respond in a way that will be supported by the law, and by their managers, the local authority, parents and carers.

The challenge facing schools today is incorporating a tailor-made "system" for behaviour management which teachers and other staff feel comfortable implementing on their own and in conjunction with others. A successful system also creates a better learning environment where children feel relaxed, motivated and safe.

The Witherslack Group faced this challenge. The Group consists of eight schools and six children's homes and provides a diverse day, residential and 52-

week system of education and care for children with special needs.

One of my first management tasks was to evaluate the accredited systems which could be used to support the existing behaviour management. Like most special schools, individual behaviour management plans were in place where required, however none of the schools within the Group employed an accredited system to support with the management of challenging behaviour.

It was my responsibility to research what systems were being used around the country before adopting one that would be suitable for the Witherslack Group.

Having identified several systems that may have been suitable, I trained as a tutor in two of them. I felt that the best of these was Team-Teach, the largest provider of training in this area for both mainstream and special schools, and it was agreed that its use would be trialled in one of our schools. The impact of this was extremely positive and valuable lessons in behaviour management were learnt along the way.

Team-Teach is a structured, holistic approach to working with children and young people who display challenging behaviour. The emphasis of the approach is on preventing conflict situations from escalating,

but it also includes positive handling strategies for situations where pupils present a danger to themselves or others.

It was developed by British educationalist George Matthews after he had spent a great deal of time researching different methods for management of aggression and violence in children and adults.

One of the first things we learnt in our Team-Teach training is that challenging behaviour must not be "dealt with", but "supported". Our training stressed that behaviour is merely the outcome of something else going on in a child's mind, such as anger, frustration, fear, jealousy and so on. If we are able to recognise how a child is feeling and support him or her in dealing with these feelings, then the challenging behaviour is less likely to surface.

Our teachers, carers and support staff make it their business to talk to the pupils if they seem distracted,



upset or angry to find out what they are thinking and how they feel. As a result they have a far greater insight into the cause of the problem and, perhaps more importantly, the child feels listened to, valued and understood.

We also identify “critical friends” of each pupil, i.e. other members of staff or peers with whom they have a particularly good relationship, and ask for their help if such conversations are difficult. Far from being seen as a sign of weakness, teamwork like this has become a professional expectation.

Staff within the Group have encompassed the concept of positive management of behaviour. By this I mean they are not merely containing challenging behaviour, but intervening in a positive, lasting way.

For example, if a child has shown physical aggression towards another pupil, their teacher will discuss with them what caused the behaviour and together they come up with alternative strategies should the problem occur again. If a child is rebelling against the school system, we may, for example, give them a meaningful voice by involving them in the school council.

We have found that some of our pupils feel calmer when sat in quiet areas or on their own at a computer in the corner of the classroom. Strategies like this help to enhance pupil-teacher relationships, rather than harming them; we have also found them far more effective at lessening the challenging behaviour rather than the traditional confrontational approach.

With its emphasis on de-escalation, much of Team-Teach’s training focuses on the verbal and non-verbal skills needed to avoid situations spiralling out of control. These include body language, awareness of space and para-verbal skills – such as the use of tone, pace and volume.

Adopting a non-aggressive body stance, moving round the classroom, and rephrasing commands are just some of the many strategies which help to improve the pupil-teacher relationship while maintaining authority.

Another part of the Team-Teach programme which we have used is “help scripts” aimed at defusing a situation through the use of carefully scripted exchanges. These can help to calm a child down as well as signalling support or relief for a fellow member of staff when a change of face might help resolve a situation before it escalates further.

Of course, there are occasions where physical intervention may become necessary. For this, Team-Teach has prescribed procedures with emphasis placed on the least intrusive intervention likely to be successful. Again, communication is paramount. If one of our pupils needs sitting down, we will tell them that we are going to sit them down. After they have calmed down, we then have a therapeutic follow-up, where staff will talk through with the pupil what triggered the behaviour and look at alternatives such as asking for help or time-out.

Following our Team-Teach training we also have systems to record, monitor and evaluate incidents when they occur. Restrictive physical intervention forms are

filled out with details of how and why the intervention

occurred. These are monitored by the headteachers at each of our schools, as well as our Group management team.

Every child also has an integrated care and education plan in which behavioural objectives, such as asking for help appropriately or improving table manners, are set. These plans are established with the child and are regularly reviewed and amended following support sessions between the child and their teachers or support staff. This approach allows us to be consistent and gives a high level of support to the child in a way that will work towards positive changes in his or her behaviour over time.

Once our staff had been trained in the Team-Teach approach, we started to see positive results in our trial school and it was soon decided that Team-Teach would be adopted across the Group. Today, every school and children’s home within the Witherslack Group has its own in-house tutor and every staff member with direct supervision of children and young people undertakes an initial two-day training course, followed by annual refresher training. We also host a regular Team-Teach forum where we share good practice and discuss problems.

The challenge of having to research and implement a behaviour management policy taught us several things. Staff feel more confident and better prepared to handle challenging behaviour if there is a common framework from which to work, communication between staff, pupils and parents is improved and, perhaps most importantly, a consistency in approach makes pupils feel better understood and more supported and thus reduces the frequency and severity of challenging behaviour in our establishments. **SecEd**

• *Tony Cousins is director of the Witherslack Group, an independent provider of education for children with learning or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.*

### Further information

- [www.witherslackgroup.co.uk](http://www.witherslackgroup.co.uk)
- [www.team-teach.co.uk](http://www.team-teach.co.uk)

