

CURIOSITY OVER BLAME

What the session is built on

A briefing note for school leaders

Most behaviour professional development teaches staff what to do once a behaviour is already happening. This session works one step earlier: reading the build-up, and responding while a small intervention is still enough.

It is a way of thinking, and a small set of practical moves. It is not a program, and it does not ask staff to add anything to an already full day.

THE FOUR IDEAS UNDERNEATH IT

The acting-out behaviour cycle *Colvin & Sugai, 1989*

Behaviour escalates through predictable phases — calm, trigger, agitation, acceleration, peak, de-escalation, recovery — rather than in a single step. Intervention is least intrusive and most likely to succeed during the trigger and agitation phases; by the peak, the options available to a teacher are narrower and costlier for everyone. This model is widely used in positive behaviour support and will be familiar to many staff. The session's contribution is to move staff attention deliberately to the earlier phases.

The Still Face Experiment *Tronick and colleagues, 1975*

When a responsive adult becomes unresponsive, an infant escalates through increasingly urgent attempts to restore the connection, and withdraws when those attempts fail. It is one of the most replicated findings in developmental psychology. Staff watch a short clip of it during the session. It is used to establish a single idea: behaviour escalates as connection drops away — including, in a classroom, when a depleted adult goes quietly flat with a child who has been draining them.

Banking Time *Pianta and colleagues*

Brief, regular, one-to-one time with a child in which the adult follows the child's lead, with no agenda and nothing to correct, is associated with improved teacher-child relationship quality and reduced behavioural difficulty. This is the rationale for the session's closing action: ninety seconds of attention that is not contingent on behaviour.

Noted honestly: this intervention was developed and evaluated primarily in early-childhood and preschool settings. It is used here as a well-grounded rationale for brief unconditional attention, not as a claim of proven effect in every primary classroom.

Diagnostic overshadowing *first described in intellectual disability research, 1982*

The documented tendency to attribute a person's presentation to an existing diagnosis and stop investigating other causes. The same pattern appears in schools when a child's behaviour is explained by their diagnosis and no further question is asked. The session is explicit that diagnostic information is useful and should be used — the issue is a label functioning as the end of enquiry rather than part of it.

WHAT STAFF LEAVE WITH

- **The Spark Map** — a one-page tool for mapping one child: what settled looks like for them, the earliest observable change, what follows, and what the adult will do at that point.
- **Six Moves** — specific, ten-second responses for the early window, with the wording staff can actually use, and a clear statement of when each one will and will not work.
- **One action for the week** — one child, ninety seconds of non-contingent attention, and a week of watching for that child's earliest cue rather than only the peak.

FORMAT

- Approximately 55 to 60 minutes, designed to sit inside an existing staff meeting. A longer twilight version is available.
- Suitable for whole-staff delivery, including education support staff. No pre-reading and no follow-up workload for participants.
- Requires a screen with sound, and printed handouts (supplied).

WHAT IT IS NOT

This session is a lens and a small skill set, not a whole-school behaviour framework. It is designed to sit alongside whatever approach a school already uses rather than replace it, and it does not conflict with the in-the-moment strategies most staff have already been trained in — it addresses the period before those strategies are needed.

*The session is drawn from Alicia Martello's forthcoming book, *The Child Nobody Wants in Their Class*, and from her experience both as a primary teacher and as the parent of a child who was on the receiving end of the approach this work argues against.*

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