

Education brief: Behaviour for learning

Behaviour for learning is an approach to understanding and developing children and young people's behaviour that focuses on their relationship with their self, with others and with the curriculum, and promotes readiness for education.

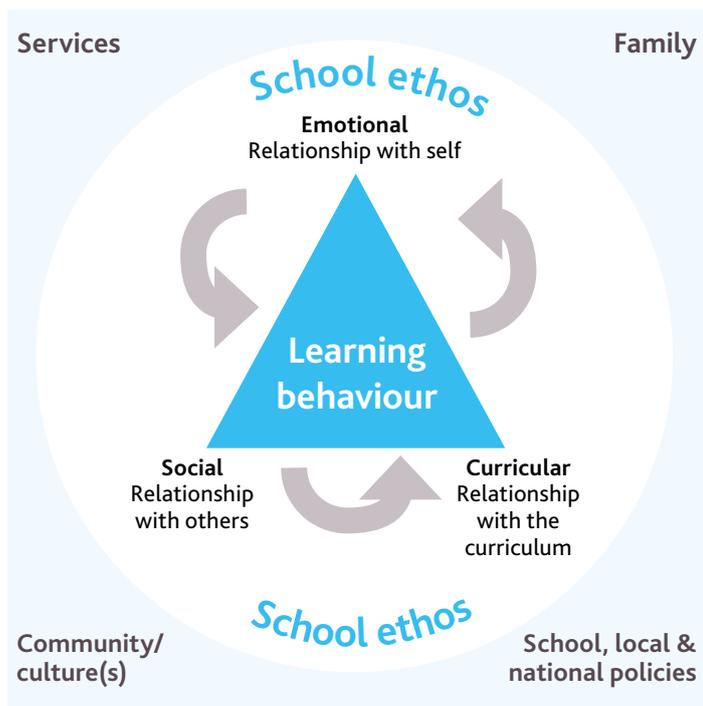
What is behaviour for learning?

Behaviour for learning is an approach developed by Dr Simon Ellis and Professor Janet Tod.

It is based on a conceptual framework that emerged from a systematic review (Powell and Tod 2004) commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in the UK and conducted by a research team at Canterbury Christ Church University.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) sets out three relationships for learning: *relationship with self*, *relationship with others* and *relationship with the curriculum*. These three relationships represent respectively the emotional, social and cognitive/curricular factors that influence the development of learning behaviour.

Figure 1: The behaviour for learning conceptual framework (based on Ellis and Tod 2018)



The arrows connecting the three relationships are a reminder that these relationships are not experienced in isolation by the learner. For example, a difficulty in forming friendships (social) may adversely affect how an individual feels about

themselves (emotional). Similarly, a poor relationship with a subject teacher (social) may impact negatively on the learners' relationship with that curriculum area. More positively, improvements in one relationship area have the potential to impact positively on another.

The circle surrounding the central triangle reflects the influence of the school ethos on the three relationships and learners' behaviour. A range of other external influences are also acknowledged.

The behaviour for learning approach can be used flexibly:

- School leaders can use its principles to support the development of an inclusive whole-school behaviour policy.
- Classroom teachers can use it as a consistent reference point when selecting and subsequently evaluating behaviour management strategies.
- Pastoral, counselling and special educational needs staff may find the approach useful in informing decisions about support and intervention required by groups or individuals.

What is learning behaviour?

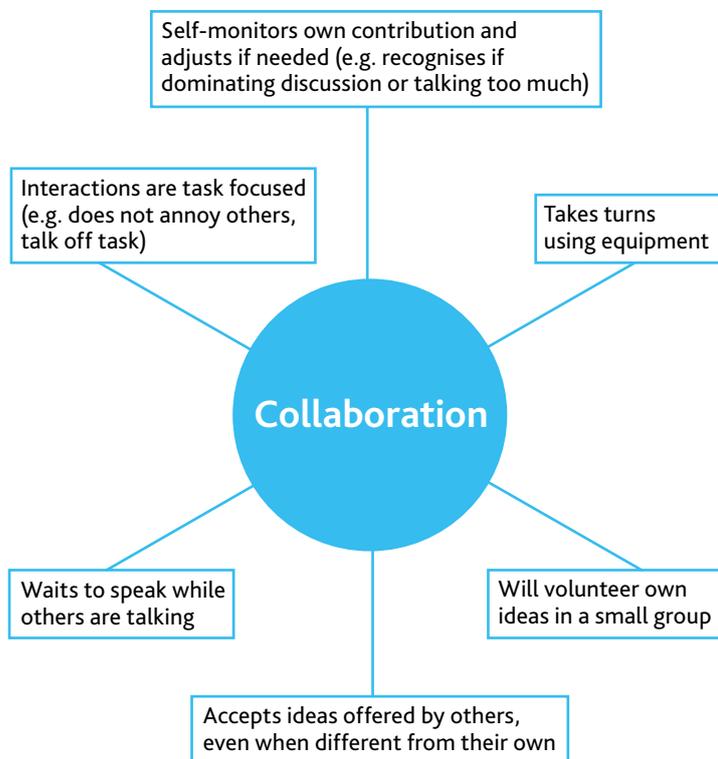
The term 'behaviour for learning' reflects the key principle that the priority of a teacher¹ is to promote learning. Therefore, even when selecting a behaviour management strategy, consideration should be given to its contribution to the development of learning behaviour.

The Evidence for Policy & Practice Information (EPPI) review (Powell and Tod 2004) identified a set of learning behaviours drawn from the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) professional standards (DfES/TTA 2002) in place at the time. These were:

- engagement
- collaboration
- participation
- communication
- motivation
- independent activity
- responsiveness
- self-regard
- self-esteem
- responsibility.

¹ The term 'teacher' is used throughout for brevity but should be interpreted as referring to any practitioner working with children and young people in an educative capacity

Figure 2: Examples of learning behaviours associated with collaboration



(Ellis and Tod 2015: 13)

A learning behaviour can be thought of as any behaviour necessary for effective learning. Within this broad definition there are some important considerations when identifying a learning behaviour to develop:

- The learning behaviour should be positively expressed, rather than referring to the reduction or absence of an unwanted behaviour (e.g. 'uses class conventions to ask for help or make a contribution' rather than 'doesn't call out').
- The learning behaviour should be assessable – the teacher should be able to identify specific indicators that would evidence progress in the development of the learning behaviour.
- If the learning behaviour identified represents a disposition (e.g. 'is more confident') it should still be possible to identify some behaviours that would indicate its development. For example, an indicator of improving confidence might be 'initiates interactions with a familiar adult'.

The three behaviour for learning relationships

The three relationships that underpin the development of learning behaviour are likely to be familiar to teachers and others working with children, even though the terminology may be different.

The term *relationship with the curriculum* refers to the cognitive or curricular aspects of learning. It encompasses,

but is not limited to, factors such as the learner's ability to tackle the task, how they organise themselves and their learning and their motivation for the task.

Relationship with others refers to the social aspects of learning. This relationship can be thought of as representing the interpersonal or social skills necessary for learning in a school environment.

Relationship with self refers to the emotional aspects of learning and can be summarised as referring to the learner's emotional health and wellbeing.

A distinctive feature of the behaviour for learning approach is its awareness of the combination of social, emotional and cognitive factors brought by the learner to their learning to support the development of learning behaviour.

The term 'relationship' is deliberately used by Ellis and Tod (2018) to encourage teachers to draw parallels with relationships they are already familiar with, such as those with partners and friends. The quality of these everyday relationships is dependent on the actions of both parties. A relationship may be positive or negative, it can break down and it can be repaired, which may require one or both parties being prepared to change. In thinking about the behaviour for learning relationships, similar principles can be applied. To take the example of the learner's *relationship with the curriculum*, the individual may bring to their learning a low level of ability, limited motivation for the subject and poor learning organisation. From their 'side' of the relationship, the teacher brings their professional knowledge, skills and understanding in relation to teaching and learning. The teacher can differentiate and employ exciting, engaging ways of presenting and provide checklists or other scaffolds to support learning organisation. Thinking in this way encourages the teacher to reflect on all variables within their control that can be positively used to develop the child's *relationship with the curriculum*. The same way of thinking can be applied to the other two behaviour for learning relationships.

In fostering and maintaining a positive *relationship with self* the teacher can consider how, through factors within their control, they create an environment that contributes towards protecting and promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

In fostering and maintaining a positive *relationship with others*, a teacher might consider the style of their own interactions with their students: strategic use of seating plans, planning lessons that provide opportunities for collaborative activities and direct and indirect teaching of social skills.

Importantly, a focus on relationships requires the teacher to attempt to understand how the individual learner is experiencing and interpreting the learning environment, and the meaning or purpose their behaviour has for them. For example, the type of positive feedback many learners welcome may be interpreted as a negative experience by an

individual with low self-esteem as it does not fit with their customary evaluation of self. They may behave in a way that draws criticism or a reprimand from the teacher because, according to their usual self-evaluation, receiving criticism makes more sense than receiving praise.

How behaviour for learning supports teaching, learning and assessment

An understanding of how the key components of the behaviour for learning conceptual framework link together supports the following four main functions:

Reflective practice

The conceptual framework allows teachers and school leaders to select and evaluate strategies for teaching, learning and assessment. It supports both reflection **in** action and reflection **on** action (Schön 1983) by encouraging a focus on the consistent question of 'How does my practice impact on the three relationships and the development of learning behaviour?'

In addition, the conceptual framework supports reflection **before** action to help a teacher select which practices are likely to have the most positive effect on controlling behaviour and, therefore, learning.

Assessment

The conceptual framework has an explanatory role that supports assessment. The problematic behaviours identified could be seen as resulting from underdeveloped or 'absent' learning behaviours and/or the combination of strengths and weaknesses in the 'curricular', 'social' or 'emotional' domains. Schools can use information they already have about the learner, supplemented by further observation and assessment to:

- identify the learning behaviours the learner already has within their repertoire and the learning behaviours to develop
- make judgements about the quality of each of the learning relationships and which of the relationships needs to be strengthened.

In a recent publication, Packer et al (2023) provide an example of a structured way of using the behaviour for learning approach to support assessment that they developed while working in an educational setting for learners with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

Planning

Knowledge of the learner's behaviours and general learning characteristics in each of the 'curricular', 'social' and 'emotional' domains provides a guide in identifying appropriate strategies, adaptations to standard practice, interventions and support.

For example, if the learner's difficulties seem to relate to weaknesses in their *relationship with self*, interventions could be identified to target the development of this relationship

alongside adaptations to standard practice to create an environment that is more supportive to learners with these difficulties. Importantly, the conceptual framework allows choice. Though the difficulties may be attributable to weaknesses in the child's *relationship with self*, it might be possible to develop this indirectly through strategies focused on one of the other two relationships.

Monitoring and evaluation

The effectiveness of any strategies, adaptations to standard practice, interventions or support is always evidenced by development of learning behaviour. Even if the intention is to strengthen one of the three relationships, the measure of success would be the emergence of learning behaviours associated with that relationship. Self-esteem is an important component of an individual's *relationship with self*. It is a term widely used in schools, and regularly appears in policy and guidance documents as a focus for intervention. If the aim is to improve self-esteem as a means of improving *relationship with self*, then the teacher would look for learning behaviours associated with healthy self-esteem as indicators of improvement.

How can schools promote behaviour for learning?

Figure 3: Increasingly personalised response

Ellis and Tod (2018) suggest three levels of use (Figure 3).



Extended

Focusing on strengthening one or more of the three relationships

Core

Identifying specific learning behaviours to develop

Day to day

Through general teaching and approach to behaviour management:

- protect and enhance the three relationships
- encourage the development of positive learning behaviours.

Day-to-day use

At the day-to-day level of use, the teacher ensures their practice in relation to both learning and behaviour protects and enhances the three relationships and encourages the development of positive learning behaviours. For example, the teacher would consider:

- how they phrase positive feedback on learning or behaviour in order to highlight positive learning behaviours
- the language they use when addressing misbehaviour
- opportunities to practise social, emotional and curricular/cognitive learning behaviours
- opportunities to directly teach social, emotional and curricular/cognitive learning behaviours
- the demand placed on learning behaviours by specific activities within the lesson and the implications of this if an individual or group does not have these learning behaviours within their repertoire currently
- how to maintain an inclusive classroom environment that reduces barriers to learning for those individuals with weaknesses or difficulties in one or more of the three relationships.

Core use

At the core use level, the assumption is that positive change will be achieved by developing a limited number of target learning behaviours. If working at this level, the teacher would:

- identify one to three learning behaviours the individual needs to develop or exhibit more frequently
- identify adaptations to standard practice and any additional or different strategies and approaches that will contribute to the development of these learning behaviours.

Some strategies and approaches may need to be provided by, or involve actions from, another person. Schools should monitor and evaluate the emergence of one to three learning behaviours originally identified.

Extended use

At the extended use level, the assumption is that positive change will be achieved by developing one or more of the behaviour for learning relationships. If working at this level, the teacher would:

- identify the relationship area ('curriculum', 'others', 'self') that the individual needs to develop.
- identify a cluster of learning behaviours (or specific significant learning behaviour) that need to be promoted in order to have a pervasive, positive effect on the target relationship.
- identify adaptations to standard practice and any additional or different strategies and approaches that will promote this cluster of learning behaviours (or specific significant learning behaviour).

It may be necessary to seek additional advice, guidance and support from within school or from multi-agency partners.

Schools should monitor and evaluate developments in the target relationship by looking for the emergence of the cluster of learning behaviours (or specific significant learning behaviour) originally identified.

Flexibility in practical use

Once familiar with the basic principles of the behaviour for learning approach, teachers are likely to recognise that they can move flexibly between a focus on the learning behaviour and focus on relationships rather than maintaining a rigid distinction between core and extended use.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) 2019 report *Improving Behaviour in Schools* provides a useful example of the interplay between the three relationships and learning behaviour and the opportunities this offers. In the example described, the teacher has judged that a learner's problematic behaviour relates to coping when they struggle with the task or make mistakes. Based on this, the target learning behaviour is to deal more effectively with setbacks. The target learning behaviour can be viewed as emotional as it relates to managing a feeling of disappointment, frustration or failure in response to setback. However, as the EEF (2019) report acknowledges, the current behaviour may also be influenced by social and cognitive factors. For example, the learner may feel embarrassed in front of peers and so prefer to give up (a social factor), or limited experience of success (a curricular factor) may cause them to give up more quickly.

In responding to the scenario described by the EEF (2019) report, a teacher adopting a behaviour for learning approach can seek to bring about positive change via strategies focused on each of the three behaviour for learning relationships.

Supporting learners' relationship with the curriculum

The teacher needs to check the level of challenge, ensuring that the task set is appropriate to the learner's abilities and will allow them to experience success if they persevere. Descriptive positive feedback can be provided, identifying effective learning behaviours the student displayed. Importantly, this feedback should pay particular attention to strategies the student employed when difficulties were encountered.

The learner could also be taught strategies to use when stuck, and even provided with a checklist of steps if felt to be helpful. Setting tasks that allow for multiple outcomes and methods of achieving may help in reducing perceptions by the learner that there is always a single right answer or method.

Supporting learners' relationship with others

The teacher can reflect on classroom culture and consider how the difficulties in tackling tasks and making mistakes are typically viewed. Students need to feel that acknowledging that a task was difficult at first is not a weakness, and talking about difficulties and how these were overcome is valued.

Claxton (2002: 17) refers to the need to develop 'tolerance of the feeling of learning'. It may be helpful to make explicit to students that learning is sometimes difficult. It may be experienced as frustrating because of the number of mistakes made when tackling something new or boring due to the repetition sometimes required to achieve competence.

Learners should not be afraid to make mistakes and instead see these as learning opportunities. The teacher plays an important role in contributing to the classroom climate by how they respond to mistakes made by learners or requests for help with a task. Where a task allows for multiple outcomes and methods of achieving these, it can be made explicit in the instructions that it is expected that learners will need to try out different approaches. In the lesson plenary, feedback on these unsuccessful methods and the learning resulting from them should be valued.

Supporting learners' relationship with self

The teacher could work with the learner to explore their appraisal of the experience of making a mistake, attempting to develop the more positive interpretation that mistakes are expected and normal when learning something new. The learner might also be encouraged to think about times when they have dealt effectively with a setback and supported to explicitly identify the strategies they used. This could contribute to the learner's sense of self-efficacy by building belief that there are actions they can take that can positively influence outcomes (Bandura 1997).

A metacognitive approach may be useful in support of all the relationships described.

How is Cambridge International supporting schools with behaviour for learning?

We understand learners' educational experiences as being holistic; inclusive of their cognitive, social and emotional development. This is reflected in our Cambridge learner attributes, as we aim to support schools to develop learners who are confident, responsible for themselves and respectful of others, and engaged intellectually and socially, ready to make a difference.

In partnership with Cambridge University Press, we have published a [Brighter Thinking podcast episode](#) with Dr Simon Ellis, who has co-authored three books on behaviour for learning in 2009, 2015 and 2018.

Dr Simon Ellis was also our keynote speaker for the Cambridge Schools Conference 2023. A recording of his [keynote speech on behaviour for learning](#) is available on our Conferences page.

We have a range of additional [education briefs](#) which provide teachers with new ideas and approaches that link theoretical understanding with practical classroom application. The topics of these include: Learner wellbeing, Inclusive education, Oracy, Active learning, Metacognition and Promoting a positive school climate.

We focus on the importance of an inclusive classroom and regularly partner with experts in learner wellbeing, neurodiversity and inclusive education.

Where can you find more information?

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Ellis, S and Tod, J (2015) *Promoting Behaviour for Learning in the Classroom: Effective Strategies, Personal Style and Professionalism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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Packer, J MacQueen, and Day, P (2023) *Relationship-based Learning: A Practical Guide to Transforming Children's Behaviour*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Powell, S and Tod, J (2004) *A Systematic Review of how Theories Explain Learning Behaviour in School Contexts*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

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