

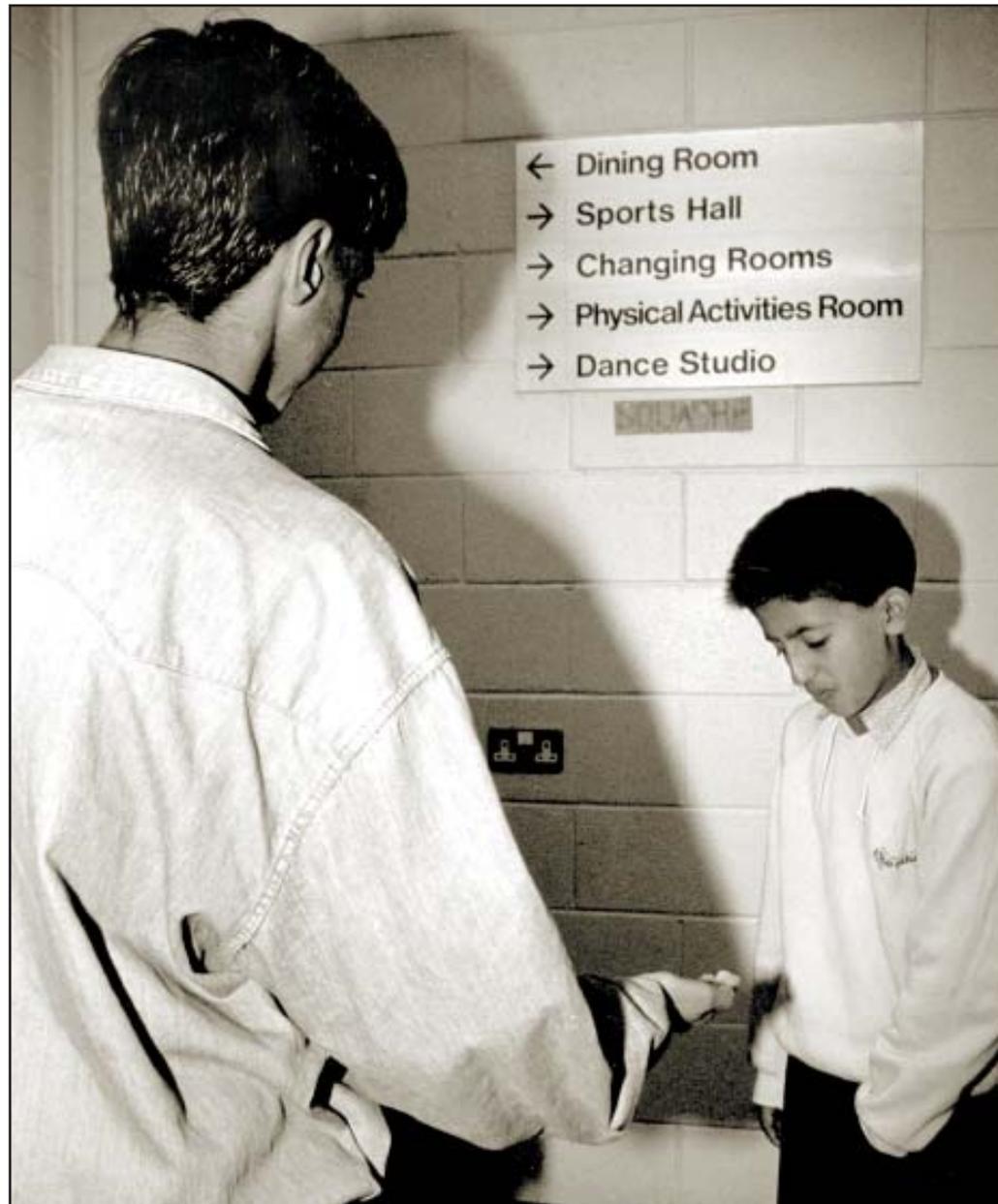
Behaviour – the social context

Discipline in schools is back in the news, with politicians queuing up to 'get tough'. But, says behaviour expert Geoff Moss, schools must recognise that indiscipline is rooted in deeper social trends

Behaviour in schools – it's getting worse, isn't it?" This is a comment often made by teachers attending assertive discipline programmes,¹ looking for ways of coping with perceived rising levels of misbehaviour in our schools.

Of course, we are all aware that when adults talk about children's behaviour they typically find each generation more difficult than the previous, as the historical record shows only too clearly. But there is growing evidence that the differences teachers are encountering between present and past generations of children may well be more significant than the effects of the usual 'generation gap'. Teachers' accounts of increasing resistance to adult authority by young people may well be describing a cultural shift of such import that our conventional responses to 'behaviour management' are often inadequate.

In this article we'll look at describe some of the reasons for this cultural rupture and at a model of 'social mediation' designed to heal it.



What is the evidence? There is more than the anecdotal. A recent longitudinal study of adolescent psychological well-being reveals that 15-year-olds are displaying a 100 per cent increase in behavioural disorders and a 70 per cent increase in emotional problems compared to 25 years ago, as rated by parents using comparable measures over different time points. Over 16 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls displayed

marked 'conduct disorders' (fighting, stealing, lying, disobedience). Additionally, over 20 per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys displayed significant emotional problems such as marked anxiety or depression.²

This level of disturbance not only has a disrupting effect within our schools, but also a formidable long-term economic cost to society.³ There is therefore an urgent need to identify the underlying reasons for this increase in behaviour problems over recent years, and to explore how best to intervene at both individual and organisational levels to address this problem.

So why is it happening? Our view is that childhood has changed so quickly and so significantly that often the expectations that children and adults have of each other are so at odds that both are frequently frustrated by the actions of the other. Commentators on the nature of childhood experience

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have pointed to the rapid change in children's experience of their world as a result of the techno-cultural revolution of the last 10 years, leading to children and adults sharing a common culture, a confusion over adult-child roles, the 'adulteration' of childhood and the infantilisation of adults.

Others would say that the roots of this disruption lie further back, and trace the cultural changes of the 1970s as creating the conditions that allow more recent influences to more rapidly erode traditional values. The post-1970s saw a "culture of intensive individualism" which "corroded virtually all forms of authority and weakened the bonds holding families, neighbourhoods, and nations together."⁴

We see this change reflected in children's literature over the period. Before the 1970s children and parents were often represented as living separate lives. Children are physically small, live lives of their own and tend to play outdoors, close to nature. Children are represented as having to learn to obey the rules, and are thereby placed in a subordinate position relative to adults. Transgression of the existing order brings punishment, and although children sometimes question this order, or try to deny it, they end by accepting it and by adapting to the given order of things.

This pattern appears to change during the 1970s when, in society in general, a key slogan was 'question authority'. Children and adults begin to assume equal roles. By the 1990s the child may now be depicted as a rational, mature and powerful being. Accordingly, the parent emerges as the imperfect, uncontrolled and immature figure.⁵



Commenting on the situation in the USA in the 1980s and 90s, Neil Postman observed the historical divisions between adults and children were eroding under the barrage of television, which turns the adult secrets of sex and violence into popular entertainment and pitches both news and advertising at the intellectual level of ten-year olds.⁶ Postman was writing before the advent of widespread internet usage, the development of hi-tech electronic games and the further dumbing down of mainstream television.

These precursors created the conditions for the trans-generational cultural rupturing that we are now witnessing in how children relate to parents and how pupils relate to teachers. The techno-cultural revolution of less than a decade has effected such a significant change in the way our children now experience their childhood compared to that of their parents and teachers that the fragile communication bridge between the generations has in many cases been broken.

So we see a widening rift between children and adults as children become more and more attuned to the adult world through personal computers and mass media yet have less and less positive contact with adults. We see the increasing absence of neighbours and kin in family life.

Uninspiring

The models of adult values held up to today's children are hardly inspiring. The celebrity culture of popular television promotes behaviour that is self-centred and attention-seeking, emotional responses that are undisciplined and volatile, and cognitive processes that are impulsive and shallow. Maturity, responsibility and commitment are only feebly affirmed by contemporary culture as the 'adulteration' of childhood has seen a parallel 'infantilisation' of the adult world – adults who dress, eat and play like children; adults who find difficulty managing their own lives, let alone those of their children.

But, of course, this is not the experience for every child. What about those whose parents are properly caring, mature and responsible? Well, we then see what has been called the ‘overprogramming’ of family life – where parents are so concerned for their children’s safety in an apparently more hostile and dangerous world (as communicated by the media) that they barely let their children out of their sight.⁷

With parents acting as drivers, escorts and social secretaries for them, the upshot is that children spend less and less time engaging in their own world – learning to take the knocks and learn the ropes of how to get on with each other. The overprogramming of family life has led to a meshing of adult and child worlds to create one of the biggest differences between today’s childhoods and those of earlier times.

So while there are some children in our schools who have never learned the value of co-operative behaviour – of sharing, taking turns, showing concern – there are others who have never learned the skills of getting on with other children, of coping without constant adult supervision, of thinking independently. Childhood, as many teachers and parents experienced it, is dead. The old adult-child relations are gone. We have witnessed a dramatic and rapid change that renders children vulnerable to previously unknown influences.

This ‘cultural rupture’ has parallels with other societies in our recent history. When the state of Israel was formed in 1948, the subsequent wave of new immigration revealed a number of young people who seemed ‘unteachable’ and unable to respond to regular teaching approaches. Reuven Feuerstein, then a psychologist engaged in the assessment of these children, concluded that their disruptive wartime experiences had resulted in a failure to connect with their own culture: the older generation had been unable to mediate between their children’s developing minds and their normal environmental experiences. The vulnerable children – those with less than optimal organic or psychological resources – could not compensate for the loss of cultural mediation and became



‘switched off’ from their learning environment.⁸

Feuerstein realised that the parents of these children had been unable to give order and meaning to their children’s experiences. The mass of different stimuli they received from the world was not organised into any stream of experience that could then provide a template for assessing new situations or solving new problems.

In response, Feuerstein reasoned that careful teaching of these learning processes was required and so developed intervention programmes that enabled children to make sense of the world around them. It is called the *mediated learning experience* and requires the

teacher to be an active bridge between the world of experience and the child’s current thought processes. It deliberately and directly teaches new and more adaptive thought processes, or ‘cognitive mediation’.

In our society today, children are increasingly failing to connect with the culture of older generations – but for other reasons and in other ways. As I have pointed out, the technological revolution of the last 10 years has transformed the nature of childhood – and probably permanently. Children’s play has been transformed by solitary electronic games. And while children have more ways of communicating – one in four children under the age of 10 now owns a mobile phone – they have less of their own world to talk about. Children’s experience of the world is so very different from many of those who teach them that we now experience this ‘cultural rupture’ in our schools.

As a consequence now we often see in our schools a mismatch between the teachers’ expectations of how a child should be, should think, should act, and the children’s actual beliefs and attitudes about their role. When expectations do not match reality we are frustrated. Teachers comment in exasperation that the all too frequent response from their unco-operative pupils is: “You can’t make me!” It is tempting to react with anger by rejecting such children or with denial by battling on regardless. Through social mediation we are addressing the people and problems that are really in front of us – not the ones we imagine are there.





Challenge

So as well as keeping order in our schools and teaching the curriculum, teachers are having to face the challenge of teaching responsible behaviour. In today's schools this will not be done by 'traditional' approaches to discipline, where we tell children what behaviour we require and then expect them to follow those rules. Telling isn't teaching.

Neither will it be done for those vulnerable children who have not gone through the mediating experiences of parent-child social interaction by so-called 'positive behaviour management' approaches. These often operate at no more than the level of verbal communication of

teaching and coaching process. Social learning is happening 'through' a human mediator (the teacher) as opposed to 'direct' learning. "The mediator controls what is learned, how it is perceived, and what meaning is abstracted in the learner's mind from the learning experience. The mediator often attempts to change the learner's psychological state, the nature of the stimuli, and even herself in order to produce a learning experience."⁸

So the process of social mediation requires that:

- adults develop a behaviour curriculum composed of those behaviours and procedures necessary for social and academic learning to take place
- adults are specific about what those behaviours are, and then carefully teach them in the situations where they are needed
- adults negotiate and mediate with those students who find these behaviours hard to learn, using a flexible range of assertive discipline strategies
- adults provide immediate and appropriately coded feedback to support the development of responsible behaviour and to correct inappropriate behaviour

- adults take a developmental perspective of these skills; they are engaged in a sometimes long journey from external to internal locus of control

- adults employ formative assessment rather than summative to guide future action.

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rules, and the consequences are statements often at odds with the prevailing social reality within the classroom. The adult 'rules' actually don't work for pupils when they follow them in the classroom. The statements the adults make and the actions they follow are not the same.

So what is the answer? Taking the lessons from Feuerstein's approach to thinking skills and applying them to social skills, we will need to provide mediated learning experiences that create a bridge between what children have learned – for good or ill – about social roles and relationships at present and what they need to achieve in order to be more successful. Practitioners of the 'assertive discipline' approach have developed the method into a vehicle for social mediation. In many ways we assume the role of the behaviour coach, and like the coach we are not only instructing, but also modelling, encouraging, explaining, correcting and instructing all over again.⁹

Social mediation, then, is a deliberate and careful means of transmitting appropriate and effective social values through a



While cognitive mediation is about changing thought processes about thinking, social mediation is about changing thought processes about human interaction. This will immediately involve emotional processes, and will also mean having to learn the behavioural skills needed for effective performance. Social

mediation thus requires a learning environment that is 'psychologically' attuned to the thinking-feeling-doing interaction.

So when we seek to change behaviour today we will often have to change the mindset that fuels the behaviour. If children are perceiving the world in quite different terms from how they did a decade or so ago, then our expectations of responsible behaviour will often be at variance with theirs. When mindsets are challenged, emotions will be stirred. The demand upon the teacher is then to create a learning environment that creates the psychological conditions for

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learning can take place – to make positive choices about how they behave, whether or not a teacher is watching.”¹⁰

Combining good order, teaching curriculum and also teaching responsible behaviour requires a coordinated and managed strategy that has huge implications for CPD. Just as the nature of childhood has changed dramatically within the last 10 years, so in the next 10 years will be the way we teach in order to rebuild the communication bridge with many of our children.

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constructive learning. In this respect, social mediation makes even greater demands upon teacher personal resources than does cognitive mediation.

The social mediation of behaviour is therefore not to be confused with the strict social determination of behaviour. In the past a child may have learned from family and school that stealing is wrong. But stealing is wrong because it deprives others of their rightful property – not because certain religious and secular authorities oppose it. Authentic social mediation involves the development of values and the refinement of the behavioural skill in performing social acts – sometimes through justifying reasons which may contradict the child's previous experiences and mindset. "The goal of teaching behaviour is not to have compliant students who dutifully sit quietly and follow their teacher's directions. It is to teach students to manage their own behaviour so that

Geoff Moss will be exploring some of the practical implications of these ideas in his *Cutting Edge Course: How to Provide Effective Classroom Management – the new Assertive Discipline* on June 7th in Birmingham. For more details and booking information please go to our www.education-quest.com or ring Sue Smith for further details on 0121 666 7878

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