



**DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CHILDREN**  
**THROUGH ALTERNATIVE INTERACTION METHODS**

BY

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## Work session 1

### *Activity 1 : Programme Orientation*

The opinion is widely held that discipline has collapsed in South Africa. Studies have found that the more misbehaviour occurs among children, the more adults use punitive methods to address the problem. Ironically Lewis (2001:315) found that *punitive disciplinary interaction methods disrupt the child's emotions and inhibit the progress of responsibility*. Present day adults are still confronted by many challenges for which they can often not find any viable solutions.

Our youth find themselves in a crisis, which according to Mabeba and Prinsloo (2000:340) manifests in physical violence, boisterousness, rejection of authority, theft and threats as well as graffiti, vandalism and a lack of respect towards others. As a result of the negative interaction methods during this battle for control, the adult and the child's self-image, enthusiasm and inner motivation often suffer. The negative experiences and emotions mentioned above, bring about and increased lowering of the morale of both the child and the adult. The aggression, anxiety and tension levels of adults increase and eventually a vicious circle is created, as the emotional condition of adults has a great influence on the children which they have to manage.

The IDEAL IS THAT CHILDREN WILL CO-OPERATE BECAUSE THEY WANT TO CO-OPERATE AND BE ENTHUSIASTIC AND DELIGHTED ABOUT WHAT THEY DO AT ALL LEVELS. According to a number of researchers, the secret lies in the manner of interaction between the adult and the child. This interaction has to however, be of a positive nature and must be implemented in such a way that it produces positive results to bring us closer to the ideal situation of co-operation and enthusiasm. According to Faber and Mazlish (1995:1), interaction has to especially be of such a nature that it has a positive effect on the child. This means that it must not be menacing, sarcastic or reprimanding, and be without threat and verbal aggression.

It is unfortunately not enough anymore for adults to be decent and to like children. If adults are prepared to help children, they require children who are emotionally prepared to listen and learn. As adults, our aim is more significant than merely conveying facts and information. Another objective is to care for children and to teach them how to respect themselves and others. If we are to appreciate the dignity of children, then we need methods and models which will verify their dignity. If we want to send them off into the world as young people who respect themselves and others, then we must show respect for them through our interaction with them.

The adult is the one who has most control over this interaction process. For this reason this training programme was developed to give adults ideas with relation to alternative forms of interaction, which are of a positive nature.

### **Activity 3 : Funactivity**

\*Stand in a line from the shortest to the tallest.\* \*Stand in a line according to shoe size.\* \*Stand in a line according to birthdays.\*

### **Activity 4 : Can it work?**

#### *Performance/Presentation*



Dewald: I'm going to beat that kid to a pulp!

Adult: Dewald, I can see that you are very angry.

Dewald: *(Throws his bag down on the floor and pushes his desk.)* I am going to do something terrible to him.

Adult: *(Speaks calmly)* I understand that you are very upset now, Dewald. I cannot allow you to strike the table and push it around, however, you can come and discuss the matter with me later or write down what made you so angry.

Dewald: *(Sits down/drops down onto the chair)* I need paper.

Adult: *(While handing over the paper)* When you have finished, you must catch up with the work.

Dewald: Scratches his head and starts writing. Shortly after, he folds up the letter and finds out from his friend what the work was that he had to do. He is calm and later puts up his hand to find out about something which he did not quite understand. After that he continues with his work.

### **Activity 5 : Role play**

Choose a person who will act the part of the friend and someone who will take the role of adult/employee.

*Imagine you are in the following situation. (adapted from Faber & Mazlish 1982 : 5)*

Your employer asks you to perform an additional task which is to do a survey of children, which he wants on his desk by the close of day. You intend to do the task immediately, but due to a series of other important matters that arise, you forget about it entirely. Your day is so hectic that you hardly have time to enjoy your sandwich. At the end of the day, you and a few colleagues are preparing to go home. Your employer enters and asks if you have completed the forms. Hastily you try to explain how exceptionally busy your day was. He interrupts you and says very sternly: "I am not interested in your excuses. What do you think you are paid to do - stand around the whole day and do nothing?" You try to open your mouth and explain but he says: "Don't bother!" and walks out of the room. You colleagues look around awkwardly while you storm out of the room feeling embarrassed. Later you go and have coffee with a friend and tell her about the incident.



*Instructions to the EMPLOYEE*

*Tell your friend about the above mentioned incident. You are very upset and want some support.*

My employer summoned me this morning. I had to fill in silly old forms about numbers of children and other statistics. He asked me to put it on his desk at the end of the day. I meant to do it immediately but then so many other things happened that I completely forgot about it. Things were so hectic that I did not even have time to eat my sandwich. At the end of the day he came to me and asked if I had completed the forms. I was still trying to explain what a chaotic day I had had when he interrupted me in a loud voice, saying angrily: "I am not interested in excuses. What are you paid for – to stand around idly, the whole day?" I was still trying to open my mouth to say something, when he snapped at me, "Don't bother," and walked out of the room. Can you believe it - right in front of EVERYONE.

*Instructions to the FRIEND*

Read the following responses one by one, as if it were what you told your friend (the adult) to make her feel better after the incident with her boss. (Wait a little after each response so that every group member can write down his/her response in his/her workbook).

*Instructions to the GROUP*

Put yourself in the shoes of the employee. Write down the primary feeling that arises each time you hear the words. You may write down the emotion or a response that comes to mind. (You do not necessarily have to respond as you would in reality – rather focus on what you think.)

*Example: Friend's response:* “Oh, don't be so upset.”

How did you experience the response above: *You don't understand me!*

*Response 1 of friend:*

“Oh, it's not so bad. Don't upset yourself so much. You are tired now and everything is much worse now. Tomorrow you will feel better and realize it was only a minor issue. Rather enjoy your coffee and don't be so upset now. “

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_

*Response 2 of friend:*

“Oh, life is like that, you know. One's boss doesn't always do what you expect him to do. You will have to learn not to take things so seriously. Life is difficult.”

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_

*Response 3 of friend:*

“Do you know what *I* think you should do? Go straight to your boss's office tomorrow morning and tell him you are sorry. Then make sure that you complete the forms before anything else. Don't go and do other things again. And if you are smart, you will make sure that it doesn't happen again – or you may just lose your job.”

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_

*Response 5 of friend:*

“Do you know, I can actually understand why your boss reacted in that manner. He is probably under a lot of pressure. You are fortunate that he doesn't lose his temper more often.”

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_

*Response 6 of friend:*

“Oh you poor thing! That is terrible! I feel really sorry for you. It’s awful, I would have burst into tears.”

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_

*Response 7 of friend:*

“Wow, that sounds like a bad experience. To be spoken to like that, in the presence of others, must have been dreadful to cope with, especially after you had had such a difficult day.”

How did you experience the words above \_\_\_\_\_



***The empathetic response:***

There is a good chance that you would feel more comfortable with response 7. The rationale behind empathetic response is: “If somebody really listens and acknowledges my feelings, then I already feel less upset and less confused, and more able to deal with my problem.”

***Activity 6: How to deal with emotions which interfere with functioning***

Indicate with a tick in the margin, after every subheading, if you have applied any of the forms of interaction before (effectively or ineffectively).



**Table 1: Ineffective and effective techniques to deal with emotions that interfere with functioning. Compiled from Faber and Mazlish (1982), Faber and Mazlish (1995)**

<b>Ineffective techniques to deal with emotions that interfere with functioning.</b>		<b>Effective techniques to deal with emotions that interfere with functioning.</b>
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Denial of the emotion.	Method:	Acknowledge the child's emotion.
<p>Child: "I am tired."</p> <p>Adult: "You can't be tired yet, it's only 9 o'clock now."</p> <p><i>When the negative emotions of children are denied, they often become more upset. They also experience that the adult is trying to prescribe what they must feel. They can easily feel more discouraged.</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Child: "I am tired"</p> <p>Adult: "Yes, you look rather tired to me."</p> <p><i>Effect on children::</i></p> <p><i>It is sometimes thought that when the emotions of children are acknowledged, these emotions are strengthened. In reality, children feel more comforted. They also feel more encouraged and want to keep trying.</i></p>	
Philosophical response.	Method:	Give the emotion a name.
<p>Child: "I don't like tidying up."</p> <p>Adult: "Well, that is what life is like. One cannot always do what one wants to."</p> <p><i>Children feel as if they may not experience emotions and that they are not understood.</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Child: "I don't like tidying up."</p> <p>Adult: "It sounds as if you are frustrated."</p> <p><i>Effect on children:</i></p> <p><i>It is sometimes thought that children's emotions will become worse if a name is given to them. In reality the opposite is true. Children hear the words that describe what they are experiencing and are reassured as someone has acknowledged their innermost feelings</i></p>	
Advice.	Method:	Acknowledge the emotion with a word or sound.
<p>Child: "I wasn't chosen for the team."</p> <p>Adult: "Do you know what I think you should do? Rather practice harder and try for another team, or forget about the team and concentrate on your schoolwork."</p> <p><i>Children experience a feeling of rebelliousness because they are told what to do. They struggle to think constructively when someone else gives advice. The adult's intentions are well-meaning but when children are bombarded with so much</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Child: "I wasn't chosen for the team."</p> <p>Adult: "Oh? Ah! hm?"</p> <p><i>Effect on children::</i></p> <p><i>When words like these are used, together with a sympathetic attitude, which shows care, it is an invitation to children to investigate and discover their own feelings and thoughts. They will probably</i></p>	

<i>advice they find is difficult to think about their problem or to take responsibility for it.</i>		<i>then be freed from their negative thoughts and come up with their own solutions.</i>
<b>Defense of the other person.</b>	<b>Method:</b>	<b>Give the child his wish in a fantasy.</b>
<p>Child: "The coach was unfair. I didn't even have enough opportunity to play. I really wish he had chosen me for the team."</p> <p>Adult: "I can understand his reaction. Remember he must ensure that the team is the best and that they win. I think it was difficult for him to decide who had to be included in the team."</p> <p><i>In this case, children will often display more reluctance and will protest even more.</i></p>	<p><b>Example:</b></p> <p><i>Effect on children:</i></p>	<p>Child: "The coach was unfair. I didn't even have enough opportunity to play. I really wish he had chosen me for the team."</p> <p>Adult: "Oh!, it must have been quite difficult for you. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were next year and you have worked so hard on your fitness that you are then included in the team?"</p> <p><i>When children's wishes are accepted in a fantasy, it is often easier for them to deal with reality. The fact that someone understands them sometimes makes the situation more bearable.</i></p>
<b>Questions.</b>	<b>Method:</b>	<b>Any of the above mentioned techniques.</b>
<p>Child: "I am so angry." (bangs his fist on the table.)</p> <p>Adult: "Oh, no! What do you think you are doing? What happened, why are you angry?"</p> <p><i>Children feel overwhelmed by all the questions and become uncomfortable. They can then easily switch off. The questions require them to come up with logical answers, which is often very difficult for them to do.</i></p>	<p><b>Example:</b></p> <p><i>Effect on children:</i></p>	<p>Child: "I am so angry." (bangs his fist on the table.)</p> <p>Adult: "I can see you are very angry, but I can unfortunately not allow you to bang on the tables. You can rather tell me what happened."</p> <p><i>It is easier for children to change their behaviour when they feel that their emotions are accepted.</i></p>



Pity.	Method:	Any of the above mentioned techniques.
<p>Child: "I wasn't chosen for the team."</p> <p>Adult: "You poor thing. I feel so sorry for you. All the other children were chosen and not you. Oh, it is terrible. I am really sorry."</p> <p><i>Children experience a sense of losing and think they are losers.</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>Effect on children:</i></p>	
Amateur psycho-analysis.	Method:	Any of the above mentioned techniques.
<p>Child: "I wasn't chosen to perform on stage."</p> <p>Adult: "But your heart wasn't in it from the beginning. Maybe, deep down, you didn't want to act."</p> <p><i>Children feel that they are not understood and that they will not have the courage again to share something with the adult.</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>Effect on children:</i></p>	
Comments about techniques	<p>It is important that the emotions of children are accepted because adults need children who are emotionally prepared to listen and learn while they are teaching. Adults must always bear the dignity of children in mind during their interaction with children. If adults wish to teach the principles of respect to children, they have to begin by respecting the emotions of children.</p>	

### **Activity 8: Identifying and acknowledging emotions**

*Exercise: Acknowledging emotions.*

- a) *One person acts as the child and reads the comments.*
- b) *Write down/say the word that you think would best describe the child's emotion.*
- c) *Write down/give the comment that you would make in reaction to the emotion (any of the above mentioned methods of effective interaction may be used.)*

Example	A word which describes the child's emotion	Possible response
I made a lot of stupid mistakes and therefore got 50% instead of 60%.	<i>Disappointment</i>	<i>Oh, dear! It is disappointing.</i>

Child's comment	A word which describes the child's emotion	Possible response
I'm going to beat that Peter to a pulp one day!		
I don't know why all the adults decide to give homework on one day.		
I am hungry. (during class time)		



**Remember ...**

**CHILDREN WANT TO KNOW THAT THEIR FEELINGS ARE CONSIDERED**

*Child: Just because I made a few silly mistakes, I got only 60%!*

*Adult: Don't worry, dear. You will do better next time.*

**Instead of giving the answer above:**

**1. IDENTIFY THE CHILD'S FEELINGS**

“You sound disappointed. It can be upsetting when you know the answer but still lose marks due to a silly mistake.”

**2. TAKE THE CHILDS'S FEELINGS INTO CONSIDERATION BY MAKING A SOUND OR A SHORT COMMENT.**

“Oh” or “Mmmm” or “Uh” or “I see.”

**3. LET LEARNERS IMAGINE SITUATIONS THAT CANNOT BE CREATED IN REALITY.**

“Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a magic pencil that would stop writing if you made a mistake.”

**4. ACCEPT THE CHILD'S FEELINGS EVEN WHILE YOU ARE CHECKING UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOUR.**

“You are so furious about your marks that you have kicked the desk! I cannot allow it, but you can tell me what has upset you so much.”

