

Engagement with Literature Skills

You use a good range of reputable sources. You need to reference more consistently and read more widely. You follow the referencing conventions.

Knowledge and Understanding Skills

You show very good understanding of humanistic theories and approaches, however policies are missing. You demonstrate great awareness of the relationship of trust between learners and support staff.

Cognitive and Intellectual Skills

Structure and flow are very good, with an effective introduction and conclusion. You might have gone into more detail about policies.

There is supporting evidence in your text, however, this is not consistent.

Practical Application Skills (13/20)

There is excellent practical application of theory throughout. You could go into more detail about the policies.

Transferable Skills for Life and Professional Practice (14/20)

Your writing is cohesive and formal. Work is presented neatly. Ensure you capitalise names of theories and acts, and put the year of publication behind them and make sure all your sources are cited.

Action Points:

- 1. Read more widely and include policies in your research and writing.**
- 2. Ensure you capitalise names of theories and acts, and put the year of publication behind them.**
- 3. Reference more often.**

Discuss a range of factors that influence children's behaviour (both positively and negatively) in a learning environment

Introduction

Children's behaviour in learning environments is shaped by surroundings, relationships, and developmental factors. These influences affect both individual learning and the overall classroom atmosphere. Behaviour especially reflects neurodevelopmental differences in specialist settings for pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). In these contexts, understanding and supporting each child requires attention to personal experience, emotional well-being, and environment. For example, some children may respond positively to structure and routine, while others benefit more from flexible, adaptive approaches depending on their mood, energy levels, or recent experiences.

Within a Specialist Teaching Facility (STF) at a primary school, where twelve pupils present with severe autism, ADHD, ASD, and other complex needs, behaviour frequently reflects sensory processing differences, communication challenges, and difficulties with emotional regulation rather than intentional non-compliance. Understanding the underlying causes of these behaviours is essential for promoting positive behaviour and responding effectively to challenges.

This essay defines behaviour and examines three key theoretical perspectives: behaviourism, ecological systems theory, and attachment theory. It critically analyses how these models are reflected in the school's Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy (2025) and Positive Handling Policy (2025), demonstrating the ways in which theory informs inclusive professional practice.

Defining Behaviour

Behaviour means any action or response that can be seen, whether it is a reaction to something inside or outside a person. B.F. Skinner said behaviour is shaped by the environment, explaining that "behaviour is determined by its consequences" (Skinner, 1953, p. 65). In schools, behaviour covers how students engage with learning, interact with others, show emotions, and follow rules.

In an STF, behaviour often communicates something important. For pupils with autism and ADHD, actions like avoidance, repetition, withdrawal, or dysregulation can show sensory overload, anxiety, or unmet communication needs. These behaviours are not simply disruptive; they often signal that a child is struggling to process their environment. For instance, a child who repeatedly leaves the classroom may be overwhelmed by noise or light, rather than intentionally being defiant. Understanding behaviour in context, not just as rule-breaking, helps staff respond supportively.

Behaviourism and Reinforcement

Behaviourism offers one explanation for how behaviour develops in educational settings. Skinner's operant conditioning theory posits that behaviours reinforced by rewards are more

likely to recur. Skinner (1953, p. 87) stated, “a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him,” underscoring the influence of environmental factors.

The Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy reflects this principle through high expectations and consistent reinforcement. The school code, “Be safe, Be ready, Be respectful,” establishes clarity and predictability, which is particularly important for pupils with autism who often rely on routine and structure to feel secure. When pupils know what is expected of them, they are more likely to feel calm and focused, and less likely to experience anxiety or confusion in the classroom.

In an STF, reinforcement strategies must be individualized for each pupil. Tools like visual timetables, token systems, and immediate praise help pupils with ADHD who struggle to delay gratification. For some, non-verbal encouragement or sensory rewards are more effective. These strategies are especially useful when pupils find it difficult to understand abstract rewards or need tangible, immediate feedback to remain engaged. The policy’s emphasis on fair consequences and routines aligns with behaviourist principles and supports neurodivergent pupils in managing emotions.

However, behaviourism alone is insufficient in specialist settings. Pupils with severe ASD may not respond predictably to reinforcement if underlying sensory or emotional needs remain unmet. Research by Gregory et al. (2016) indicates that relational and restorative approaches yield more effective behavioural outcomes than purely punitive systems. This underscores the necessity of integrating reinforcement with relational understanding.

Ecological Systems Theory and Contextual Influences

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 3) said that “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment.” This means behaviour is shaped by many connected systems.

In an STF, the impact of the environment is particularly evident, as children are highly sensitive to changes in their surroundings. Many pupils may experience:

- Sensory sensitivities to noise or lighting
- Transitions between mainstream and specialist environments
- Home-based stressors
- Multi-agency involvement

The school policy acknowledges that trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can significantly influence behaviour. In specialist settings, trauma may interact with neurodevelopmental differences, resulting in increased emotional difficulties.

The Positive Handling Policy reinforces ecological thinking by embedding rights-based practice and systemic accountability. It states:

“We believe avoiding physical interventions is the best practice.”

Restrictive physical intervention is defined as a last resort:

“Any use of physical intervention to control or restrain pupils should be seen as a last resort when all other preventative strategies have been exhausted.”

In an STF, prevention means changing the environment, such as offering sensory breaks, keeping classrooms calm, using routines, and providing clear communication. Flexible seating, access to quiet spaces, and visual supports can empower pupils to self-regulate and reduce episodes of distress. The policy’s call for proactive plans and risk assessments shows an understanding that behaviour often comes from known triggers, not just sudden defiance.

This approach encourages staff to look beyond surface behaviours and address the underlying causes, fostering a more compassionate and effective response. By recording, reviewing, and analysing incidents, the school takes responsibility for behaviour instead of blaming the child alone.

Attachment Theory and Emotional Security

Attachment theory provides critical insight into behaviour within specialist settings. Bowlby (1969, p. 194) argued that “the propensity to make strong emotional bonds to particular individuals is a basic component of human nature.” Secure relationships support emotional regulation.

For pupils with severe autism or ADHD, strong relationships at school help them stay regulated and build trust. Many depend on familiar adults to calm down when upset. Staff responding predictably and consistently can reduce behaviour problems. The behaviour policy includes strategies based on attachment theory, such as emotion coaching and safe spaces. Pupils are helped to calm down before discussing their behaviour, which is crucial for those who struggle with impulse or emotional control.

The Positive Handling Policy reinforces this relational approach by clearly stating: “It is unlawful for a member of staff to use any degree of physical contact which is deliberately intended to punish a pupil.”

Instead, restrictive intervention is defined as:

“Direct physical contact between persons where reasonable force is positively applied against resistance... to disengage from harmful behaviour.”

Crucially, it emphasises:

“Any force used should always be the minimum needed to achieve the desired outcome.” In an STF, pupils may have meltdowns because of sensory overload, not aggression, so using only the necessary amount of force is very important. After an incident, talking things through and repairing relationships fits with attachment theory, as it focuses on restoring trust.

Gregory et al. (2016) found that restorative and relationship-based approaches strengthen teacher–student relationships and reduce exclusionary discipline. This supports the policy’s focus on working “with” pupils. When pupils feel understood, they are more likely to engage positively and less likely to display challenging behaviour.

Balancing High Expectations with High Support

One of the main strengths of these policies is how they balance structure with care. The Social Discipline Window encourages working “with” pupils by offering both strong support and high expectations. This balance matters most in specialist settings, where expectations should be adjusted but not reduced. When children are supported in a way that acknowledges their individual needs, they are more likely to fully participate, build resilience, and form positive connections with staff and peers.

In an STF, high support can mean giving different tasks to suit each pupil, using sensory strategies, and making individual behaviour plans. Staff may use assistive technology or adapted materials to ensure all pupils access the curriculum. High expectations include encouraging communication, teaching self-regulation, and promoting safe choices. Celebrating small achievements and progress, however incremental, is key to building pupils’

self-esteem and motivation. This dual focus helps children build confidence and develop new skills.

The Positive Handling Policy supports this approach by making sure safety is handled fairly and ethically. It recognises that staff have a duty of care and also protects children's rights and accountability.

Conclusion

Children's behaviour in schools is shaped by rewards, the wider environment, and relationships. Behaviourism explains how consequences affect actions. Bronfenbrenner's theory shows how different environments connect and influence behaviour. Bowlby's attachment theory highlights the importance of emotional safety and supportive relationships. Recognising this interplay gives educators a more holistic understanding of behaviour. In a Specialist Teaching Facility for pupils with severe autism, ADHD, and complex ALN, behaviour often shows their neurodevelopmental needs, sensory differences, and need for secure relationships. The school's Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy and Positive Handling Policy combine theory with inclusive practice. Clear rules give structure, understanding the environment helps prevent problems, and attachment-based strategies support regulation and belonging.

By combining consistency with compassion and safety with dignity, the policies create an environment where even the most vulnerable pupils can experience security, respect and the opportunity to succeed.

Reference List

Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment and loss: Volume 1. Attachment*. London: Hogarth Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A. and Gerewitz, J. (2016) 'The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher–student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline', *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), pp. 325–353.

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