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Children's behaviour in nursery and primary school classrooms is influenced by many different factors. These include the child's individual needs, their relationships with adults and other children, the classroom environment and wider influences such as family life and education policies. In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales places a strong focus on children's wellbeing and relationships, showing that behaviour is closely linked to how safe, supported and included children feel (Welsh Government, 2022). The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system also encourages early identification of needs and support, helping practitioners to see behaviour as communication rather than just poor discipline (Welsh Government, 2021). By understanding what influences behaviour, early years practitioners can create positive learning environments where children feel confident and ready to learn.

Behaviour can be described as the actions and responses that a child shows when interacting with their environment, other children and adults. This includes both verbal behaviour, such as talking or shouting, and non-verbal behaviour, such as body language, facial expressions or movement. Children's behaviour is shaped by internal factors, such as emotions and development, and external factors, such as routines, expectations and relationships (DfE, 2024). Behaviour is not random; it often shows how a child is feeling or what they need support with.

One way of understanding behaviour is through an ecological approach, which recognises that children are influenced by different systems around them. These systems include the home, school, community and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Changes over time, such as starting nursery or family changes, can also affect how children behave. This shows that behaviour is influenced by many connected factors, not just what happens in the classroom.

Strong relationships play a key role in children's behaviour, especially in early years settings. Attachment theory explains that when children have secure relationships with caregivers, they feel safe to explore and learn (Bowlby, 1969). If a child experiences inconsistent or disrupted care, they may show behaviours such as anxiety, withdrawal or aggression. In a nursery setting, this can be seen during transitions like morning drop-off, where some children may cry or refuse to separate from their caregiver.

Attachment-informed practice helps children feel safe and supported. For example, having a key person system allows children to build a trusting relationship with one adult (DfE, 2024). Predictable routines, emotional support and calm responses help children regulate their emotions. When children feel secure, they are more likely to engage positively in learning.

Children develop in different ways, and some children are neurodivergent, meaning their brains process information differently. This includes children with autism, ADHD, developmental language disorder and sensory processing differences. These differences can affect how children behave in learning environments.

For example, autistic children may find changes in routine upsetting or feel overwhelmed by noise and crowds (National Autistic Society, 2023). Children with ADHD may struggle to sit still or focus for long periods (NHS, 2023). Children with language difficulties may become frustrated if they cannot understand instructions or express themselves.

These behaviours are not intentional misbehaviour but signs that children need support and adjustments. Using visual aids, clear routines, movement breaks and simple language can help children feel more comfortable and successful (DfE, 2024).

In early childhood, self-regulation skills such as attention, waiting and controlling impulses are still developing. As a result, young children often need support to manage their behaviour. Practitioners can help by teaching learning behaviours clearly, such as how to listen, take turns and follow routines. Consistent expectations, praise and calm guidance help children learn what is expected of them (Welsh Government, 2022).

Family and community factors also influence behaviour. Stress at home, changes in routine or financial difficulties can affect a child's emotional wellbeing and behaviour in school (Welsh Government, 2021). This highlights the importance of building strong partnerships with families and offering supportive, understanding approaches.

The physical environment also plays an important role in children's behaviour. Noise, lighting and space can affect how children feel and behave. Young children are sensitive to loud noise and poor acoustics, which can make it harder for them to listen and concentrate. Soft furnishings, quiet areas and appropriate lighting can help create a calmer atmosphere and support positive behaviour (DfE, 2024).

Conclusion

Children's behaviour in nursery and primary classrooms is influenced by many connected factors, including relationships, development, neurodiversity, communication, family life and the learning environment. Understanding behaviour as communication helps practitioners respond in supportive and inclusive ways. By building strong relationships, teaching routines clearly, creating sensory-friendly environments and working closely with families, early years practitioners can support children's wellbeing and learning. These approaches reflect the aims of the Curriculum for Wales and help children develop into confident, capable learners.

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