The Continuum: A Framework for Responding to Children

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The continuum provides a framework to look at and evaluate the ways you respond to children. It can help an adult organize specific guidance strategies from those on the left-hand side which give children opportunity to be involved in solving the problem with minimal adult power and control to those on the right which are more directive. Ideally, a situation should be approached by starting on the left and progressing just as far to the right as needed to resolve the problem (Wolfgang & Glickman, as cited in Oken-Wright, 1992). Unsafe situations need to be addressed with the immediate and more directive measures on the right of the continuum; however, once safety is assured the teacher should debrief using strategies on the right of the continuum.

Now let’s look at some individual skills starting with those at the far left-hand side of the continuum. Here adults intervene minimally and children are given maximum opportunities for involvement and decision-making. As you read through this article, you will likely already be familiar with a number of the approaches or skills; they may be strategies that you are already using.

**Proximity**
Sometimes going close and being near the child/children can modify behaviour without an adult having to say anything at all. For example, when children are flicking sand in the air at the sand table and it is getting on the floor, sometimes just going over to the sand table, crouching and being there is enough to change children’s behaviour. There is minimal intervention by the adult and children are given the opportunity to change their behaviour on their own.

**Natural Consequence**
There are times when it is most appropriate to avoid responding to behaviour and just let happen what would occur without any adult intervention. If, for example, a child is adamantly refusing to wear mitts outside on a cold day, the adult might decide to let natural consequences occur by not interfering. Once the child has been outside and his or her hands get cold, the child will likely either want no mitts or pull coat sleeves down to cover his or her hands. Some early childhood practitioners simply ask children who do not want to wear mitts to put them in a basket that is taken outside and that is readily available for those whose hands are cold. Of course, as a responsible adult, you will be closely monitoring to ensure that frostbite is avoided.

**Ignore Behaviour**
Closely related to natural consequences, is the “ignoring” strategy. There are times when it may be best to simply ignore problem behaviour while it is occurring and give positive attention as soon as the behaviour ceases. Of course, you would not ignore behaviour that is unsafe or that would place others in physical danger such as hitting or emotional danger such as verbal attacks. These kinds of responses need to be stopped immediately by intervening with approaches further to the right on the continuum.
Distract
As those of you who have worked with two year olds know, distraction is a useful approach for preventing and stopping challenging behaviour in very young children. While distraction is a developmentally appropriate skill for use with toddlers and would fall on the left-hand side of the continuum for this age group, it is less child-centred and positive with older children. This is because distraction does not convey the teacher’s concerns in a way that gives children information that they can use for next time. When children are upset about something that is happening, ignoring their strong feelings by distracting would be the “withdrawing” roadblock.

Cue/Reminder
Sometimes a very minimal cue or reminder can be enough to change behaviour. For example, when children are coming to the table for lunch a gentle whisper, “Hands” can alert them to the need to wash up prior to eating. A single word, “Backpack” can remind the kindergarten child to pick it up off the floor. Be aware that tone plays a big part in making this strategy a child-centred and minimal intervention—a stern reminder, “Walking feet!” or an exasperated, “Stephanie!” convey negative messages to the child that are not part of strategies at the left-hand side of the continuum nor the positive verbal environment. These kinds of responses come across as “ordering, directing and commanding” which are roadblocks belonging further to the right on the continuum.

Describe what you see
Without evaluation, describe the situation or event so that children might be able to come up with their own conclusions or solutions. “Marissa, your glass is really close to the edge of the table.” might be enough information to motivate Marissa to move the glass so it won’t spill. “There’s a lot of sand on the floor.” might cue children to stop flicking sand. When children respond with, “So?” to your description, it is time to move further to the right on the continuum and explain why you are concerned with their behaviour using an “I message”.

“I Messages”
An “I message” describes the behaviour and conveys your feelings and concerns about it. It conveys the problem clearly and gives the child an opportunity to be responsible for changing behaviour. This is why an “I message” should not be followed by instructions about what a child needs to do to solve the problem. Most importantly, it lets the child know the reason for your concern; this is a crucial part of an “I message” because it gives the child new learning for the next time. This knowledge about how the world works (i.e. that you might tip over when you lean your chair back on two legs; that your glass might fall when it is close to the edge of the table; that other children might not want to play with you if you keep pushing and hitting them) is socially constructed and it is the caring adult’s responsibility to provide this information to young children. An “I message” related to tossing sand might sound like this: “I’m worried that the sand is going to get in someone’s eyes when it’s flicked in the air.” If you do nothing else, remember to let children know the reason for your concerns, “Uh oh, someone may trip over the shoes.” Depending on the child’s age and stage of development, you may decide to simplify the message to, “Ouch, that hurts.”

Turn it back to the child to solve
When a child does not respond to an “I message”, your next approach on the continuum is to turn it back to the child to solve by saying something like, “Hmmm, what can you do so you can play with the
sand and not get it on the floor?” or “How can you play with the sand and keep it in the table too?” This gives the child an opportunity to come up with a solution to the problem and conveys the message that you think the child is capable. Problem solving is a learned skill and will need opportunities for practice as well as modeling from a caring adult or more experienced classmates. Even if you think a child may not be able to come up with a solution, posing the question begins to model the problem solving process. A questioning “What can we do?” with accompanying hand gestures may be developmentally appropriate for toddlers followed by choices.

**Choices**

If children are not yet capable of coming up with possible solutions to your attempt to turn it back to them to solve, offering choices not only models a crucial step in the problem solving process, generating ideas—but it also gives children an opportunity to still be involved in making the decision. Remember that, “You can stop throwing sand or go to the Director’s office.” is not a choice; it is a roadblock. It is an ultimatum or threat, which is a response that is much further to the right on the continuum because at that end, adults are in control and possess most of the power. Options offered in the “spirit of choices” would sound more like this: “Did you want to put the sand into a pile with your shovel or move it with a crane— which will work best for you?” When a child responds with, “None of them!” or “I don’t like your choices!” it is the adult’s responsibility to acknowledge the child’s strong feelings with active listening responses. Switching gears with a compassionate, “These aren’t the choices you’d make, are they?” may help the child feel listened to and more willing to participate in another attempt at problem solving. “Let’s think again. What might be a way to do what you want to do and still be sure it is safe for the other children?”

There can be a choice in almost every situation and it will take creativity to come up with an option when there seems to be only one solution. When it is time to come down from the climber and leave the playground perhaps the offer, “Are you going to fly down like Batman or crawl down on Spiderman’s web?” just might entice a reluctant hero into action.

It is important to offer choices that are actually options. You would probably not want to offer the choice of having a nap or not if your program does not have the capacity to offer this option or if parents want children to sleep. A better choice might be, “Do you want to try getting to sleep on your own or would you like me to rub your back once the other children get settled?” or “Do you want to have a book to look at or a teddy to cuddle with while you’re on your mat?”

**Contingency**

This response is more limiting than those before it on the continuum but it still gives children some restricted input and decision-making opportunity. In a contingency, being able to do one action is dependent upon first completing another action (i.e. “As soon as your hands are washed, you are welcome to come and have snack.” or “When the toys are put away, then we’ll be able to get ready to go outside.”) Remember to word the contingency in a positive way and avoid responses such as, “You can’t come to snack until you wash your hands.” or “We can’t go outside until the toys are cleaned up.” This kind of wording is more likely to result in power struggles.

**Logical Consequence**

As we have already discussed, natural consequence can be employed when ignoring the behaviour and when letting whatever happen occur will not result in any harm to the child, others or materials.
Logical consequence, on the other hand, is an option when the adult has concerns about the child’s behaviour and cannot permit it to keep happening. A logical consequence is created by adults and has the possibility of becoming punishment if adults are not conscious and careful in their application. Barbara Coloroso (1994) proposed the following guidelines for creating logical consequences, which form the handy acronym R.S.V.P.:

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<tr>
<th>R</th>
<th>reasonable</th>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>simple</td>
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<td>V</td>
<td>valuable</td>
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If a consequence is **reasonable**, it will also make sense and it will also be directly related to the specific situation. When a child spills juice, a reasonable consequence is to help wipe it up. It would not make sense to send the child away from the snack table and to deny basic requirements such as food is against licensing requirements. Denying the child playtime in the blocks because he or she spilled juice is definitely not related and therefore would not make a lot of sense either.

**Simple** consequences are not so convoluted and complex that they are hard for children to understand them. Not being allowed to play at the water table for a week would not be a simple consequence; not playing there until the child is ready to play without splashing is more appropriate.

Consequences should be a learning tool and not take away activities that are **valuable**. For example, if a child tears the pages of a book, it would not be valuable to take away that child’s book reading privileges. More learning would occur from getting the child to help you repair the torn pages.

Telling a child who is taking a long time to dress for outdoor play that he or she cannot go outside may not be **practical** if there is not a staff member to stay inside with the child. A much more practical consequence may involve the adult helping the child get dressed instead of the child doing it on his or her own that particular time. There are times when consequences have more of an impact on adults than they have on children. Consider the impact of denying a child who has a high need to be active the opportunity to play in the gym because of something the child did in the playroom. This “logical” consequence turns out to be totally “illogical” when early childhood practitioners have to deal with the behaviours that result from the imposed inactivity.

**Word Positively:**
Let children know what they *can* do instead of what they *cannot* do

As you can see, we are getting to a more teacher-centred place on the continuum as we begin to tell children what to do. Teachers become the experts and the capable ones with the answers when they tell children what to do, so this is a strategy to resort to after you have tried ones further to the left on the continuum. The exception, of course, is a dangerous situation when your immediate
and direct intervention is essential to protect children. In this instance, you are expected to respond quickly with interventions that remove the child from the imminent or immediate danger. Once the situation is safe, go back and respond with skills from the left hand side of the continuum so that there is some meaningful learning for the child.

A classic example of this strategy is saying, “Please walk inside.” instead of, “No running.”

“No, Stop, Don’t”
These responses are roadblocks that should be saved for safety situations and be followed with more child-centred responses once the child is out of danger. There is little positive learning that results from these orders and when these strategies are used on an ongoing basis, they become meaningless and ineffective. Save your “no, stop and don’t” responses for unsafe situations when you really need the child to respond to your instruction.

There is an interesting response that is beginning to turn up in some early childhood programs that warrants some mention. When children are doing something that an adult does not want them to do, adults are saying, “No, thank you.” So, for example, when Juan is splashing water at another child, the early childhood practitioner would come over to the water table and tell him, “No thank you, Juan.” While it may sound polite using the phrase “thank you”, this strategy is so closely related to the “ordering, directing and commanding” roadblock that its place on the continuum is to the far right-hand side.

Roadblocks
There are a dozen ways that adults typically respond to problem situations that are called “roadblocks” (Gordon and Burch, 2003). These responses are considered roadblocks to communication because they do not build the relationship between adults and children and they close down communication because they give children negatives messages about themselves and their capabilities. Why is it so important for children to have a positive sense of self? Because children who feel good about themselves tend to behave—and this is a big “win” for adults and children.

However, there are times when it is necessary to state quite clearly, “I can’t let you hurt other children.” which is the ordering, directing, commanding roadblock and a strategy at the far right-hand side of the continuum.

Time Out
Administered in the traditional behaviour modification method with a child spending a specific amount of time in a designated location, time out is merely punishment. The learning that comes out of punishment tends to be negative and teaches the child that it is permissible for bigger, stronger people to dominate and control those with less power. It also places high value on not getting caught and often does not teach a new way of responding to the situation and therefore is a method to be avoided in a child-centred approach to guidance. In fact, many child care programs have removed this strategy from their child guidance policies completely.

This does not mean, however that it is not valuable for a child to be away from the source of stimulation that is making behaviour challenging. Sometimes finding another place to play for a little while can support a child’s positive behaviour. If you are still determined to use a time out strategy in your program, the following guidelines may help you determine how to make it a more supportive
and positive approach for children:

- time out should not be in a specific place (i.e. the corner, the orange chair, the Director’s Office)
- time out should not be a specific amount of time determined by the teacher (i.e. one minute per age of the child, “double time out” for second offences)
- the teacher should be near by to talk when child is ready
- time out should not be the end of the process (i.e. once time out is served, children can go back with no new skills for preventing the behaviour next time)
- time out should not be a known entity in your program (i.e. if you hear children saying, “If you’re not nice, you’ll go in time out.” you know that it is likely being administered as punishment). Adults should refrain from using the term “time out” at all with children.

Instead of time out, Reynolds (2001) suggests a “sitting apart” strategy as a last resort when children are out of control which might sound like this, “It looks like it’s hard to be here and not splash the other children. Let’s find another place to play and when you fell like you’re ready to be at the water table without splashing, you are welcome to come back.” This strategy is meant to be supportive of children and give them an opportunity to regain control before re-entering the play. It also gives the child control over when he or she is ready to come back and play.

Physical Intervention

There are times when direct physical intervention is called for to immediately stop dangerous or potentially dangerous behaviour. Stepping between two children who are hitting each other, grabbing a unit block poised at arms length above a child’s head, and scooping up a child teetering on the edge of a high climber are all times to intervene quickly to ensure children’s safety. Once the child is out of danger, you can go back on the continuum to explain your concerns.

Using restraint—holding and immobilizing a child—has been a controversial issue in early childhood programs. While Hearron and Hildebrand (2005) advise that restraint can be “...the simple act of putting your hand on a child’s arm as a suggestion to go slowly downstairs” (p. 167) which is not particularly invasive, interpretations vary. If you are thinking that you need to physically restrain a child, it is likely a sign that further intervention by an interdisciplinary team is warranted—as well as training in the technique and permission from parents (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 1999). Since the restraint technique involves use of excessive power by adults, it is not recommended as a part of a child-centred guidance plan.

Switch Gears to Active Listening

At any time during your interactions if a child reacts with strong feelings (“But I like doing it this way!”) it is your cue to switch to listening skills to acknowledge what is happening for the child. “It looks like you’re having lots of fun. You are sure enjoying it, aren’t you?” Active listening is a valuable tool for letting children know that they are important and that their feelings are recognized. A child who feels this way is more likely to cooperate with your concerns because you have modeled listening and are working on building the relationship between the two of you through acceptance. When children are upset, they are less able and less likely to become involved in seeking solutions for problems so focusing on your concerns at this point can be futile. It is essential to switch to active listening any time when you sense resistance and strong feelings in the child’s
verbal and non-verbal responses. Gordon and Burch (2003) called this "switching gears" because the adult disengages temporarily from addressing his or her concerns and focuses on acknowledging the child. Once the child is calm again, the adult can resume problem solving the situation with the child. Have you ever tried to address a problem when you are upset? Are you able to rationally figure out what has happened and brainstorm solutions when you are crying? This is a daunting task for adults yet it is something children are often asked to do. Problem solving needs to happen when children and adults are settled and calm; it’s just easier to think when you’re not upset.

A reminder about reframing
Responding positively to children in troubling situations is not easy and it is especially difficult when you feel like you are saying the same things over and over and it is "not working". Remember that just because an approach "works" it does not necessarily make it a positive strategy.

Child-centred guidance focuses on relationship-building, modeling the way I want children to behave, giving children positive message about self, and providing new learning for next time.

The Continuum: A Flexible Approach
What I especially like about the continuum approach is that it is forgiving. If I happen to respond with a strategy on the right-hand side such as, “Arianna, get that bike off the grass!” (“ordering, directing and commanding” roadblock) I can backtrack and continue with a more positive approach such as, “You know what, I was so concerned that you were going to bump into Carlos when you were riding on the grass.” Recognizing what approaches you are using and where they are on the continuum is vital to your success in becoming more child-centred and becoming a positive role model for children. If you are predominantly responding with more directive and teacher-centred approaches from the right side of the continuum, it is time to refocus and work specifically on a problem-solving approach.

Do you need to use the skills in the exact order prescribed on the continuum? No, think of the continuum as a buffet table laid out with salads, appetizers, a variety of main courses, and dessert. Just as I pick and choose at a buffet table, I can pick and choose on the continuum. Sometimes, I don’t want salad, I want an appetizer instead; sometimes, I may not start with describing what I see, I might use an "I message" instead. If the child I am working with has a difficult time attending to a full "I message" then I need to adapt and just let him or her know the reason for my concern. What is important though is not to start all the time with “dessert” (teacher-directed responses), which is located to the far right on the continuum.

Add to the continuum framework other approaches and skills you are using to respond to children’s behaviour. Rank them—decide where they would be placed in relationship to the other strategies and incorporate them into your guidance repertoire.

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