

## Chapter 2

# Understanding Challenging Children and Children with Emotional and Behavioural Disorder

*Understanding emotional and behavioural disorders in mainstream schools*

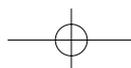
*Bill Rogers*

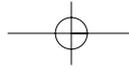
*All the teachers writing in this book have realised, early in their careers, that there are many factors in a child's life that affect their behaviour at school; we have little control over those factors:*

- *disturbing patterns of family dysfunction*
  - *disruptive parenting patterns*
  - *substance abuse*
  - *structural and generational poverty*
  - *long-term unemployment*
  - *a significant lack of positive male role-modelling in children (particularly – perhaps – in male children)*
  - *the characteristic diet of the child*
  - *the role, extent and kind of TV characteristically watched by the child*
  - *the kind of internet usage (by some children).*
- (Howell, 1993; Rogers, 2003; Rutter et al., 1979)*

*Factors such as how race, ethnicity, gender and even religion are typically communicated (in negative and stereotypical ways) in family dynamics can affect children's behaviour in self-defeating ways in a community like a school.*

*What all these teachers have done is to 'de-victimise' the child and not 're-victimise' him in the school setting. While many of the factors – noted above – can significantly affect a child's behaviour and self-perception (self-concept and self-esteem), they do not automatically bind him to dysfunctional self-*




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*coping, poor peer relationships and failure at school and beyond.*

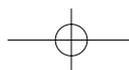
*These teachers – unfailingly – enable these children to believe in themselves and to value learning. They also encourage the child to find a positive sense of peer acceptance.*

Even if a child is 'at risk' (from family circumstances, special needs considerations or poor or dysfunctional behaviour at school), it is likely that they will be attending school on a more or less regular basis – particularly so at primary level. It is here, at school, that teachers (supporting each other) can make a difference. Children spend a third of their waking day at school. School can, and does, awaken a child's potential to *learn*; not just to learn literacy and numeracy skills (crucial as they are) but to learn that life has many possibilities – and that better, more positive choices can be made in life. A third of their waking day in a school – that's a hefty (legally required) slice of their life and development. Most children enjoy school, and cope well with the formal and informal demands of schooling and education. That small percentage of children who are frequently challenging, or emotionally behaviourally disordered, need some extra level (and kind) of support.

Every teacher (one hopes) considers the special needs that some children have in areas of literacy and numeracy. Schools allocate teaching personnel and time for such students. Programmes are developed, plans are made and implemented. The teachers in this book apply the same sense of 'need' to children with behaviour concerns and behaviour disorders. These children, too, need support as well as necessary and appropriate discipline. This support will need to include a teaching component related to the students' 'academic' and 'social survival skills' (Rogers, 2003). This is discussed at some length in Chapter 3.

Schools are a *crucial* factor in the total social mix. As Elizabeth McPherson notes in her essay, at early years level, the teacher may be, for some children, the most secure person in their day-to-day lives. In understanding challenging behaviours (and emotional and behavioural disorders), we need to understand that we work with, we relate to, a child – a person – not merely a difficult or challenging student.

- These essays affirm how teachers perceive challenging behaviour in their students. They note, frankly, how they sought *to understand* the disruptive and even bizarre behaviours exhibited by this (thankfully) small percentage of 'their children'.
- These teachers do not 're-victimise' a child because of where they are from, or their unfortunate progeny. They find ways to connect with – and then support – the child.
- Communication – these teachers seek to gain a *common* bridge between child and teacher; no mean feat. They share how they found ways to connect and build positive, workable, relationships.





- Each of these teachers honestly acknowledges the struggle, the frustrations and stress that working with challenging behaviour can occasion. They also *reflect on*, and learn from, that struggle.
- They acknowledge – and value greatly – the support of their colleagues in meeting the challenge of working with these children. This is a crucial factor in all that we do to enable, and work with, challenging children and their families.
- ‘Separating behaviour from the person’ is difficult when a child’s behaviour is lazy, rude, arrogant, mean-spirited, selfish, hostile and aggressive. While on the one hand these teachers advocate appropriate discipline (and consequences for disruptive or wrong behaviour), they do not hold grudges; they repair, rebuild and move on with the child; the teachers work with the child within.
- They provide supportive ‘structures’, ‘programmes’ or ‘plans’ to teach the child the *behaviour skills* they need, particularly the skills they will need at school (see Chapter 3).

At the end of the day, however, it is not the programmes we provide (essential as they are to a child’s learning), it is *the kind of teacher* who uses whatever teaching practice, strategy and content that enables the positive connections in these children’s lives.

### *Measurement of difference or meaning (when working with challenging children)*

#### *Ken Sell*

*Ken is an experienced teacher of over 15 years. For the last three years, he has been working as an advisory support teacher for Education Queensland in the Nambour District on the Sunshine Coast. He has designed and implemented many in-service workshops relevant to primary and secondary teachers as well as advising administrators in areas of social equity and the interpersonal dynamics found within schools. Ken is presently finishing a research project relating to his work in schools. In this account, Ken weaves the threads of three stories about children, which span over 15 years. These stories illustrate how, as teachers, we often significantly impact on the lives of our students. They illustrate how teachers demonstrate care and compassion through their role as a teacher. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ‘measure’ (with any accuracy) the effect of these many interactions we engage in as teachers. The meaning, however, can be demonstrated in the telling of the stories.*



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'He's dead.'

'How?'

'Car accident.'

'Is his father OK?'

'Yes, he wasn't in the car. He was running away.'

The look in the eyes suggested not all was right. Those around knew little of Michael, perhaps cared little for Michael. What could I do? I'm a teacher not a social worker. I'm not trained for this. Michael needed something, someone to connect with, to trust, to love. These were subjects not taught at university.

He was 11 when he died, hitch-hiking. Metal, blood, screams, silence.

Even in death, when a cold calmness surrounds the noises of sirens and the living, there is time for onlookers to make assumptions. Families torn apart in seconds. The mother, the father, the brothers and sisters – how do they feel? The officer by the roadside can see his own family. Visions of faces smiling, angry, laughing, talking, playing, working, sleeping. How this would tear his family apart!

Michael's family was torn apart well before the crunching metal took hold.

His mother had left him; gone to the big city, problems in the mind. She ran.

His father was running but going nowhere. He ran to the pub.

Now it was Michael's turn to run. He ran head on.

What was he thinking as he stood by the roadside, finger out, rain dripping, waiting for a stranger to become his friend, to drive him away? He was 11 years old. What was he running from?

Michael had started the marathon long ago. Long before I'd met him. He'd been hurt, emptied of trust. Lost. His smile gave a different impression. One of hope – there's a chance; I'm not a bad kid. The smile hid the confusion. He was confused and so was I. His smile carried all the emotion attached to someone crying for love; his face looked for peace, but his body was angry. He couldn't connect, he didn't know how. His eyes were saying, 'Please look after me', but his voice was saying, 'Get f\_\_\_ed. You can't make me do it! What's happening? I don't want to go home. Can I go with you? It isn't my fault. Don't get too close to me. Shit, I need help. Will you help?'

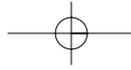
He's dead.

He can't be, he's only 11. A child, 11 years old, leaving home, in a stranger's car about to collide on the highway. Met head on by the loneliness of life, the noise of silence, the loneliness of death.

Did his father weep or was he too pissed? Did his mother weep? She may have – but for the overdose. People went to the funeral. It was a long time ago now. He'd be 26 all going well. Now I wonder who remembers the boy of 11.

Clinging to the cliffs, through the tunnels as black as the stockpiled coal on the sidings, the train made its way down the coast. Like that night of death, there was





a coldness about the air from the south as it shot up the escarpment. I was leaving one kind of work behind, apprehensive as to what to expect as the train pulled into the platform that is a university.

I know I could not have stopped Michael's death, but my training as a teacher left me ill-equipped to recognise the problems with Michael, to cope with Michael's emotional disturbances or to teach Michael about himself. The years of further education in an institution that pays scant attention to social justice in terms other than theoretical was never going to prepare me for Michael.

Like the officer at the roadside, I made assumptions. I thought those at the cutting edge would have an educated memory. It wasn't as I thought.

When I walked into the university, I was clear in my thoughts about education. I had vision, compassion and intent. When I walked out a qualified teacher, I suffered from fragmentation of thought and mixed messages about pedagogy, unable to declare with any confidence what education is all about.

Teaching, like parenting, doesn't come with a ready-made formula. Both Michael's parents and I made many mistakes. I'm lucky enough to have been able to learn from mine. I cried for Michael but I didn't know why.

Much later I found out.

### **Gee, you're a good bloke!**

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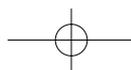
Years later, my aunt told me that regardless of what's happened, *leaving the door open* is the most important thing when working with people.

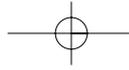
But sometimes finding the spare key to my house is difficult enough, let alone the key to the minds of students so that they realise they have unconditional access into our classroom. Even though sometimes when I do find the 'key' and open the door some students won't come in, this doesn't mean we should be selective in our invitations to enter; far from it. I firmly believe we do make a difference to the lives of all students we come in contact with.

It is the *type* of difference that is important.

This first story is a simple and uncomplicated one about the influence we have on children both young and adolescent. Recently on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's programme, *Radio National*, I heard someone talking about resilience. The point he was making is that although a group of children can grow up in very similar circumstances (namely structural poverty), some end up contributing positively to society while others are a cost to it. The man speaking on the radio believes the difference is partly due to the *quality* rather than quantity of childcare given to the child that makes the difference.

Teacher *quantity* of care is easily 'measurable' by those outside the relationship. However, it is a far more difficult task to measure the quality of the care we give students, because of the subjective nature of quality relationships and the fact that





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the results are not always immediate.

Listening to these ideas about resilience and the difference we as teachers make reminded me of the time I was given a nice bottle of red wine some five years after I had taught a child in Year 2. Unbeknown to me, this child was miserable and hated Year 1, and he was finding it difficult to come to school each morning. When I was leaving the school, the parent of this child gave me the bottle of wine in recognition of the work I had done in 'turning her son around' all those years ago.

'Thanks, but what did I do?' I asked the parent of a child heading down the path of school refusal.

She told me that she remembered the day her son came home and said that now he liked going to school. When she asked him why, he said, 'Mr Sell said, "Gee, you're a good bloke".'

Five words of encouragement to the boy. At the time, I thought nothing of it. However, five years later, I was told of it and nearly a further five years later, I began to understand what quality really is. So now when the economic rationalists come to measure my performance I say to them – when they look miserable and don't really want to be at work – 'Gee, you're a good bloke'.

## Terry

Like the first story, this one is also about a boy who lived in structural poverty and despair. The previous year, Terry nearly succeeded in providing a very well organised and experienced Year 1 teacher with an opportunity to have a 'nervous breakdown'. She refused but did suffer a great deal in the meantime and was exhausted by the end of the year. I wasn't going to become his second victim.

But how could I prevent this from happening? I worked on two things. First, I gathered as much information as possible about past teacher experiences and became determined to avoid those situations that lead to conflict. Not an easy task given Terry's need to be the 'boss of everything'. Second, I decided that Terry needed a trusting relationship if he was to develop the social skills expected and that this relationship would not be created through coercion. All that aside, I still had to deal with a boy whose life picture was less than happy. After two weeks of bloody hard work, I decided that this child needed only one rule to follow.

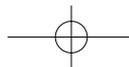
The rule was that *he was not to infringe on others' rights*.

Nothing else. Pretty simple.

What does it mean?

Good question and one I worked on throughout the year. In his language, the rule became: *he has to get along with others*.

This meant he didn't have to do his school work, line up, sit on the carpet, join in group work or anything if he didn't want to; *however*, when he was interacting with others (which he really wanted to do), he simply had to get along with them. Of





course, to teach the boy the skills he needed to get along with others, I needed help. This was a problem too big for me alone. Realising it was a shared problem, I enlisted the other students in the class to help and help they did. Before we made our plans, it was important to know what we were all talking about and what the problem was. As a group with a shared problem, we informed each other by being quite transparent about the problem. We then mapped the boy's misbehaviour so we could all recognise it as it happened and then we had a plan to do something about it.

We agreed the problem was that: *usually when Terry doesn't get his own way he throws a tantrum.*

Then we used a very transparent mapping process which the whole class – with the student – helps to construct. It is a very interesting process and one I've since used repeatedly with varying degrees of success.

I wrote on the board:

- 1 Terry wants to be the Boss. (He replied, 'Do not', and rubbed it off the board.)
- 2 Terry becomes verbally aggressive. ('F\_\_in' don't', as he rubbed it off the board.)
- 3 Terry becomes physically aggressive. ('Bullsh\_t!', as he kicks the furniture around the room and rubs it off the board.)
- 4 I have to 'remove' Terry from the room. ('Can't do that. I know my rights', as he is 'removed' kicking and screaming.)
- 5 Terry in a calm manner wants to return after about five minutes (and he does).

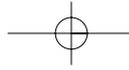
All through this, Terry 'did not want to know'. This was a very big room full of 'mirrors' for this student and I feel he didn't like what he saw. In his discussion, he proceeded to rub out each part as I wrote it up. The next day, I wrote the same thing on a piece of paper with a felt pen and this time he accepted it.

By doing this, we gave Terry a very good idea about his own behaviour and how his peers saw his behaviour at times. It also provided an 'instrument' for me – as his teacher – and the other students to identify what was coming next. It was a positive experience to watch them say to Terry, 'You're up to number 2. Do you really want to do this?'

Of course, there was far more to it than I've described. But we were confronting the reality as we saw it and we found agreement to that reality and the belief that it could move forward in a learning context rather than one of mere containment or management.

I firmly believe that if we put behaviour in the context of education, we can look at new and creative ways of developing teaching practice based on learning theory. With Terry, we spent a lot of time giving him an opportunity to recognise his current inappropriate behaviour and then learn the skills to change the misbehaviour. We had an open door policy for Terry, despite his misbehaviours, and we helped him change the picture in his own mind of schools and people in authority.





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His peers rallied to the cause like neighbours can rally together when faced with disaster that could destroy their community. They, too, learnt new skills about dealing with difficult people.

Before he left, just prior to the end of the year, he was still occasionally telling someone where to go, doing next to no school work set by me (he was already very good at readin', writing and the other thing) and generally misbehaving. I asked him what he had learnt in Year 2 at this school.

He replied, 'Mr Sell, I've learned to get on with people.'

Try measuring that.

#### *Changing perceptions of challenging behaviour: Tom and his teacher*

*Larry Taylor*

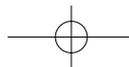
*Larry was transferred to a new and rapidly growing school a few weeks before the end of term three and given a 2/4 class. The children were drawn from eight different classes. The school was growing so fast that the classroom was a temporarily partitioned off section of the school library which had been partitioned once already and currently was home to a Year 6 class.*

*The children, without exception, were feeling unwanted and uncared for, having been uprooted from their existing classes so far into the year. They were less than impressed by their 'new' home and more than a little unsure of their 'new' teacher. He had to deal with tears and anger as he helped them move, and cope with the angst from parents as well.*

*Larry shares the 'strategies' that connected with his challenging students, noting that there are no 'formulas' for building the sorts of relationships that encourage positive change in a child's perception and behaviour.*

In my year 4 class, I noticed a young boy – Tom – looking sullen and discontented, already. Unhappy with his new lot, he dealt with this situation with an approach that some might call 'creative disobedience'. When the group lined up after breaks, Tom would be in the vicinity of the line leaning against a post. When asked to join the line properly, he would do so but stretch out his hand to the post and lean slightly towards it. When the line moved, he would wait until the last moment to release contact with the post. He looked at me at each stage with a look that dared me to say something. When I made the 'mistake' of doing so, the immediate response was along the lines of 'What? I'm in line.'

This type of scenario was also regularly played out in class. Tom would speak when silence was required, speak louder than necessary when quiet talk was asked for, be last to sit down when quickness was needed and so on. These





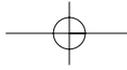
actions, however, were always accompanied by a well-thought-out, if somewhat manufactured, 'good reason'. I'm sure all of this was Tom's way of letting me know that he was not happy about being moved from his previous class. Instead of simply telling him that what he was doing was inappropriate – 'Tom, keep your voice down, thank you' – I found that asking a question – such as, 'Are you doing what everyone else is doing?' – was the more effective strategy (because Tom always had a 'reasonable' answer).

There were several other students in the group posing problems of their own, as well as Tom, and I took every opportunity to build a relationship with them as well. I did this by asking questions to find out what they were interested in and what they did in their spare time. With Tom, it was like pulling teeth initially; there was a great reluctance on his part to give me more than monosyllabic responses. As I showed more interest, however, he grudgingly gave more information. I made numerous attempts to hook into these interests, with little success, and I was becoming frustrated by the whole experience. The rest of the class were beginning to adjust to their new circumstances, but problems with Tom continued. I decided that whenever I needed to speak to Tom about some problem, I would call him over and speak to him quietly one-on-one so that less attention was drawn to the problem, but Tom frequently countered this by loudly saying, 'I didn't do anything!', or something similar, as he approached me.

There were times when juggling razor sharp knives in busy traffic seemed a more attractive proposition than going to work. I spent many days and nights pondering how best to deal with this – and I should add that we had regular class meetings from day one, where we all talked about what we were thinking and feeling about the changes we had been subject to. We also did 'getting to know you' and team-building activities, mixed in with a healthy dose of fun, but Tom steadfastly refused to buy into any of this. Then one day, unexpectedly, in a matter of minutes, everything changed forever. I had not thought through the particular strategy that I ended up using. When the breakthrough came, it did so from a seeming spur of the moment action on my part.

Without waiting for a problem to occur, I once again called Tom out to speak to me. My request was greeted by the now predictable loud voice, saying, 'What did I do now?', to which I quietly replied, 'You're not in trouble.' His demeanour changed instantly. I then sat on the carpet in front of a whiteboard divider and invited Tom to do the same. I picked up a whiteboard marker pen, drew a circle on the board and wrote Tom's name in it. I then said, 'This is what I know about you.' I drew a line out from the circle and at the end wrote 'likes' and then began saying and listing the things Tom had been telling me he liked. Then I drew a second line and at the end wrote 'friends' and then spoke and wrote down the friends he had talked about. I continued with 'good at', 'groups', 'music', 'TV shows', 'movies', 'books' and anything that I remembered that he had told me. I

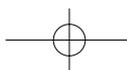




resisted the temptation to write anything that he might perceive as 'negative' and focused only on the 'positives'.

Tom mostly sat quietly and listened, occasionally correcting, clarifying or adding to some piece of information I was listing. I acknowledged these additions by amending what I had written and discussing some points with him. We were having a 'real' conversation for the first time and it was a pleasant experience. What happened next took me completely by surprise. Tom asked for the white-board marker, and then drew a circle on the board and wrote my name in it. He drew a line from the circle and then wrote 'likes' and began listing things like 'sketching' and 'computers'. As he went on listing things like 'good at science and maths', I became more and more amazed at how much he had learnt about me. But the last two things he wrote surprised me most of all. He wrote that I was 'friendly' and 'cared about kids'. If anyone had asked me how Tom perceived me, those two items would probably have been the last two things I would have ever considered. From that moment on, Tom and I got on really well. There was a new-found respect that altered all our perceptions and interactions from that moment on. Tom left the school, and that district, at the end of the year. Two years later, he returned to pay me a visit and the mutual respect was still there. I was interested in being updated on how he was going and what he was currently doing. He seemed to be equally interested in how I was going as I answered his similar questions about me.

When I look back on those early months with Tom, I think that the strategy I had spontaneously used allowed Tom to see that my overall perception of him was favourable. I had included words like 'friendly' too, because he was, towards everyone else. It also gave Tom some control, in that he was able to update or amend my perceptions of him as we went, something he would not normally have been able to do – at least, not usually in a positive way. Although I didn't think of the other half of this strategy, the half that Tom used, I now realise that I could have invited him to take the pen and list what he knew about me, having already modelled the process using him as the example. A possibly risky venture granted, but nevertheless informative. The value in doing so was, firstly, that Tom was now in control of the interaction, something he often tried to be anyway, although this was a different and more positive type of control. Secondly, it gave me an insight into how Tom perceived me. This was something that I often attempted to influence by my actions, but – prior to Tom's revelations – I had judged my actions to be unsuccessful and Tom's perception of me to be unfavourable. Obviously, I could not have been more wrong. Clearly, Tom had been unwilling to share anything favourable he had learnt about me, until after I had first shared – in an 'organised' way – the favourable impressions I had formed of him.





### *Finding a connection point for change in behaviour: Alex 'wins a race'*

*Karen Kearney*

*Karen shares her journey with a 12-year-old and how she helped him to 'belong'.*

*A Year 6 student (who we shall call Alex) had a one per cent attendance record and read at 'beginner' level. Alex had difficulty completing tasks and was assigned a peer tutor. When he did attend school, he spent a great deal of time with teachers from the Special Education Unit. Alex lacked social skills and often behaved aggressively toward other students. Not surprisingly, he spent most of his lunch and recess time under administrative supervision.*

*In this short essay, Karen shows how she was able to find a connection point for a change in the student's sense of belonging at school.*

During the first lesson for which I took the class (as a student teacher), I attempted to establish a rapport with Alex, but he responded by covering his work and placing his head on the desk. Alex stated that he 'knew what to do' and that his peer tutor would help him if he had any problems. I subsequently actively observed Alex's activities and noted that half way through the lesson, he had not attempted the task.

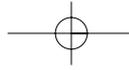
Later, I discretely asked Alex why he had not started the activity and he replied that he was 'not interested'. In an effort to identify motivators that could be adapted to aid Alex's education, I asked what did interest him and he replied 'running and sport'. I therefore suggested to Alex that if he finished his work, I would take the class for a run in preparation for the upcoming athletics carnival.

Alex immediately commenced to put some effort into the task – although he did rush, was initially reluctant to accept assistance and demonstrated a short concentration span. During the next 20 minutes, Alex sought immediate progression to the sports activity by constantly claiming to have finished the task. On each occasion, I acknowledged his efforts and encouraged him to continue. When Alex did eventually complete the task, his personal satisfaction was quite evident.

I adjourned the class to the oval soon afterwards. Alex was very enthusiastic and difficult to quieten. I informed the students that we would 'run the first lap as a slow jog to warm up' and then do some stretching. The race was to be then run with a requirement that runners stay within the marked lanes. As an incentive, I informed the students that anyone who obeyed the rules and completed the race before I did would receive a prize.

Alex and a few other children immediately raced around the oval during the warm-up lap. Alex then approached me and stated that he had won. I asked him





what my instructions were for the first lap, but he did not reply. I restated my instructions and then commenced some stretching exercises. I asked Alex if he knew of any stretches; he did and *ably demonstrated an exercise to the class*. Alex's turn (possibly first ever) at peer tutoring appeared to help him over his earlier disappointment and he enthusiastically completed all the stretching exercises.

We then conducted the race and at the finish, Alex informed me that he had won and wanted his prize. However, Alex had not stayed in the 'lanes' and I advised him that he was disqualified from receiving the prize because he had not complied with the rules. Two boys who completed the race correctly were awarded prizes.

As we returned to class, Alex told me that he knew he was the fastest and that next time he would win. I replied that if he completed his work tomorrow, we would go out and race again.

The next day, Alex completed his work and won an important race.

### *Choosing to teach: choosing to make a difference*

*Elizabeth McPherson*

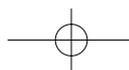
*'When I chose to be a teacher people said that it would be difficult, but I certainly didn't think it would be like this...'*

*Elizabeth scans the students in her class group of infants and reflects on the wide range of emotional and behavioural disorders present in a number of her students. Aware that many of the 'reasons' for such behaviour lie outside her control, she nonetheless asks how a teacher can still make a difference.*

When I was completing my BA and about to start my Bachelor of teaching, that's when all of our friends began, in earnest, their full scale attempts to dissuade me from the profession of teaching. Surely, I thought, what could be a more honourable, rewarding and fulfilling career than teaching? One year down the track and now I see what some of them meant. In my first year of teaching, I have been exposed to more diseases than a third world tourist, had less sleep than an emergency room doctor and been exposed to more unusual, strange, even bizarre people than an American talk show host.

At university, the proverbial 'they' enjoyed using analogies such as 'a child is like a flower, that when nurtured, will blossom into a thing of beauty'. Within the first week of knowing my more challenging students, I was tempted to use the analogy 'some children are like weeds that take over the garden'. In a perfect world and even on a good day in the classroom, the first analogy is true, yet easy to forget. This year, I have often needed to remind myself that my children are 'flowers', not 'weeds'.

On teaching rounds, I felt a connection with the children with whom I worked, I felt close to them. But in my first year on the job, I would have to say that I have (for





the most part) felt like a mother with post-natal depression, longing to feel a connection to her child, but often feeling frustration and resentment. I found the first few months of teaching frustrating and heartbreaking at times. Most of my children came from dysfunctional, violent or underprivileged homes and my classroom, despite my best efforts, was not the educational 'utopia' that I had hoped it would be.

Then, one day, I heard a startling statistic at a professional development session: that children hear 100 negative comments to every one piece of encouragement they receive. The next day, I walked into my classroom determined to focus on the positives. As the year has progressed, I have learnt to become closer to my children and have come to accept them for who, and what, they are. One of my achievements this year has been developing a close relationship with a particular child who used to hide under tables and refuse to come out (p. X). This particular child refused to join the rest of the class or do anything, was petrified of the playground, of specialist classes, of theme days or anything out of the ordinary. Just recently at the school concert, not only did he go out on the stage, but he even led his line on; I was so proud. He still climbs up onto my lap whenever he is in need of 'sanctuary', but he has certainly blossomed.

Another one of my 'flowers' is the child of parents with heroin addiction. He was so violent that the assistant principal asked him to remain indoors at play times so as not to jeopardise the safety of others. This child has had a lot of trouble sitting still or focusing on his learning tasks and is extremely impulsive. I have always said to my own mum and dad, 'In what other job do you see potential doctors, teachers, parents; the person who will cure cancer, car thieves, murderers, prime ministers?' I looked at this beautiful little boy and thought, 'What will become of you, what chance do you have, what horrors do you go home to at night?' I have worked hard *while he is with us at school* to help make this child feel important. He sometimes sits on my chair and chooses people who are 'sitting beautifully' to go and get their play lunch, and he is now the one who tries to have the 'hardest working table'. At one level, I see myself reflected in him. When he is playing, he pretends to be me, and I know I am doing a good job when I like what I see.

I went to the birthday party of one girl in my class as a surprise guest, organised by her parents. While I was there, I was amazed to see that I was the one they all came to for conflict resolution, encouragement, opinions ... I discovered that teachers are never 'off duty'. After the party, I drove another one of my students and her mother home. On the way home, she brought to my attention that we, the teachers, are the ones who spend the most time with their children. In *some* cases, we know the children better than their parents and may be the only really stable and positive influence in their lives. This is perhaps the first thing that made me want to become a teacher.

Teaching is definitely not a job you go into for the fame and glory; you do it to make a difference.



**40** HOW TO MANAGE CHILDREN'S CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

These days, there is an ever-increasing push towards globalisation. As a result, there has been an increased push towards technology in the classroom in addition to the traditional three Rs. As teachers become evermore accountable for the performance of their students, the academic side of schooling is pushed to the forefront of classroom planning while childhoods may be at risk of being marginalised.

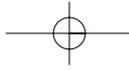
I too – at times – have been guilty of pushing my students too hard and have needed to remind myself that they are only five years old. Talking to one of my parent helpers, I commented on one of my student's writing – 'Can you remember writing like this at this age?' – to which she replied, 'I can't even remember learning to write in grade prep' (infants). We are putting more and more weight on little shoulders and I, for one, think that we should allow space for 'developmental play' in our work programmes.

During the lead up to the school concert, I was reminded of the importance of play in the lives of my students. We were heading off to an unscheduled rehearsal when one of my boys began to show obvious signs of distress. 'What about free time?' he said. 'Why are they making us do our dance again, we know how to do it ...' As I thought about getting him a paper bag to breathe into, I was reminded, yet again, of the desperate need for play in children's overall development. I recall seeing a child from my mother's school who developed 'environmental autism' from having no stimulation as an infant. From birth, he was left to lie in his cot for hours on end and as he grew he was never allowed to play with paints, play-dough, puzzles ... anything that 'messed up the house'. As a result, he was placed in a special school when he turned five. Although I make no claim to be an expert on this topic, I do claim to be genuinely scared by this story.

Some of the highlights of this year – as a teacher – have been:

- The time Corey cut the tip of Luke's finger off, and – carrying a hysterical Luke – I found myself drenched in blood.
- The time Lachlan told the Italian teacher that he was going to 'rip her f\_\_\_ing arms off' and the numerous occasions on which he threatened to 'burn the f\_\_\_ing school down'. (He didn't – thankfully.) Later, he would come over to me, hold me and seek reassurance that 'I was going to stay, wasn't I? Don't leave, Elizabeth!' I didn't.
- The period of several weeks in which Luke refused to come out from under the table.
- The candid revelation of Nick's mother that she was a heroin addict (that helped explain why Nick was often late and why she often forgot to pick him up at the end of the school day and ...).
- Finding out that some of my students are confusingly related through various torrid 'affairs' of their parents.
- The day that Damien's auntie got him in a head lock and practically ripped his





ear off during a sports lesson I was conducting.

- Having dirt thrown in my eyes, and being kicked, punched and sworn at by a student on yard duty.
- Another teacher finding one of the students soaked to the bone (rolling in a puddle) because, in her words, she had decided to ‘fall’ repeatedly into a puddle.
- Seeing nits for the first time and many, many times since.

Every recess or lunchtime, I wait for the inevitable knock on the staff room door announcing that one of my children needs an ice pack because they have been punched or kicked or are covered in some new strain of violent rash. All I could say to the other teachers (with a wry smile) was that I didn’t give birth to them – *but I am their teacher.*

We live in a society where some of our children present as ‘damaged goods’ in school.

*It is not their fault.*

At the end of my first year of teaching, I am left with one thin, elusive but crucial strand of idealism: if I can make a difference in one child’s life, if one child finds some self-worth in my class, if one child makes something of themselves, then I have done my job.

*I am a teacher.*

