

Every Child Can Learn Podcast Episode 6: Behavioural Difficulties

- **Intro**

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- **Episode intro**

Glades: Welcome to our sixth episode of Every Child Can Learn, a podcast series about how to meet every child's learning needs - even if they are a little more complicated.

My name is Glades and I work as the Lead Trainer at Backup Uganda. Today, I am joined by Gertrude. Gertrude, please introduce yourself?

Gertrude: Thank you Glades. My name is Gertrude and I work at Backup Uganda as a trainee. In today's episode of Every Child Can Learn, we will be taking you through our last learning difficulty for now: behavioural difficulties. If you listen to the word, I know a lot of you will start asking yourselves about your own behaviours, because what I know is, we all have unique behaviours, whether good or bad. Today's episode will help us understand better.

- **Recap**

Glades: So far, we have had five episodes about different learning difficulties. I hope you have loved it and that you have already started trying out the different strategies with your children, whether you are a parent, a teacher, a neighbor, an aunt, it doesn't matter. Let's look at the previous episode for a second. In episode five of Every Child Can Learn, we talked about autism, where we explained in detail what autism is and the different ways of how to support a child with autism, by addressing their challenges in social interaction and communication. If you haven't listened to it yet, please you can find it on our website, www.backupuganda.org, or offline at Mega FM, Divine Video & Music Library, Highland Primary School, Gulu Prison Primary School, Gulu Town Primary School, Mary Immaculate Primary School, St Joseph's Primary School, or Christ the King Demonstration Primary School. We have to remember that children with autism or with any other learning difficulties also have their strengths amidst all their challenges, therefore we could still use that to be able to help them.

Today, we are going to look at yet another category of difficulties that most of us have experience with, and especially our children. This is what we call behavioural difficulties. A lot of times both parents and teachers keep saying, this child's behaviour is terrible, I am tired of it and we fail to know what this thing called 'behaviour' means, where it comes from, what influences it, and what we can do about it. How about we get to understand it today?

- **Topic: Behavioural difficulties**

Gertrude: The simplest way to explain the word behaviour, is 'the way someone acts'.

Behavioural difficulties are difficulties that are noted when there are constantly unacceptable habits in behavior. If this keeps taking place in the learning environment - for example, in the classroom or at school - and they interfere with a child's learning, we can call them learning difficulties. In fact, a lot of behavioural difficulties can come from specific learning difficulties. Remember ADHD? Children with ADHD often show behavioural difficulties as part of their disorder. We only talk about these to be behavioural difficulties when the learner repeatedly shows such behaviours, so that does not mean that if a child is stubborn on a particular day, they immediately have a behavioural difficulty - it has to be consistent over time. An example may be a child who is aggressive and does not care about the impact of their behaviour on other children at all, they are not sorry for their actions. Like Glades said, behavioural difficulties are a category of difficulties, or what we call an 'umbrella term'. This means that there are different behavioural problems that fall in this group. We bring them together, because there are a number of strategies to deal with these difficulties that are somehow similar.

In all the previous episodes, we have been reminding you of the different words that are often used for children with difficulties, which does not help them. These are words like being big-headed, lazy, slow et cetera. This also happens with children struggling with behavioural difficulties: they are children given names like very stubborn or notorious. These names do not change these children, but instead they worsen their situation because it makes them get stigmatized. Now, let's look at some of the signs that could show that a child has a behavioural difficulty.

- **Characteristics**

Glades: Let's first think of some types of behaviour that we usually see as problematic. I am sure you have already thought of some examples when you heard we will be talking about behavioural difficulties. How about shouting? Using bad words? Bullying? Fighting? How about we take some time to analyze the different types of behaviour and behavioural difficulties a bit more?

Behaviour can basically be explained in two different ways: we have behaviours that happen from the outside and those that happen from within someone. When it comes to the behaviour that happens from the outside, this means you easily see the behaviour that someone shows.

Behaviours that you can notice from the outside include examples like laughing, crying, fighting,

running around - any behaviour you can easily observe. When we talk about behavioural difficulties that children show from the outside, they are the kids who rarely follow rules either from home or school, they may steal, they could be aggressive, they destroy property like desks from school, or utensils from home. Of course the parents and teachers will probably have tried to correct this behaviour, but like Gertrude already mentioned, behavioural difficulties are persistent: they keep happening and are not corrected so easily. Yet, because children with a difficulty like this are often interfering with what is happening around them and seen by others, these difficulties usually receive quite a bit more attention than others.

Gertrude: Then, we also have behaviours that happen from within, these are not easily seen by other people. We can think of an example like how you talk to yourself, in your mind. This can happen in both a positive and a negative way. If you keep telling yourself that you are a bad person, that you are not capable of doing anything, that you are worthless, et cetera, then we will still speak of a behavioural difficulty that will very much affect you in your life. This is something that children do a lot as well, and most of the time it is something you are doing without being aware. It can severely interrupt children's learning, but it is a behaviour that is almost invisible. You can often suspect it when a child is withdrawn, afraid to make mistakes, lonely, or not sharing what is bothering them. Young children often complain of headaches and stomach pain when this is the case, when they have not yet learned how to express their emotions but they do feel the burden of it. Due to the quiet nature of these symptoms, children who show behavioural difficulties this way may not receive support as quickly as those with more obvious symptoms. This means it is something we should be keen about when monitoring our children.

- **Causes**

Glades: When you look at all the different episodes of Every Child Can Learn so far, you will find that the direct causes of all these learning difficulties originate from the brain, its development and any damage that may be affecting it. Likewise, the key causes of most severe behavioural difficulties originate from the brain as well, but they do sometimes connect with the behaviour that children learn when they grow up.

An example of this is what we call disruptive behaviour disorders. A group of difficulties that involve symptoms like: unwillingness to follow any rules, being aggressive towards others and not feeling bad about it. In most cases, a child with a disorder like this may have inherited this from the parents or earlier generations, and the problem seems to lie with how the brain responds to what is happening around the child: they need stronger input to actually experience a reaction to it. For example, most of us will easily reach a limit when we realize we are hurting someone else. Children with this type of disorder will take much longer to reach that point. The signals that are sent between the different parts of the brain and the body do not work the way they should be working. You can imagine how a disorder like this interferes with a child's learning at school, because they are expected to interact and learn together with other children well, without

becoming aggressive and causing any pain or problems. This is why we say it can come with a learning difficulty.

Another important aspect we cannot do without is the environment. It plays a big role in shaping our behaviours. This means that sometimes, whatever happens around us, shapes us either in a good way or bad way depending on how we respond to it. It means that environmental factors contribute to the behaviours of our children. For example, the upbringing by their parents, the different groups of peers they mix up with, expectations from parents, like that their children should always be the best performers, and the way children feel attached to their parents or not. Although we may not entirely blame parents for children's behavioural difficulties, they can definitely make it better or worse, especially if a child has already inherited the likelihood of developing such difficulties from their parents.

- **How to help children with behavioural difficulties**

Gertrude: Just like we have discussed the different strategies of how we can help children with learning difficulties both at home and in school in our previous episodes, we would love to also share with you the different strategies of how we can help children with behavioural difficulties.

When we experience children with behavioral difficulties, what we usually do is to look at the problematic behaviour itself, and how we can make it stop. Most of us have straightforward ways of doing that, and these often include some form of punishment. Whether that means taking away the child's toy, making them do tasks they do not want to do, or perhaps beating them, it all comes down to the same thing: make something unpleasant happen, so that the child learns to not show the problematic behaviour again. What we tend to forget, is to look at why the child is showing the behaviour in the first place. Every behaviour comes with an immediate outcome, or what we like to call a 'reward'. For example, if a child is stealing food at school, the immediate reward might be they get satisfied. That reward points you to the reason for the behaviour, in this case: the child was stealing food to get satisfied, because he or she was not getting enough during lunch. Once you understand this, it can help you think of the possible solutions, which usually focuses on taking away the reason for the behaviour, rather than punishing the behaviour. It means the way you react to the behaviour will always depend on the reason for the behaviour, there may not be one solution for all the bad behaviours. When you take away the reason for the behaviour, the chance of the behaviour happening again becomes much smaller. In this case, having a conversation with the cook at school could take away the reason for the child to steal food - in addition to explaining to the child that stealing is bad, of course.

Another example would be a child jumping on the bed before sleeping every night. This can be problematic, that keeps the other children in the room awake. If your child is jumping on the bed for 15 minutes, what will happen after that? What will be the immediate 'reward'? Exactly, they will get tired. What would be the reason for wanting to get tired? What if your child has been watching cartoons for an hour right before bed? Could it be that they have so much energy that

they cannot sleep immediately, so they first have to do something else to make them tired? Now you have discovered both the immediate reward and the reason for the jumping. This helps you find a solution, and another way to have the child get the 'reward'. For example, if you make sure your child stops watching cartoons an hour before the bedtime and does something active first, falling asleep will be much easier, and the jumping will no longer be necessary. In summary: when you see problematic behaviour in a child, try and find the immediate reward, and the child's reason for wanting the reward. Then, find a different way for the child to still get what they want, without having to show the problematic behaviour. This is an experiment I am going to leave for you to think about. Can you try it out in your own home or classroom?

Glades: Another way that can help deal with behavioural difficulties, is to model the behaviour you want to see. Both as a teacher and as a parent, you are expected to be a positive role model and behave in the same way you expect your learners to. For example, if you are a teacher and you ask your learners to always be on time, make sure you demonstrate or show a good example of time management. Like when your lesson starts at 9am and you report to class 30 minutes late, and you keep doing this continuously, your learners will be likely to adopt the same and say "Madam Mary is always late for her classes, so we will enter the classroom if she comes". Our team has seen these examples many times. You can hardly expect children to show a certain type of good behaviour if you do not show them what that looks like. Similarly, if you ask your child to keep the bedroom organized, ensure your level of organization matches it. If your sitting room is very messy, yet you do not accept the same from your child, how should your child know what exactly they are supposed to do? If you want your child to be considerate of other people's feelings, but you are not considerate of theirs, then how will they learn to do this? Identify what counts as good behaviour and how you want your learners or your children to behave. Then, work on ways to communicate and show it. You can even open conversations with children about it and ask for their input, so that they are actively involved in the process. Based on this, you could consider establishing a Code of Conduct for your classroom or even your home. At the start of a new school year for example, both you and your learners or children could work together to establish this. Discuss the different types of behaviour that you think are acceptable and unacceptable and how you want everyone to act towards each other, such as 'treat each other with respect'. It is important to use practical examples of what that looks like. You can even include role play to practice this. Involving the children in this is important, as it gives them a sense of ownership and in return they agree to following the code of conduct themselves. It always helps to make sure your communication is clear, specific and consistent. The way you comment can have a big impact on the way children perceive you. For example, "hand over your homework to me at the beginning of the lesson on Monday" is much more specific than "Hand your homework in on Monday". In doing it this way you have communicated to the learners exactly what you expect them to do. As a parent, you can be specific about the type of behaviour you are not happy with. I know a sentence like "Stop that" is so common for all of us to use. If we would be specific, we would say "I want you to stop shouting, because I cannot hear the radio".

Gertrude: Whether you are a parent, a teacher or both, recognizing good behaviour and achievements is always crucial. Most children misbehave from time to time – that’s just a fact of childhood. However, they also learn new things and make very good progress every day, and that’s an achievement in itself. When a child behaves well or completes a good piece of work, make it known. Tell them well done, show the rest of the class how proud you are. In doing so, other children are more likely to behave positively to get a similar reaction.

This relates to the use of positive reinforcement, which is more of giving someone a reward for doing something that you wanted them to do. We have seen both parents and teachers do this before. Did you know that this motivates children so much to show the same type of good behaviour again? In classrooms and in home, we usually see children who receive positive reinforcement from their teachers or their parents, those who receive negative reinforcement or punishments, and there is also a group of children who are often just ignored. Let’s try to put yourself in the child’s shoes: how do you feel when you are punished? And when you are ignored? How about when you are rewarded? What makes it most likely for you to be motivated to show a type of good behaviour that someone is asking from you? For example, when you are at work, what would motivate you more: a punishment when you are doing something wrong, or a reward when you are doing something right? Positive reinforcement at this point is very important, it motivates children and even adults to continue trying and not to give up on their dream. When you ignore a child and not correct or reward the efforts they make, if you give negative feedback only, no child loves that, it can easily make them stop trying. Instead, you would appreciate both the effort made and good results or behaviour to encourage them to keep it up.

Glades: There are different types of rewards you could use: material or non-material rewards. Material rewards could be in the form of a small gift, like pencils, books, sweets, anything you can manage. Non-material rewards could be compliments, thanking them, singing for them, clapping and many others that make a child feel good. Another way of rewarding could be when a child earns points for specific behavior that can lead to a reward. Let's say you want a child to stop fighting his brother or sister and to solve this kind of disagreement by talking. Every time this child solves a disagreement by talking it out without fighting, you can agree that they earn themselves a point, perhaps in the form of a sticker. After the child has collected a specific number of points that you have agreed on together in advance - let’s say, 10 points - they can choose a specific reward they would like to have. This could be either a sweet, ice cream or 30 minutes of watching tv, depending on what they like very much. It may be helpful to agree on the options for rewards in advance together. This way, you encourage the behaviour you want and let the child practice it, rather than punishing the behaviour you do not want.

Gertrude: In general, it will always be helpful to be friendly and accommodative as much as possible. We can learn to be nice to our children and supportive of them, we can also model words like ‘thank you’, ‘sorry’ and ‘please’ for them to learn to use if they are requesting for

something or asking for permission to do something. All this can bring about good behaviours in children, especially when you make an effort to talk to them instead of being judgmental. This is one of the areas where parents who are using abusive words towards their children go wrong, for example calling them useless, stubborn, or ungrateful. I want to encourage parents to show love to their children despite their busy schedule and make time to follow up their learning and behaviour: how are they performing and behaving at school, are they doing their exercise right, have they completed their homework? Do they like their school and their class? Are they getting along with the other children? Attending the parents meetings at school is a good step in this, but I want to encourage every parent and teacher who is listening to connect more frequently than that.

Teachers, if you are not doing this, please make it a habit to communicate with parents. Maintaining communication with parents every time is essential for managing challenging behaviour. Keep the parents in the know when their child has misbehaved, and ensure that they agree on similar rules to use at home and at school. Parents, meeting up with your child's teachers on how to find the different strategies to help your children will create similar expectations for your child in all their environments. Children do not always behave the same when at school as they do at home, so it is important to learn from each other to find a helpful way forward.

Lastly, a reminder: nearly all children misbehave from time to time, in different environments, and for many reasons, whether they are dealing with a behavioural difficulty or not. As long as you make an effort to understand the reasons for this behaviour and you have a range of options to try to deal with this without causing harm to the child, you are doing a great job.

- **Closing**

Glades: Thank you for listening to our sixth podcast on how every child can learn. By now, we have gone through the most common learning difficulties. We hope this is helping you recognize some of the difficulties that you may have seen already, and that you are getting new ideas that you can use to help children who are dealing with these difficulties. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us for more information, we would love to hear from you.

- **Outro**

Glades: Thank you for listening to Every Child Can Learn. Please share your thoughts with us! Join the conversation on Facebook or send your questions to 0772630078. Do you want to learn more about Backup Uganda and stay updated about our activities? Check our website on www.backupuganda.org and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn.