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WORKING WITH CHILDREN SENSITIVELY

Prerana's Guide for Caregivers to Sensitive-ly
Work with Children

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WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Engaging with children in Child Care Institutions can be a difficult process. It requires kindness, patience and strength. Here are some tips for caregivers to deal with children sensitively.

Please note that this document is developed based on actual observations and field experiences of counselors and caregivers working with children in institutional settings. This is in no way an exhaustive list but a work in progress.

COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN



1. **Listen to children** - Whenever a child is seen engaging in an unacceptable behavior or is found doing something that is unacceptable, the child should be first asked what he/she was up to. After knowing what the child was doing, an adult can explain why a behavior is inappropriate. In order to avoid shaming, embarrassing or humiliating the child, the caregivers should hold this conversation one- on-one with the child and avoid confronting the child in front of the other children.
2. Talk about inappropriate behavior without demeaning their self worth or attacking their personality or character.
3. When correcting behaviour, provide a calm explanation for your preferences. Giving a reason helps children understand the implications of their behaviour for others (e.g., if your child teases another child because they wear glasses, explain that wearing glasses helps the child to see better and remind them that teasing can hurt others feelings).
4. Tell the child what you **do** want them to do rather than what you **don't**. In most cases, it's simple to turn a negative sentence into a positive one. For example, instead of saying 'Don't walk so close to the road', say 'Come and walk next to me'.

5. Often, we remember to reprimand children for their mistakes and correct them but forget to appreciate them for achievements and healthy behavior. A simple ‘you did a very good job today!’ can help children feel good about themselves and reinforce healthy behavior.
6. Do not verbally or physically abuse children. This hurts them and teaches them that abuse is a problem-solving technique, which they are bound to use to solve their own problems. Take abuse between children seriously as well and teach them alternate ways to solve problems.
7. Avoid impatient body language like eye rolling, foot tapping or sighing. This can discourage a child from talking.
8. Hold conversations at the appropriate time and place. It is also important to address an issue in a timely manner. If one waits too long to address a situation, sometimes the child will not remember the incident or more often than not, it will not register that they did something wrong or unacceptable, thereby causing them to repeat the behavior.
9. Refrain from labeling children negatively (for eg: *manda, aalsi, moti, sukdi, bewakoof*). All labels related to looks, intellect and behavior should be avoided. If you see a child lying, you can talk about the situation and address the lying instead of labeling the child as “liar” or “*chor/stealer*”
10. Apologize to children when you make mistakes. This helps children understand that everybody makes mistakes and that mistakes can be rectified. Children often learn through modeling – by observing other individuals and imitating them. Hence, apologizing to them when you are wrong will teach them to apologize when they are wrong.
11. When children ask questions, you do not have to know all the answers. Admit it when you do not know something. This helps children learn that it is okay to not know everything and that new knowledge can always be acquired through effort.
12. Use conversation as an opportunity to keep up with adolescent activities and relationships. Stay interested, and gently ask questions and seek explanations for their behaviour.
13. Praise their efforts, not just their results. A child needs to know that it is okay to fail.
14. When the child returns from school, college or any vocational training centre make a point to ask how was his/her day in school/college/ vocational training centre.

15. Ensure that you maintain confidentiality when children trust you with their stories. This builds trust and helps them accept you as a safe space they can come to when they need adult help. In case the child discloses anything threatening or about an abuse:
 - Acknowledge that the child is being courageous in sharing a difficult experience or information
 - Validate that their decision to trust and share with you was a good, safe and responsible one
 - Reassure the child that specific steps will be taken to protect them and other children or adults affected by the event/experience
 - If possible identify the next steps that the caregivers will be taking to ensure the safety of the child and others affected
 - Follow-up and check-in with the child with regards to feelings of fear, shame, anxiety, relief that they may be experiencing following disclosure
16. Ensure that consistent messages are given to the child. Hence, it is important for caregivers to regularly communicate with each other.
17. Address children with their names, even in your internal communication and not as POCSO Case, Missing child, ITPA case, Trafficking case, Suicide case, etc.

DEALING WITH EMOTIONS & ATTACHMENT



1. The best way to work with children is to be empathetic towards them. Children can quickly understand who understands them and who cannot understand them. When a child has a fight and is angry with everyone, caregiver could go near and ask permission to sit nearby. The caregiver could say that “I can understand that you are angry and do you want to talk about it?”

2. As an adult living with children, express your emotions on the child's behavior. Only being patient is not the way to deal with children experiencing emotional and behavioral challenges. Having conversations about others feelings is required too as it helps the child build skills for empathy and considering different perspectives. Let them know that the staff is human too and not just an authoritarian figure.
3. Use the language of "anger expression" (appropriate and inappropriate) instead of anger management or "controlling anger". Do not seek tips for "controlling" child's anger. Anger may have been a useful emotion for children who were abused as that emotion made them protect themselves and realize that they don't feel safe.
4. When children are distressed or aggressive, help them to calm down and then try to have a conversation. When children are triggered (having a strong emotional and physical reaction) they do not access to the part of the brain that helps them think rationally. Therefore, it is important and will be more effective if caregivers help the child stabilize emotionally by using a range of tools such as grounding or relaxation exercises before disciplining, discussing behavior corrective measures. Giving them a stress ball, mandala sheet, etc. might help the child to calm down.

After the child has calmed down, the staff/parent should have a conversation with the child about what made him/her angry. It is not helpful if you ask children not to be angry. Anger is an emotion and an adult can teach the child to express it healthily. Address the anger and tell the child to express it in words. Sometimes due to power dynamics between the child and staff, the child may not feel comfortable to express the anger. In our culture we are taught to respect elders, which mostly translates as you cannot express your anger towards them. If the child does not have a dialogue about the anger, it will lead to bottling up of the anger and resentment towards the adult causing defiance to follow anything that is told to the child. (Authoritarian parent figures that have high demandingness and low responsiveness).

5. When a staff realizes that the child is going to be aggressive and say bad things about the staff's character, the staff can tell her/him to think about what s/he actually feels and write it down in a letter than trying to hurt the staff by saying nasty things. The staff may naturally get angry as the child starts to say hurtful words but the more the staff reacts the child will adapt the way of expressing anger. It may help to acknowledge the impact the child's words are having in a manner that does not place the responsibility on the child, for example, "I can see that you are angry and hurting. The words that you are saying are hurting me and making me angry/frustrated as well. I don't think we can have a helpful conversation when we are both so upset."

6. Teach the child difference between response and reaction. For example: child says to the staff “I don’t want to study”.
Reaction: You never like studying you only want to play all the time.
Response: Can you tell me why you don’t want to study? It is not always fun to study specially when we have to study something we don’t enjoy or is challenging. Sometimes we have to do things that are hard so that we can keep learning and growing. What is it that is making it hard for you to study today? Let’s talk about it.
7. Sexual abuse in the past may cause sexual dysfunction or excessive sexual acting out. Let the child seek help from a counsellor in such cases. Finding the child while engaging in sexually reactive behavior should not be used as a reason for punishment or scolding.
8. Encourage parent(s)/guardian(s) to meet the children as much as they can. It helps the child to build trust and reduces the attachment issues they face which reflect on their behavior. In early childhood it also helps in the brain development of the child.
9. Model empathy and compassion in your engagements with children and recognize and encourage empathy and acts of kindness among children that will make them live together in harmony.
10. It is normal for children especially in the adolescent age group to explore their sexuality. The caregivers need to accept and deal with dignity when a child identifies himself/herself/themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or other sexual orientation. Discriminating children based on sexual orientation can affect their mental well-being.

SETTING RULES



1. Effective caregiving is a combination of setting boundaries and structures and providing autonomy.
2. Children may not conform to all the rules and the staff can decide what are acceptable. Extreme disciplining may lead to defiance in children.

3. Encourage children to ask questions about rules and have a discussion with them on why certain rules are important. By teaching children to be blindly compliant, we are discouraging critical thinking, which is a valuable characteristic. In our culture, good children are children who blindly listen to adults without questioning them. This not only hampers critical thinking but teaches them that adults are always right which is untrue.
4. While working with adolescents recognize that they are developing ideas that might differ from your own. Unless these ideas place the adolescent in danger of harm to self or others, accept their beliefs as an example of their developing individuality.
5. Don't deny children participation in activities, events they were looking forward to attend as a punishment for breaking rules unless the same was announced beforehand.

SETTING CHILDREN'S ROUTINES



1. A child's day is the best when it is filled with art, play and some time with friends.
2. Adults require 8 hours of sleep for a good mental and physical health and children require 8-9 hours of sleep at a stretch, make sure the children's schedules include their minimum sleep. An afternoon nap does not compensate for the hours missed at night.
3. When children are napping in the daytime, do not wake them up for counselling sessions or any other activity by asking them to compromise their sleep; this will lead to anger and demotivation to do that particular task. Encourage a child to go for activities when he/she is awake.