

POSITIVE APPROACHES TO CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Promoting positive behaviour is a key feature of both the Portage approach and the guidelines of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It is important not to lose sight of the positive nature of the Portage approach when we are dealing with difficult issues such as tackling challenging behaviour. During the workshop we have considered how to teach children new skills and break tasks down into smaller steps. This applies to teaching a child 'how to behave' just as much as it does to teaching a child to post a shape, learn colour names, etc. So, we must continue to apply the Portage Principles of:

- ✓ being positive
- ✓ setting goals - looking forward
- ✓ using a small steps approach
- ✓ using clear language

GUIDANCE ON SUPPORTING BEHAVIOUR

Understanding the child's perspective

Establishing clear boundaries and setting reasonable expectations

Discussion with parents and carers

Praising children when wanted behaviour occurs

Promoting positive behavioural responses

Giving children every chance to regulate their responses

Developing skills to co-operate with others

BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

Behaviour, like other skills, develops as the child matures. The behaviours we can typically expect will depend upon the child's developmental level. The children we are working with in Portage may have additional support needs in developing social skills just as they do in other areas.

Knowledge of the child's developmental level is essential for planning behavioural change just as it is when planning any other intervention. We must always bear in mind the importance of making sure the behaviour we are expecting of the child is developmentally appropriate. If the child is developmentally younger than their chronological age, it could be that we are expecting behaviour from the child that he or she is not capable of.

BEHAVIOUR AS COMMUNICATION

When children lack the communication and/or social skills to be able to express what they need or want, unwanted behaviours may occur. It is important to be reflective when challenging behaviours occur and think about what message they are trying to communicate, such as:

- My needs are not being met
- I want/like
- I don't want/don't like
- Emotions
- Pain and discomfort



‘Language development is central to self-regulation children use language to guide their actions and plans. Pretend play gives many opportunities for children to focus their thinking, persist and plan ahead.’

Revised EYFS 2020, Julian Grenier

BEHAVIOUR MAY LOOK LIKE THIS

- Sensory** To gain or stop sensory information
- Escape** To escape or avoid a situation
- Attention** To gain or avoid attention
- Tangible** To get something tangible, an object or activity



A behaviour that a person engages in repeatedly will serve some kind of function for them (O’Neil 1997) If we can work out the function of behaviour we can more easily work out why it is happening.

SENSORY BEHAVIOURS

Sometimes children’s behaviour can be linked to sensory needs. These include:

- **Sensory-seeking behaviours** (biting, licking, flapping, humming, mouthing objects, teeth grinding, self-harming, etc.)
- **Sensory avoiding behaviours** (taking off clothes, refusing ‘messy play’, screaming when face and hands are wiped, being a ‘fussy’ eater, etc.)

Changes in the environment or routine may need to be made to address sensory behaviour, particularly if the behaviour is triggered by anxiety or stress. For example, moving to a quiet area if the child finds it difficult to cope with noise/crowds.

Although it may help to try and modify sensory behaviours and introduce more appropriate behaviours, be aware that this may require a specialist approach with guidance from other agencies, such as Occupational Therapy.

A SMALL STEPS APPROACH TO CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Our aim in changing a child's behaviour is to work together with the family to set shared goals that lead to unwanted behaviour being replaced with a more positive one.

The skills learned in the *Using Clear Language* and the *Small Steps Approach* modules will be useful when we are considering changing behaviour.

Portage always uses a positive approach and it is therefore important to state the target in positive terms. We are interested in what the child '*will do*', not what they '*will not do*'. For example, "*Azir will put the bricks in the box*" not "*Azir will stop throwing bricks*".

We work towards the end goal by breaking it down into small manageable steps.

- ✓ Change in the frequency of the behaviour
- ✓ Reduction in the amount of help
- ✓ Gradual change towards the desired behaviour

Aim for a gradual change in the frequency of the behaviour	Vary the amount of help given	Gradually shape the behaviour towards the goal
• If the unwanted behaviour happens less often, we have been successful • If the desired behaviour happens more often, we have been successful	• As time goes on: • prompts can be decreased in frequency • prompts can be faded to less obvious ones • less powerful (and easier) rewards can be introduced • rewards can be given intermittently	• We may need to start by working on the unwanted behaviour in a specific situation but as we are successful, we can work on the behaviour in a wider range of settings

REWARDS

Rewards are powerful tools that can be used to shape behaviour. Actions which result in a pleasant outcome tend to be repeated. Rewards are used to help children learn new skills; they are not a bribe or used as coercion.

The key principle is that behaviour which is rewarded is more likely to occur again and behaviour which is not rewarded is less likely to occur again.

Rewards need to be meaningful and effective for the individual. We know that our response to a child's actions is rewarding for them if the child repeats the action to get the same response again. For some children, what they find rewarding is not immediately obvious so thought must be given to the choice of an appropriate reward, based on careful observation of their independent play and exploration.

The better we know the child, and the more we work together with parents to find out about them, the more likely we are to tune into their interests. We may, for example, through discussion with parents, find out they have a preference for a particular TV character, food or drink. It will also help to talk to other people who see the child under different circumstances, as advocated in the 'Portage Holistic Profile'.

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Portage Workshop: *A Small Steps Approach to Learning for Children with SEND*

Participant's Notes – Positive Approaches to Children's Behaviour

Effective rewards should be:

Strong	Immediate	Consistent
• motivating for the individual • attention-grabbing	• to develop understanding of consequences • to avoid inadvertently rewarding other behaviour	• on every occasion the child performs • rewarded in the same way each time in the home and setting

Aim for social praise as the reward

A tangible reward is an interim step in learning a new behaviour and should ultimately be withdrawn. They can be useful during teaching but the aim is to gradually reduce these external motivators and for the child to respond to their own intrinsic rewards. Naturally, we use social praise alongside tangible rewards for children, e.g. saying 'well done' when a child is given a sticker. This is important because social praise is the desired form of reward that we are aiming for in teaching. We may have to teach children to find social praise rewarding as for some this does not naturally occur. We need to move on from tangible rewards if we can so that eventually children feel rewarded by social praise.

Using praise

It is important to:

- ✓ praise the specific action or behaviour, otherwise the child may link the praise to another behaviour, e.g. *"Well done, you put all the toys away!"* or *"good sitting"*.
- ✓ think about the most appropriate way of doing this for each child including proximity, language used, eye contact, etc.
- ✓ praise with enthusiasm and use appropriate body language and tone of voice to ensure the child pays attention to the adult and realises they are being praised.

Positive versus Negative Responses

The Portage Model advocates a positive approach to managing children's behaviour that builds on the child's strengths and uses rewards to shape behaviour. The advantages and disadvantages of both positive and negative adult responses are outlined in the tables below. It is clear that the disadvantages of negative responses have greater consequences for the child, the family and the setting, and the disadvantages of positive responses are merely things that need to be carefully considered and fine-tuned.

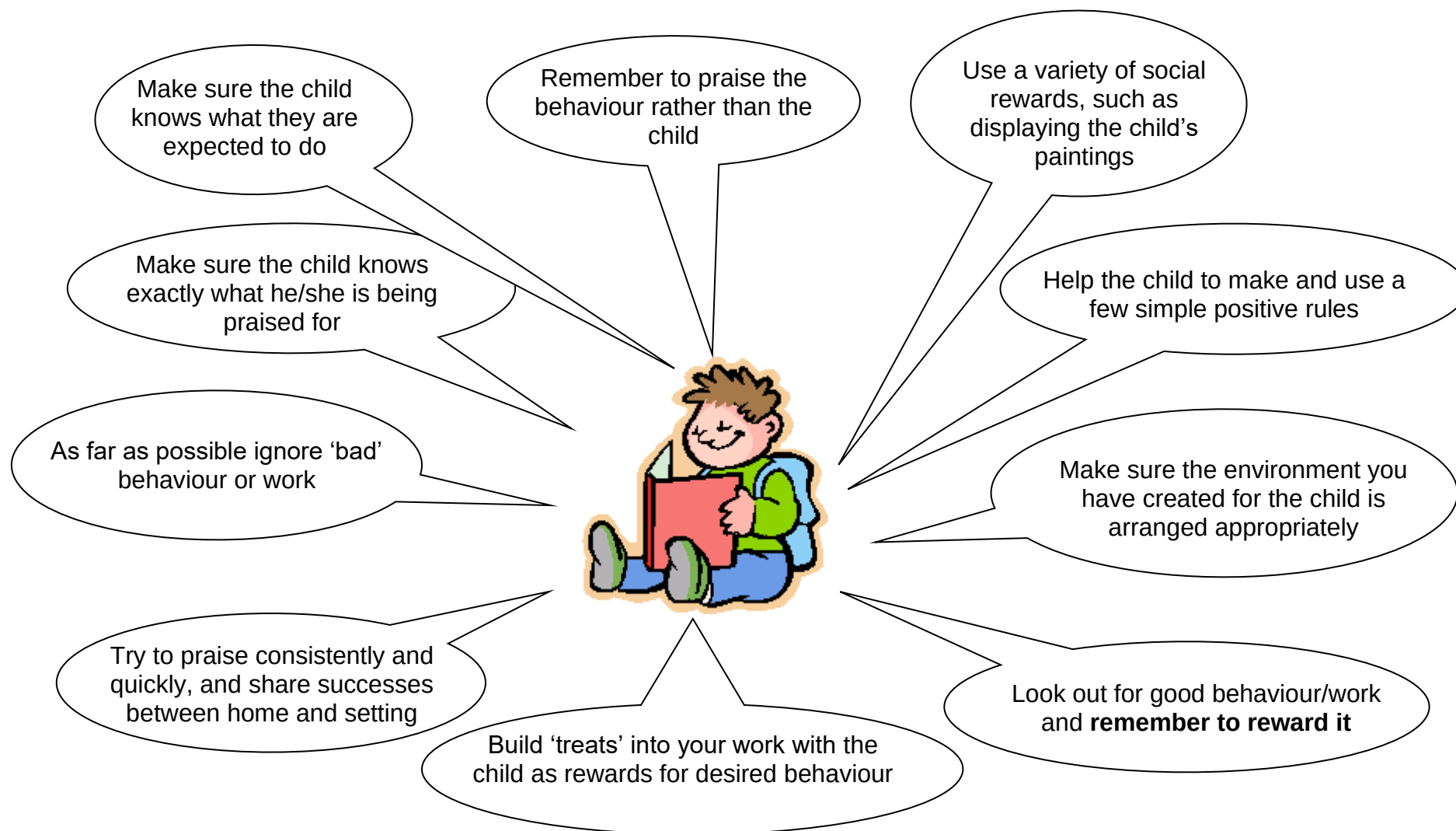
Advantages and Disadvantages of Positive Responses

Advantages	Disadvantages
✓ Ethos of Portage ✓ Considered good practice under EYFS ✓ More likely to increase the behaviour ✓ Positive example to other children ✓ Motivational ✓ Models desired behaviour to the child	✓ Hard work to maintain exhausting ✓ Can be hard to find right rewards ✓ Others may resent what they see as 'special treatment' ✓ Can be focused on an individual rather than whole approach ✓ In itself doesn't develop intrinsic motivation

Advantages and Disadvantages of Negative Responses

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Immediate • Low resources • Others can see it • Appears to deal with the problem	• Against Portage model • Affects relationships • Tells child what not to do • Makes adult feel bad • Impact on whole setting • Gives other children and adults negative impression of child

Positive Behaviour Strategies



THE BENEFITS OF OBSERVING BEHAVIOUR

Observations are key to helping us understand a child's behaviour. They help us to:

- Identify triggers and highlight environmental factors
- Consider how behaviour is maintained
- Identify possible adult contributions to behaviour
- See any differences between home and pre-school
- Clarify the behaviour and set goals

When the behaviour has been observed and is clearly described, then we can begin to plan what we would like to see happening in the future, i.e. set Long Term Goals. These need to be written in clear language that everyone can understand, for example:

Jared will stop taking other children's food at snack time



*Jared will sit at the table and eat his own snack
alongside 2 other children for 5 minutes*



If the positive behaviour that we would like to see happen is clear, parents and practitioners have a definite goal to work towards and can measure the child's progress towards the goal.

USING A STAR CHART FOR BEHAVIOUR

The S-T-A-R Model of Behaviour



'S' means 'settings' – all those things going on in the environment or in the background that may affect behaviour. These are the stable or relatively stable things in the environment such as the day, time, place, people, weather, hunger, noise level, lighting, temperature, etc.



'T' means 'triggers' – Particular things that happen immediately before the behaviour is observed, which may have set the behaviour off. These can include such things as a request to start or stop doing something, a loud noise, a sudden realisation that the adult is not there, someone taking a toy, etc.



'A' means 'action' – the child's behaviour; what the child actually does as a result of the 'settings' and 'triggers'. This is always described using **clear language**, noting and recording **what we can see** the child doing and **what we can hear** the child saying.



'R' means 'response' – to the behaviour; all those things that happen as a result of the child's action, including what the adults did and how the child responded to this.

SETTING**TRIGGER****ACTION****RESPONSE**

DAY & TIME	WHAT WAS GOING ON AT THE TIME?	WHAT HAPPENED IMMEDIATELY BEFORE?	WHAT DID _____ DO?	WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE TO THIS?

	SETTING	TRIGGER	ACTION	RESPONSE
DAY & TIME	WHAT WAS GOING ON AT THE TIME?	WHAT HAPPENED IMMEDIATELY BEFORE?	WHAT DID NOAH DO?	WHAT WAS THE RESPONSE TO THIS?
Tuesday 4.30pm	Noah and Tom were playing in the lounge while I was getting tea in the kitchen.	Noah wanted the toy Rio was playing with. He grabbed it but Rio wouldn't let go.	He kicked Rio and made him scream.	I shouted at Noah and told him off. He got into a temper and screamed.
Wednesday 3.15 p.m.	Noah was playing with my friend's child while I was talking to my friend in the lounge.	Noah wanted the toy the other child was playing with.	He snatched the toy from the other child and refused to return it.	I grabbed the toy off him and gave it back. He snatched it again 5 minutes later.
Wednesday 5.30 p.m.	Noah was watching the TV in the lounge. He wanted to see the end of the cartoon.	He wanted to see the end of the cartoon, but I switched the TV off.	He had a tantrum when I turned the TV off because tea was ready.	I left him and took out the TV plug. After 5 minutes screaming, he joined us at the table.
Thursday 5.00 p.m.	Noah and Rio were in the lounge. I was in the kitchen and didn't see what happened at the start.		He pinched Rio and left marks on his arm.	I shouted at him and he cried.
Saturday 10.00 a.m.	Noah was in the garden. He was playing with his ball, but it ended up in the tree.	Noah wandered around and started to play in the flowerbed.	He threw stones over the fence.	I made him come in. He kept asking if he could go in the garden again.

Recording behaviour in a STAR chart (or other similar models) can be helpful for a number of reasons. It can help parents and professionals working with the child to identify triggers for unwanted behaviour, patterns of behaviour and the circumstances in which they occur. Recording the actions of the child using clear language ensures the information is reported to parents in a non-judgemental way and the parent is clear of exactly what the child did. Recording the responses of the adults helps us to see the strategies and language used by different adults working with the child and can provide useful information to help us tackle any inconsistencies in approaches between home and nursery, or between different adults or family members.

When we want to intervene to change a child's behaviour, the STAR model is helpful to focus our attention on the child's actions. We can then look to change either:

- the SETTINGS**
 - the TRIGGERS, or**
 - the RESPONSES**
-

CHANGING THE SETTINGS AND TRIGGERS

Children with sensory or motor difficulties are especially sensitive to the effects of the environment. Providing additional adult support, supervision and intervention may help to reduce the frequency of unwanted behaviours. Often, simply changing the settings and triggers can bring about considerable change, promote positive behaviour and prevent the unwanted behaviour from occurring in the first place. For example, you could temporarily remove an object that causes conflict between children. This is where we should usually start. Settings and triggers are usually under our control therefore we are more likely to be able to change them.

We can:

- **Change the environment** - sometimes simply re-arranging furniture, using stair gates, moving ornaments out of the way, locking cupboards, etc. can prevent unwanted behaviour.
- **Avoid the situation** - if unwanted behaviours occur at a particular place or time, for example, in one shop or at a particular time of day at nursery, it may be possible to change something to avoid this. Is it possible to go to a different shop or leave the child with a friend? Does the child have to do that particular nursery activity? Does the child need to do something different at this point?
- **Distract the child** – it is often possible to anticipate unwanted behaviours based on previous experience and to intervene swiftly. For example, *“Let’s put the brick in the basket”* just before the child throws the brick.
- **Provide clear rules** – it is vitally important to tell children what to do and not just what *not* to do. Many children with learning difficulties will not understand negative language, so giving positive instructions such as *‘walk’* rather than *‘don’t run’* is easier to understand. Wherever possible, model how to behave as well as telling the child. This is especially important with developmentally young children. For example, *“This is how we stroke the cat – see, he likes to be stroked.”*
- **Provide warnings before an activity is going to change or end** - children can get very absorbed in what they are doing and often react negatively to a change. Prior warning that something enjoyable is going to finish, or that something the child likes less is about to happen, gives the child time to adjust to the idea and hence to respond more positively. Sand timers can be useful to visually indicate the length of a task, or for older children using a time prompt, e.g. *“When the big hand points to the top, it’ll be bedtime.”*
- **Catch the “good”** and reward it - this is something we often forget to do but it is very easy and very effective. For example, *“Nice to see you playing so well – how about a hug?”* is better than only giving attention when something goes wrong *“Put that down! Be quiet!”*
- **Teach a new skill and develop communication skills** - often it is possible to increase the frequency of a behaviour that is more socially appropriate than the unwanted

behaviour. We can do this by teaching and then consistently rewarding the new positive behaviour. For example, teaching the child to hold out an open hand when they want a toy from another child rather than snatching. In this way, we focus on teaching the child communication methods that will help them to have their needs met and reduce the likelihood of confrontational behaviour occurring.

UNWANTED BEHAVIOUR	BEHAVIOUR TO BE TAUGHT AND REWARDED
Mouthing a toy	Exploring a toy with hands
Snatching things	How to ask for the item
Throwing items	Putting the items in to a container
Slapping own face with hand	Clapping hands on request
Biting	Stroking

CHANGING RESPONSES

Remember that changing the settings and triggers is often easier and more effective than changing the responses. It is also important to remember the potential disadvantages of adults using negative responses to children's behaviour.

We can change:

1. **The way the adults respond to the child** – for example, a child may behave in a certain way to avoid doing something. If an adult removes the child from the activity, he may be getting rewarded, so the adult needs to change the way they respond. This also includes what the adult says to the child, the language they use, their tone of voice, body language, etc.
2. **What the adult expects from the child** –Sometime strategies can be seen as rewarding by the child, particularly if they do not understand the social context and language being

used. They should be adapted to suit the individual and reflect their level of understanding. The strategies used should be agreed in partnership with parents and be appropriate to the child's developmental level.

Possible responses to a child's unwanted behaviour include:

Active Ignoring and Selective Attention – Ignoring is difficult but can be very effective if it is used consistently. Ignoring unwanted behaviour can be made more powerful by giving attention to someone else's appropriate behaviour instead. However, it is obviously not appropriate if the child is doing dangerous things. If it is necessary to intervene to safeguard the child, be sure not to give any attention to the child whilst doing so (avoid eye contact and conversation with the child).

Admonishment – For example "Don't do that" It is important to use appropriate body language and tone of voice so that the desired message is conveyed. Some children will find facial expression difficult to read therefore it needs to be strong and sometimes even exaggerated. Depending on the developmental level of the child, the language should be adjusted. For some children, an explanation of the impact of their actions will be helpful, e.g., "*you've hurt Rashid*" but for others a simple clear instruction such as "*stop*" may be enough.

'Making good' – There is a certain natural justice to this response. It involves the child making good what has been done. For example, spilt liquids are wiped up or thrown toys are tidied up into a box. It is important to use appropriate body language and tone of voice so that the desired message is conveyed and the child is not inadvertently rewarded by our attention.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL REGULATION PLANS

Emotional Regulation plans help focus all involved on the next steps towards changing a behaviour. They do not necessarily lead to a complete change in behaviour but ensure that parents and professionals agree a way forwards and a consistent approach.

Plans should always be discussed and agreed with parents and include clear behaviour goals, any resources needed and strategies and prompts to be used.

An Example of a Behaviour Plan:

Settings and Triggers	Current Behaviour	Behaviour Goal
Being asked to share a toy or join in a sharing game at playgroup triggers the behaviour, particularly if it is a favourite	Bill screams repeatedly and holds onto toys when asked to share a toy or activity	Bill will share resources with another child at an activity, with adult support
How to help me avoid the unwanted behaviour	How to help me if the behaviour occurs	
- At calm times, key adult models sharing activity with puppets or toys and rules on 'good sharing' are explained to Bill - Set up small group activity with carefully chosen children - Set up the activity to rely on cooperation by sharing out materials - Adult to sit next to Bill to model good sharing - Photographs of key materials given to Bill to enable him to ask for something - Give verbal praise: 'Bill, can you ask Jem for the scissors-good sharing Bill!' 'Jem, thank you for giving Bill the scissors, that was kind' - Reward Bill for good sharing by letting him choose a sticker after the sharing activity (his favourite thing). This can be reduced once sharing is established	- Talk calmly - Explain clearly what you are going to do and do it - Move Bill away from situation - Sit with Bill in quiet area until calm - Limit interaction - Take toys back to area once Bill is calm - Record incidences of behaviour to see if they are reducing	

CHECKING FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

The Emotional Regulation plan should be regularly reviewed to ensure it is accurate and useful. If a change in the behaviour has not been observed, we should consider:

- Are the rewards motivating enough for the child?
- Is there consistency between adults and settings?
- Are the 'negative' consequences really negative for the child or are they inadvertently being rewarded?
- Are we expecting too much in too short a time?
- Are the family fully involved and committed to the plan?

Any change in behaviour that we work towards must improve the lives of children first and foremost, although of course that will improve things for families too. Change that serves primarily to improve a child's opportunities to learn is what we are seeking.

The use of specialist techniques

There is a range of other, more specialist techniques that can be used in response to severe unwanted behaviours.

The National Portage Association recommends that these approaches should only be carried out under close professional supervision, with parental agreement and involvement and with multi-professional support.

Training in the use of these techniques is beyond the scope of the Portage Workshop.