



Supporting 'non-compliant' children in the early years

Few things challenge early years practitioners more than a child who refuses to follow instructions, disrupts group activities, or constantly tests boundaries. These moments can stretch our patience and confidence, especially when time is short and expectations are high. It can be tempting to label such children as “non-compliant,” and in years past, they may even have been labelled as just “naughty.” But thankfully, our thinking and understanding have moved on.

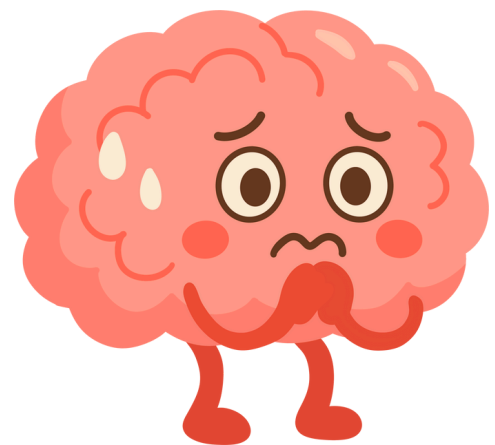
However, when we look beneath the surface, what we often find is not disobedience, but a child in distress, confusion, or one struggling with a need that hasn’t yet been met. Understanding and supporting these children begins with changing our own perspective. Rather than asking, “How can I make this child behave?” we can instead ask, “What is this child’s behaviour trying to tell me?” When we do, we move from control to compassion, and from correction to connection. And compassion and connection are really what we are about as early years professionals.

What does ‘non-compliant’ really mean?

Traditionally, “non-compliance” refers to a child who doesn’t do what is asked of them. This might mean refusing to tidy up, join group time, or follow instructions. Yet, this description often oversimplifies what is really going on. A refusal to join in can be a sign of fear, sensory overload, communication difficulty, or simply the outward expression of their developmental immaturity. In the early years, these are not acts of defiance but messages and communications that the child is currently unable to express in words. It doesn’t mean they are unwilling, but usually that they don’t understand or are struggling to comply for a specific reason.

For instance:

- A child who ignores a direction may not fully understand what’s being said
- A child who refuses to share may be struggling with impulse control or attachment worries
- A child who lashes out when routines change may be feeling anxious, overwhelmed or scared



In other words, **behaviour is communication**. Viewing behaviour through the lens of compassion and the “[ABC model](#)” or antecedent, behaviour and consequence, helps us interpret what is really going on beneath the surface.

These are not just buzzwords. It is the true nature of the motivation driving the behaviour. The child who appears “defiant” may actually be saying, “I’m scared,” or “I don’t know how to tell you what I need.” It is our job as early years professionals to pick up on this first, and when we interpret behaviour this way, we become translators rather than disciplinarians. Isn’t this what you would want for yourself or your own children?



Looking beyond the surface of behaviour

Before assuming that a child can comply, we must ask whether what we're asking is realistic for their age, development, and emotional capacity. For example, a three-year-old who can't sit still for storytime isn't necessarily being 'naughty'. They may simply not yet have the self-regulation skills or sensory control to manage that demand at that time. Similarly, a child with speech and language difficulties might not process multi-step instructions quickly enough to keep up, and they may not understand the directions given.

Developmental readiness matters, and we already know that each child is an individual, developing at their own rate and in their own way. It is not a linear process. Expecting instant obedience from a child who is still learning to manage big feelings sets everyone up for frustration and failure.

Instead, we can ask:

- Do they understand what I'm asking?
- Do they have the skills to do it?
- Have I given them time and support to succeed?



By adjusting our own expectations to meet the child's level, we can reduce conflict and increase confidence for both ourselves as practitioners and the child.

The link between communication, emotional literacy, and behaviour

One of the strongest predictors of positive behaviour is a child's ability to communicate. When children can express their needs, name their feelings, and understand others, frustration and conflict decrease. Conversely, when communication is limited, behaviour can become the only language available to them.

Research highlights this connection. The University of Bristol found that early language ability is one of the strongest indicators of later social and behavioural outcomes. Children with speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) are significantly more likely to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties. In fact, studies show that around 81% of children with emotional or behavioural disorders have significant language needs, and at least 60% of young offenders present with undiagnosed communication difficulties.



These statistics underline why the EYFS identifies Communication and Language as a prime area of learning. Strong communication is a protective factor. When children can talk, they can ask for help, explain their feelings, and negotiate safely.

It is important to remember here that a child's lack of communication skills is not their fault and is not something they have consciously developed in order "to be difficult." The reasons are complex, but are not related to the willpower of the child. They have not decided to adopt these needs, but they may be genetic issues or a result of the social, emotional, and physiological experiences the child has had over time.

As educators, our job is to identify these areas of need and help the child overcome them.

Practical ways to strengthen communication

There are simple ways to help children strengthen their language and communication skills, and most do not take lots of special equipment or time. But they do take a conscious awareness on the part of the practitioner and a commitment to put them into practice. For example:

- **Create a language-rich environment:** Narrate your own actions and comment on what children are doing to model vocabulary and sentence structure. This could mean saying things like: "I'm tidying away the paints now, and I can see that Stella has started to help me, thank you." Or "I can see you are playing with those today very gently and putting them back tidily"
- **Use visual supports** such as photos, symbols, and gestures to reinforce meaning. For example, put images by the doors to the sinks and toilets, and the dining room, to represent where these doors lead. Try to use simple non-verbal gestures such as calling someone towards you with your hand, whilst asking them to "please come here"
- **Encourage dialogic reading**, which is pausing to ask predictive or reflective questions like, "What do you think will happen next?" Or "Can you tell me what XYZ should do now?"
- **Teach emotional vocabulary** and use it regularly to help children make the links between how they feel and the vocabulary they can use to express themselves. For example, introduce feeling words ("frustrated", "worried", "proud") through stories, puppet-work, and play
- **Work with Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs)** if you notice persistent communication gaps. This is important because early interventions can yield results which can truly help the child to learn and develop
- **Use toolkits** such as those provided by the [EEF](#)

Remember that when we give children words for their emotions, we remove the need for behaviour to fill that gap.



Creating emotionally safe and predictable environments

Children thrive when they feel safe, seen, and secure. Emotional safety allows them to take risks, follow guidance, and develop independence. For children labelled as non-compliant, changes in their routine often fuel their anxiety and can lead to opposition, but this can usually be reduced if they are well informed about what they are doing and when they are expected to do it.

Practical strategies include:

- **Predictable routines.** Use consistent daily structures supported by visual timetables to build trust and predictability. If changes do need to be made, give as much warning as possible and explain the reasons so the children understand
- **Offer calm, sensory-friendly spaces.** Provide quiet corners with soft lighting and sensory tools. Over-stimulating environments can trigger avoidance or aggression, so allow children time to regulate themselves again in places where they feel safe
- **Clear transitions.** Warn children before activities change. A simple “In two minutes we’ll tidy up” can prevent meltdowns, but if you have children with particularly strong needs, make sure that they are spoken to directly and individually to make sure they understand what is happening. Sometimes, as adults, we assume children know what is happening simply because we do, but that is often not the case
- **Choice and autonomy.** Offer small and limited choices, such as “Do you want to wash your hands first or hang up your apron first?” These choices reduce power struggles and build trust between the children and the practitioners

Our goal is not control but co-operation. When children feel safe, they’re more likely to respond positively to guidance. Think about how you feel if you think that someone is trying to control you, or if you think they are co-operating with you to achieve a shared goal.

Connection before correction: the power of relationships

At the heart of all positive behaviour support is the relationship between the early years practitioner and the child. A child who feels understood by a trusted adult is more likely to accept the boundaries given, and the Key Person role is central here, providing a secure base for the child to return to when things feel difficult.

Building trust takes time and commitment, so do not expect instant results, especially for children who may have a trauma background, for whom adults may not have been the most trustworthy people in their past. However, non-compliant behaviour often softens when a child realises that the adult is on their side.

Tips for connection-based practice:

- Always use a calm, consistent tone of voice and body language. Children mirror the emotional energy around them, so de-escalate potential problems by remaining calm, patient and in control of your own emotions
- Focus on connection before correction. Acknowledge the feeling first: “I can see you’re cross because we must tidy up. What if we tackle it together?” This shows children that it is OK to feel different things and that there are different ways to respond
- Use emotion coaching and reflective listening to validate children’s feelings. You might say, “I could see you didn’t want to stop playing; that can feel hard.”
- Try to spend some one-to-one time with children who find it difficult to comply. A few minutes of daily positive play can rebuild trust
- Recognise your own triggers and stay curious rather than reactive

When adults model empathy and calm, children begin to internalise those same responses.

Teaching self-regulation and emotional literacy

We all know that self-regulation doesn’t develop overnight. Young children rely on adults to teach them how to calm down, name their feelings, and find safe ways to express themselves. We can build these skills through small, consistent social-emotional learning (SEL) moments each day.

Ideas to try:

- **Morning check-ins:** Use emoji cards or coloured pegs to help children show how they feel on arrival or throughout the day
- **Circle time reflections:** Talk about what makes people happy, sad, or worried and offer a space to talk and reflect
- **Drama and role-play:** Help children understand different situations through role-play
- **Mindful breathing games:** Encourage children to “smell the flower and blow the candle” to calm themselves



- **Storytelling:** Use stories and social stories to help children externalise big feelings safely and practise in different social situations
- **Art:** Allow opportunities for creativity using art and mark-making for children to express how they feel. Set up a creative corner and allow children the opportunity to use different media as well

Research from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) shows that structured SEL programmes can significantly improve social competence and reduce emotional distress. Trauma-informed studies also highlight that predictable routines and relational approaches lead to calmer classrooms and stronger staff-child bonds.

Working with parents and carers

Partnership with parents is essential in the early years and especially when it comes to dealing with how children behave, since this is influenced by consistency across environments. Remember that families often need reassurance and guidance too. When sharing concerns about non-compliant behaviour, always separate the child from the behaviour they are displaying. Avoid giving children labels that they are 'naughty' or 'disruptive' and instead, try to understand what is driving that particular behaviour in that particular situation.

When speaking to parents and carers, always use empathy and avoid judgement or blame. For example:

Instead of suggesting "He's very difficult," try, "He seems to find transitions challenging; here's how we're supporting him"

- Offer simple strategies parents can use at home, such as visual routines, emotion cards, or calm-down boxes and sensory toys
- Invite families to workshops on social and emotional learning or positive behaviour approaches

Remember that families may be dealing with their own stresses or traumas, so sensitivity here is vital. By working collaboratively with families, we can build more consistency for the child, and that, in turn, builds progress.

When to involve other professionals

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, a child's non-compliance may indicate deeper needs on their part that may need a specialist intervention or professional help. If a child consistently struggles with instructions, communication, or emotional regulation, or if there are concerns about possible safeguarding issues, it's important to recognise this and to escalate appropriately.

Talk to your Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), and if needed, make referrals to:

- Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs)
- Educational Psychologists
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- Family support services or inclusion specialists

Early intervention is always more effective than waiting until behaviours escalate, and early help has been shown to improve outcomes for the child.

Reflective practice

Supporting non-compliant children isn't just about what we do to support them. It's also about what we can learn about ourselves in the process. Challenging behaviour can press emotional buttons for us as adults, especially if we feel judged by others or under pressure. Reflective practice helps us respond with more awareness instead of reacting out of frustration or a lack of self-control.

In any situation regarding non-compliant behaviour, ask yourself:

- What does this child need right now?
- How might my tone or voice, timing, or body language affect them?
- Am I responding from calm curiosity or from stress?

Staff well-being matters too, and staff need to feel supported in these situations, especially if they involve challenging behaviour. Regular supervision, peer discussions, and CPD in trauma-informed practice or restorative justice can help practitioners maintain compassion and consistency even when things get tough.





Moving from compliance to co-operation

True compliance in early childhood should be rooted in co-operation and trust. We are not aiming to make children “do as they’re told,” but to help them want to engage, because they feel safe, valued, included, and understood.

When we focus on seeing the holistic child and understanding the world from their perspective, we can begin to model, teach and cultivate:

- Emotional safety that reduces fear and defiance
- Communication skills that replace frustration with expression
- Stronger relationships that model empathy and respect
- A learning environment where all children feel seen and included

In conclusion

Supporting non-compliant children often begins with a shift in our mindset. Instead of seeing “difficult behaviour,” we can choose to see communication, emotion, and unmet needs. By strengthening language, emotional literacy, and relationships, we can help children learn new ways to manage themselves and the world around them.

Every act of compassion on our part teaches self-control, and every moment of connection plants a seed of trust. And every child, when truly understood, has the potential to co-operate, grow, and thrive in our care.

References and more information

- [Three key areas of research evidence that could help us address the public health crisis in children's speech and language skills](#)
- [Associations Between Social-Emotional and Language Development in Preschool Children](#)
- [Co-occurrence of linguistic and behavioural difficulties in early childhood: a developmental psychopathology perspective](#)
- [Learning through language: The importance of emotion and mental state language for children's social and emotional learning](#)
- [Education Endowment Foundation \(2023\). Early Years Toolkit: Communication and Language Approaches.](#)
- [Social and Emotional Learning Associated With Universal Curriculum-Based Interventions in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care in Early Childhood Education Settings: A Scoping Literature Review](#)
- [NEU: Trauma-informed practice](#)
- [Managing Challenging Behaviour in Early Years Settings | ChildCareNurseries.co.uk](#)
- [Respond don't react 2021](#)
- [Managing Challenging Behaviour In Early Years](#)
- [ABC Model of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: How it Works](#)

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