

WHITEPAPER | EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Behaviour is Communication

A practical guide to respectful, consistent behaviour guidance — the language, the patterns, the plans, and the discipline that makes it repeatable.

A McArthur Whitepaper

The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF

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Executive summary

When a child grabs, refuses, shouts, or runs, the first professional question is not "why are they being difficult?" It is: "what skill is missing here?"

This is the final edition in M^cArthur's three-part Practitioner's Guide to the NQF. Edition 01 mapped the shift from compliance to child-safe culture. Edition 02 drilled into active supervision and high-risk routines. This edition completes the arc by addressing the moments that test both — when a child's behaviour escalates and the adult response determines whether the situation becomes safer or harder.

The central argument is practical. Behaviour guidance in early childhood is not about being soft and it is not about being harsh. It is about holding safe, respectful boundaries — firmly enough to protect safety, respectfully enough to protect dignity. That requires shared language, observable patterns, one-page plans, and a handover discipline that means children receive the same message from every adult.

SIX PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR GUIDANCE

1. Children are still learning behaviour. Our job is to identify the missing skill and teach it.
2. Safety first, dignity always. Hold the boundary without shame, labels, or public correction.
3. Say what the child can do — not only what they cannot do.
4. Read the pattern, not the label. Use ABC facts, not characterisations.
5. Prevention before escalation. Redesign the pressure point, not the child.
6. Consistency is safety. Children need the same response from every adult, every day.

Who this whitepaper is for

- Educational leaders and coordinators building team-wide behaviour guidance language.
- Permanent educators strengthening their response, documentation, and family communication.
- Casual and agency educators who need a transferable framework for responding safely and consistently in any room.
- Service leaders and nominated supervisors embedding behaviour guidance inside governance and continuous improvement.

1. The professional standard: safe boundaries, respectful language

Guidance must be firm enough to protect safety and respectful enough to protect dignity. That is the standard — and it applies to every interaction, every educator, every day.

Behaviour is learning

When a child grabs a toy, refuses to pack away, or pushes another child, the professional question is: what skill is missing? Do they need words? Help with waiting, turn-taking, or managing frustration? Sensory support? A routine cue? Security? The answer shapes the adult response — and it moves the interaction from correction to teaching.

Name the safe action, not only the prohibition

In a busy room, educators often default to prohibition — "don't run," "don't snatch," "don't throw sand." But young children need the next action made clear. "Walking feet." "Ask for your turn." "Sand stays low." Fewer words, a clear action, the same wording repeatedly. This is one of the simplest tools a casual educator can use immediately.

Requests before demands

When a child can still cooperate, a request works better than a demand. The pattern is: acknowledge the child's current state, state the real need, then offer a manageable first step.

Demand language	Request language
Do it now.	You worked hard on this road. Lunch is nearly ready, so we need the walkway clear. Wheels in the basket first — I'll help.
Don't make me ask again.	I can see you're still building. We need to start packing away. Which piece goes first?
You need to listen.	I need you close so you can hear the plan. Come sit near me.

The adult is not giving in. The boundary is unchanged. But the language gives the child respect, a reason, and a manageable first step.

The boundary formula: for when the behaviour cannot continue

When a request is no longer sufficient — hitting, grabbing, blocking, running, unsafe movement — the boundary formula applies:

1. Limit — name what cannot happen. "I cannot let hitting happen."
2. Safe action — give the alternative. "Move your body back."
3. Help — offer support. "I will help you use your words."
4. Follow through — if safety is still at risk, move closer, block calmly, call for support.

FOR CASUAL EDUCATORS

Use the room's script first. If you don't know it, ask: "What wording does the team use here? How do they handle this situation with this child?" This keeps the boundary consistent and protects the child from mixed adult responses.

2. Read the pattern: behaviour as information, not identity

Once we stop labelling and start observing, we move from opinion to prevention.

Labels close the inquiry; patterns open it

When we use labels — "difficult," "defiant," "attention-seeking" — we stop looking. The label becomes the explanation. A more useful approach is to describe when the behaviour happens: before lunch, after deep play, during waiting, during transition, when the child is unsure. Pattern language replaces label language.

Label language	Pattern language
Eric is aggressive again.	Eric pushed during pack-away after 40 minutes of deep construction play, before lunch.
She's always difficult at group time.	She leaves the mat within two minutes when the group exceeds eight children.
He's attention-seeking.	He calls out when the educator's back is turned and quiets when an adult moves closer.

The professional question shifts from "what is wrong with this child?" to "what is the child trying to manage, and what adult plan would make success more likely?"

The ABC scan

Before choosing a strategy, use facts:

5. Antecedent (Before) — where was the child, who was nearby, what routine or demand was happening, what was the sensory load?
6. Behaviour — what did the child actually do or say? Facts only, no labels.
7. Consequence (After) — what did adults or other children do next?

Repeat this across incidents and look for the pattern. Does this happen at the same time every day, in the same routine, with the same trigger? That is the information that drives prevention — not the label.

Needs-based analysis: observe, pause, choose one action

The thinking tool is:

8. Describe what the child actually did or said — without adding a label.
9. Pause interpretation — ask what need might be underneath. Language? Waiting? Sensory load? Routine? Security? Tiredness?
10. Choose one practical strategy to try today. Not ten. One clear adult action.
11. If the same issue keeps repeating, review the routine, the space, the timing, or the adult approach. Change one variable.
12. Document and hand over what you noticed — so the next educator is not starting from zero.

3. Prevention: redesign the pressure point, not the child

If we know that waiting, crowding, rushed transitions, and sudden interruptions create predictable flashpoints, we do not wait for behaviour to escalate. We redesign the routine.

Pack-away after deep play — a worked example

What adults see: the child refuses to pack away. What the pattern reveals: the child was deeply engaged, now faces a large cleanup task, and is managing disappointment — three demands at once. The solution is not more pressure. It is better planning.

- Break the task down: "Start with the wheels, then the blocks."
- Make it visible: basket labels, photos, a first-job queue.
- Protect deep play: take a photo and say "we have a photo of what you built — we can share it with your family later."
- Join in beside the child rather than calling instructions from across the room.

Reducing routine pressure

The behaviour is often not the child being unwilling — it is the routine becoming too crowded, too rushed, or too hard to manage. Practical levers:

Pressure point	Design adjustment
Waiting and lining up	Move children in smaller groups. Stagger hand-washing before meals.
Pack-away	Break into named tasks. Use first-job queues. Join in physically.
Sudden transitions	Give a warning and a bridge. "Five more minutes, then we start packing away."
Deep play interrupted	Take a photo. Save the creation on a shelf for tomorrow.
Group time creating behaviour	Review group size, length, content, and adult support.

Agency within routines

Routines work better when children have a small role inside them. The routine stays non-negotiable, but the child has a choice or a job. "You choose the first job — cups or plates?" The child cannot refuse the task, but they can choose how they enter it. That gives participation without handing over the boundary.

FOR CASUAL EDUCATORS

Ask: "What choices or jobs are children usually given in these routines?" That follows the room's existing practice rather than creating a new system on the spot.

4. Responding in the moment: when behaviour becomes unsafe

In the peak of escalation, the adult's body, voice, and pace become part of the safety response. Teaching comes later. Right now, safety comes first.

The adult resets first

When a child is dysregulated, the adult's speed, body language, and volume either de-escalate or accelerate the situation. The first step: pause your body, lower your shoulders, slow your voice, move close without rushing. Be in control of yourself before attempting to control the situation.

The real-time response sequence

13. Notice — recognise the risk early.
14. Protect — block harm, move hazards, create space. Protect the child, the group, and yourself.
15. Connect — short, calm adult presence. "I can see this is hard. I'm here. We will keep everyone safe."
16. Guide — one safe action, with help. Not ten instructions.
17. Restore — once calm: repair, reconnect, teach the next attempt.
18. Document — what happened, what adults did, what helped, what needs to happen next.

WHAT WE DO NOT DO DURING ESCALATION

Argue. Shame. Force an apology. Demand eye contact.
Discuss consequences while the child is overwhelmed.
Correct the child publicly in front of peers.
Use isolation, a chair facing the wall, or "come back when you are good."
Teaching comes after regulation, not during escalation.

Aggression: when a child hits, bites, or pushes

The first response is safety and care, not blame:

19. Respond to the hurt child first — check for injury, comfort, protect dignity. Provide first aid if needed.
20. Hold safety with the child who caused harm — short, steady words: "I will keep everyone safe. Move back with me."
21. Reduce the audience — move other children away. Avoid correcting the child publicly.
22. Support regulation — stay close enough to supervise. Do not lecture in the peak.
23. Document the pattern — if this is repeating, the record is what builds the prevention plan.

Time in vs time away

Time in: the adult stays emotionally available — beside the child, walking with them, reading quietly, simply present. Time away: giving the child less stimulation, a quieter area, more space — but supported, not shaming. A cosy corner, a sensory tool, water, a quiet walk, or a simple job beside the educator.

Repair: not forcing "sorry"

Repair is not forcing an apology before the child understands what happened. It is restoring safety, relationship, and skill.

24. Name the impact simply: "That push hurt. [Child] needed space and care."
25. Offer a repair choice: bring a tissue, help rebuild, draw a picture, check if the other child is okay — but only when the other child is ready.
26. Teach the next words: "Stop. I don't like it." "My turn next." "Can I have space?"
27. Keep it brief. Practise once. Help the child return to the group with support.
28. Document the follow-up: what repair was offered, what support was needed, what plan should be used next time.

5. Records, plans, and family communication

A good record is not paperwork. It is how the next educator knows what happened, what helped, and what to do differently.

Documenting facts, care, and next steps — without labels

A strong behaviour record covers four elements:

Element	What to include
Facts	Time, place, routine, what was observed, who was present.
Care	Injury check, comfort given, supervision increased, immediate safety actions.
Adult response	Language used, support called, regulation support offered, whether repair happened.
Next step	Family communication, plan review, handover notes, leader follow-up.

What to avoid: labels, blame, diagnosis, assumptions, and emotional wording. Be professional. Stick to the facts.

The one-page behaviour support plan

A plan does not need to be long to be useful. If it is too long, educators will not use it during a busy shift. A strong one-page plan answers five questions:

- 29.** Pattern — when and where does this behaviour usually happen?
- 30.** Prevention — what adult action reduces the chance of it happening?
- 31.** Script — what consistent wording do all educators use?
- 32.** Regulation — what helps the child calm safely?
- 33.** Escalation — who to call and when?

THE CASUAL EDUCATOR HANDOVER CARD

For casual educators specifically, the one-page plan should tell them:

1. Pattern — when the behaviour is most likely.
2. Prevention — what to do before it escalates.
3. Script — the exact words the team uses.
4. Escalation — who to call and when.
5. Documentation — ABC facts, adult response, what helped recovery.

Talking with families

The aim is to be factual, caring, and clear about the support being trialled. Not to alarm, blame, or defend.

- 34.** Open with how you are supporting the child, not with the problem.
- 35.** Share observable facts, not labels.
- 36.** Name the plan you are trialling.
- 37.** Invite family input — "Does anything similar help at home when changing activities?"
- 38.** Confirm a review date — so families know the plan is being monitored, not mentioned once.

6. The seven-day consistency cycle

The goal is not to fix every behaviour at once. It is to choose one repeated pattern and make the next week cleaner.

For educators working in centres through block bookings or permanent roles, this cycle turns observation into action:

Day	Action	Detail
1	Choose one pattern	Select one routine or behaviour the team keeps seeing.
2	Write the ABC facts	What happens before, during, and after.
3	Set one prevention change	One adult action to trial. Not ten.
4	Agree the script	All educators use the same words.
5	Update the casual handover	Ensure relief and agency staff have the information.
6	Check the records	Review documentation for consistency and completeness.
7	Review what changed	Did incidents reduce? Did recovery shorten? Did participation improve? Decide the next step.

THE STANDARD FOR THE STAFF ROOM WALL

Calm is not permissive. A warm adult can still hold a clear limit. Boundaries are not punishment — they are safety and teaching tools. Records are protection for you and for the child. Consistency is safety.

7. A 30/60/90-day plan for service leaders

Horizon	Focus	Concrete actions
First 30 days	Language and scripts	Audit current behaviour response language. Build a shared script library (3–5 common scenarios). Implement the boundary formula: limit, safe action, help, follow through. Brief casual educators on scripts at induction.
Days 31–60	Patterns and plans	Run ABC scans on the top three repeating behaviours. Build one-page behaviour support plans. Create casual educator handover cards. Initiate family communication on active plans.
Days 61–90	Consistency and review	Run the seven-day consistency cycle on one pattern per room. Review documentation quality: facts, care, adult response, next step. Review family communication: factual, caring, clear. Audit casual educator handover: do they have the five pieces of information before they supervise?

About M^cArthur

M^cArthur has supported the Australian early childhood education and care sector for more than 35 years. We work alongside approved providers, service leaders, and educators across the country — placing the right people, building leadership capability, and helping services translate regulatory change into confident, day-to-day practice.

Our Early Childhood Education team partners with services on workforce, governance, and continuous improvement. The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF is our editorial series for the sector — built from frontline webinars, expert interviews, and direct casework with services across NSW and nationally.

The complete series

Edition	Title
01	From Compliance to Child-Safe Culture — the legal and ethical architecture.
02	Where Risk Lives — active supervision, ratios, and high-risk transitions.
03	Behaviour is Communication — respectful, consistent behaviour guidance.

To access all three editions, the webinar replays, and supporting articles, visit www.mcarthur.com.au/insights or speak with the M^cArthur Early Childhood Education team.

