

Improving behaviour

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham external evaluator

The ultimate aim of yMIND is to create greater tolerance and improved relationships between children and young people of different genders and from different backgrounds. In most cases this has meant challenging existing group norms to get children and young people thinking differently about themselves and those around them. While yMIND activities have been effective in achieving this, such challenges to norms do not come without cost - including in the form of disruptive behaviour. Practitioners delivering yMIND came to understand this as part of the learning process that needed to be managed, as young people were given freedom to determine their own contribution to learning activities. Practitioners developed strategies to help young people interact more positively with each other, to the extent that yMIND can be considered a 'behaviour for learning' intervention.

This case study describes some of the disruptive behaviour which occurred and the strategies participating practitioners recommended.

What kinds of problematic behaviour did practitioners encounter?

By no means did problematic behaviour manifest itself in all yMIND sessions, nor consistently across all sessions with the same group, or with the same young people. Where it did occur, it could be in the form of:

- Verbal abuse
- Disorderly communication – students talking over each other
- Non-adherence to session rules.

While disruptive behaviour such as this undoubtedly put strains on practitioners and other young people, it was often symptomatic of deeper-seated behaviour and relationship problems, which needed addressing. Ironically, such behaviour was an indication that it is precisely with these groups that the yMIND intervention is most needed.

In the next section are some of the strategies practitioners deployed to improve behaviour.

How did practitioners encourage better behaviour

Starting from where the young people are

The topics covered by yMIND have the potential to elicit a range of emotions from young people: they may be embarrassed by them, find them a source for jokes, and in some cases

be affected by them personally. For this reason, some preparation was required before young people were ready for full discussion. Setting out rules was one key part of this, but also primary activities, such as expressing feelings non-verbally, for example through 'frozen images', helped young people move gradually into the topic.

Setting out and returning to rules for interaction

In nearly all sessions, practitioners discussed and formulated rules with children and young people for conduct in the session, and returned to these when the flow of the session was disrupted through bad behaviour. The more practitioners invited young people to formulate and apply the rules, the more they were supporting the principle of activating learners as owners of their own learning.

Establishing small group work

Young people's frustration to participate was reduced, and practitioners were better able to focus attention on where bad behaviour was happening by dividing a class into smaller groups. As long as young people were clear about what they needed to do, this worked well. It also helped if more than one practitioners was present to facilitate small group work.

Understanding that noise in itself is not an indicator of bad behaviour

Practitioners had to use their judgement carefully to decide if discussions were getting out of hand, and if so, call young people back to the rules. Noise of itself was not an indicator of bad behaviour, after all young people were getting used to finding their voices, how to handle interaction on sensitive topics, and learning to develop self-regulation. Practitioner intervention at the wrong time could easily squash this.

Holding your nerve

Supporting young people to change their behaviour took time, especially when they inhabited environments that provided few role models or structure:

The class seemed to me to be a melting pot for frustrated, refusing, and acting out coping strategies. Respect to each other is hardly given, has to be slowly learned and modeled, it is a challenging, effortful task for the teacher. It takes a long time.

(German practitioner)

However, the experience of yMIND practitioners was that perseverance brought results and as long as they were consistent in their approach, young people responded over time, and behaviour did improve.

For more information on the yMIND project, visit our website at: <http://www.youth-mind.eu/>

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