

**AFTER THE  
ADULTS  
30 YEARS**

**ACHIEVABLE  
BEHAVIOUR  
NIRVANA**

**PAUL DIX**

First published by

Independent Thinking Press  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
[www.independentthinkingpress.com](http://www.independentthinkingpress.com)

and

Independent Thinking Press  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2021.

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Edited by Ian Gilbert

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135377-6

Mobi ISBN 978-178135392-9

ePub ISBN 978-178135393-6

ePDF ISBN 978-178135394-3

LCCN 2021932299

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

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# INTRODUCTION

There is a behavioural nirvana. One that is calm, purposeful and respectful, where poor behaviour is as rare as a PE teacher in trousers and relationships drive achievement. Annoyingly, and predictably, the road is hard and the ride bumpy and littered with clichés. It is achievable, though, and when you get there it is a little slice of relational heaven.

The steps outlined in *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes* are about shifting the behaviour of the adults and changing the response the child receives.<sup>1</sup> You will soak that up through this book too. Read them in any order – the core message is the same. Your deliberate calm, consistent and planned behaviour underpins everything.

If you are anything like me, you can read a book, take away three useful things and then move on. If you have read and implemented *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes* like a legend then get ticking. If not, here is a quick reminder of the foundations of the approach – the five pillars of practice.

1. Consistent, calm adult behaviour.
  - Don't shout or respond emotionally to poor behaviour.
  - Responses are always rational and planned.
  - Adult behaviour is deliberately modified to make the team effort consistent.
  - Your model of being a rounded human being does a lot of the heavy lifting.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Dix, *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes: Seismic Shifts in School Behaviour* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2017).

2. First attention for best conduct.
  - You will get more of the behaviour you notice the most.
  - School culture shifts when the focus shifts to the 95% of children who come every day, who do the right thing, who are honest, disciplined and diligent.
  - Recognition mechanisms are used in every lesson to acknowledge effort, not achievement.
  - Positive notes, positive phone calls and Hot Chocolate Friday are huge wins for minimal effort.
3. Relentless routines.
  - Meet and greet at the door of every classroom and position non-teaching colleagues strategically throughout the school.
  - The rules are limited to three words: ready, respectful, safe.
  - Deliberate teacher routines are designed to make transitions easy for everyone (e.g. calling the class to silence, signals for the start of a task/end of a lesson, transition rituals).
4. Scripting difficult interventions.
  - Interventions are designed so that staff can hold the boundaries while staying calm.
  - Rational steps to address poor behaviour include scripted interventions and planned conversations.
  - Consistent use of the 30 second intervention script by all adults.
5. Restorative follow-up.
  - Restorative conversations are chosen for incidents that need restoration.
  - Relational paths out of difficult events are preferred to punishment roads.
  - Students get what they need, not just what they deserve.

After the adults have changed, there is an opportunity to go faster, wider and deeper. To embed positive classroom cultures soaked in humble

recognition, to cast a critical eye over the use of proportionate consequences, to further refine support for children who struggle with it all and to map out a route for radical, sustained behaviour improvement.

This book will challenge you to rejig your time to introduce coaching for every child and refresh your restorative approach to keep everyone thinking. We will look at the knotty issues that need to be overcome when holding to inclusive values and explore how to lead your classroom or school like a plodding tortoise, not a performance enhanced hare. We will look in detail at how to support those who cause chaos while protecting those who just want to learn. And we will do it all without blame or any notion that a child's behaviour is the fault of the teacher.

I will share work that I am inspired by, including the Glasgow Model (and from schools across Scotland) which has reduced exclusion and improved provision for those at the margins. We will drop in and learn from schools who have been 'Paul Dixing it'<sup>2</sup> for years and those who are innovating brilliantly with the strategies from the start. Along the way, I will reaffirm my commitment to managing behaviour with calm humility and the right of every child to learn in peace – and my utter disdain for ludicrous notions of zero tolerance/no excuses and any other euphemism for being shitty to kids.

People, strap in, tables in the upright position, one hand on the oxygen mask and let's go.

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2 A terrifying phrase apparently in common usage in Scottish schools. I am sure it is also to be heard with accompanying swearing.

## Chapter 1

# EMOTIONALLY CONSISTENT TEACHING

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Calm, predictable, safe.

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A deliberate tightening of consistency, which was central to *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes*, often achieves great leaps in improved behaviour. The essential daily drumbeat of the same rules, calm, smiling adults and predictable responses lay the foundations for a climate that works for everyone. When the adults change, everything changes is the first principle, so your behaviour is an important focus. As the revolution in practice begins to normalise, you will need to be ready to adapt your own behaviour further. You are no longer standing on the barricades persuading your colleagues to change, but don't lower that flag just yet, soldier. There is work to be done.

Once you have upgraded your own professional behaviour and relationships, there are further consistencies that will make your classroom a safer, more predictable and better place to learn. I know that your ability to suppress the natural emotional responses to poor behaviour is now well rehearsed and practised. I am sure you have perfected the poker face and can control your rolling eyes, screwface or twitchy blink like a mannequin. Legend. In your mind you have separated forever the child's negative emotional response from your own. You have become curious about distressed children, not angry with naughty scrotes. You recognise secondary behaviour when it is thrown at you and you know there is a better time and place to respond to it. When you look back at your worst moments, you laugh at your own ridiculousness. There is now a different level of emotional control that pervades every interaction. Zen-like, you float between incidents. Your inner peace (or at least your 'pretending to

be at peace') means that you can start to see through the behaviour to what is being communicated.

It takes time to find the balance between being your true self and being the person your pupils need. The two are rarely the same. Context also matters. Being transparent, open and honest with some classes is a fast track to relational currency. With others, it means getting mugged off and asked by every giggling child you meet for the next six months, 'Sir, is your middle name really Susan?' Revealing too much of yourself too soon is a crapshoot. It might go brilliantly, but in all probability you will end up rolling a 7, walking home in the rain and wishing you had never picked up the dice.

When you have been at a school for some time, you may allow yourself a slightly smug smile when you hear of another new teacher explaining that they told the class about their slam poetry YouTube channel. 'You told them *what?!*' is always funny because we have all trodden much the same route. I wanted so desperately to be the teacher I never had that I thought I could mimic the performance of a great teacher, but behind that performance there was no substance. Being an emotionally consistent adult takes most of us a long time. We get better incrementally, not in one dramatic leap.

## EMOTIONAL CONSISTENCY AND REFINING ROUTINES

Visible and audible consistencies make the school live and breathe with your values. Emotional consistencies are harder to pin down but no less critical. Emotional consistency for the children comes with the ability of the adults to control their emotions in response to poor behaviour, and instead put empathy and logic at the heart of each interaction. Easy to say, hard to do on a Thursday afternoon when you have been run ragged by Chelsea and her attempts to gradually and discreetly complete a full facial over the course of three lessons. Unregulated children need obviously regulated adults, even if their behaviour seems designed to frustrate this.

Predictability makes classrooms feel safe. Routines are central to this predictability. In lessons, refining the routines so they can be triggered quickly and executed deftly is a driver of productivity.

I recently watched a teacher working with a class of 8- and 9-year-olds and was struck on entering the room that some of the children were proudly wearing golden, sparkly top hats. In fact, they seemed to walk a little taller in the hat – it bestowed a certain authority and swagger. Like a PE teacher with a new clipboard.

The hats were ‘golden peer assessment hats’ (I know, dangerously progressive) and were used to recognise the ‘assessor’. The pleasure on the children’s faces when wearing and then passing on the hat to another child was wonderful to behold. They were having a whale of a time, yet the class were focused, disciplined and caught up in the learning. The transitions in the activity were effortless: the hat was passed and the roles changed.

What was perhaps even more impressive was the transition to a new activity. The teacher’s count was just a quiet ‘Three, two, one.’ The hats disappeared in an instant and they were ready for the next part of the lesson. This seemingly effortless transition demonstrated how determined the teacher was to get her classroom running like clockwork. She was never going to be satisfied with routines that were just OK. Her high standards and expectations for routines translated into a very productive classroom, but they were also a model for the children and promoted a safe environment. The climate was set. With these mechanics in place, everyone worked more efficiently to squeeze a little extra out of every lesson. Everyone felt safer inside the predictable roles and rituals.

Without refined routines there is too much improvisation, too much surprise and too much chance of some children losing their way, day after day. Around the site, the sharper the routines, the greater the predictability and sense of security. In many schools, fantastic walking (hands behind the back, chest out, walking with purpose – and an idea originally created by Margaret Farrell) has fast become wonderful walking. Young children particularly love it. It isn’t really a strategy for a secondary school, although with tongue in cheek I would have a go. Fantastic walking has also given birth to a series of alliterative offspring including legendary line-ups, spectacular silence, marvellous moving (where not all the children can walk)

and perhaps, in some far off mutation, quintessential queuing. The same principles are at work.

There is a world of difference between teaching positive routines using gentle reinforcement that the pupils enjoy and drilling children with micromanaged compliance routines. Some authoritarians pursue 'do as you are told' routines and pretend they are quite reasonable. Compliance routines – standing up when an adult walks in, fingers on lips, look at me when I am talking to you, track the speaker and so on – are more about exerting authority and control than improving teaching and learning. They chill the climate in the classroom. In these schools, relational practice is considered less important than power. Nobody is truly happy learning in such a culture.

## CHOPPER HARRIS

Mr 'Chopper' Harris, my teacher for many years, was an expert in quashing any notion of a positive relationship. Chopper became a teacher after leaving the navy. He was called Chopper, as legend had it, because he shot off his own thumb with his rifle. Quite how you achieve that I have still not been able to work out.

He was a uniquely strange and oft-times violent man with a dry sense of humour. Chopper was incredible and terrifying all at once. His opening ritual for the lesson was to slowly, dramatically, tilt his head backwards and spread his handkerchief over his face, cleaning his glasses and blowing his nose in one ridiculous but oddly mesmeric action. He would then lay out the pages of *Sporting Life* (a sports newspaper best known for its coverage of horse racing) across his desk, carefully turning each page by pinching the top right corner, and set about choosing the horses he would bet on while we got on with page 12, exercise 4.

At lunchtime he would visit the betting shop and boozer that were conveniently situated next door to each other. If you had him after lunch, and the bets hadn't gone his way, the board rubber was thrown with increasingly aggressive abandon. Once, memorably, his aim was blunted by a couple of extra whiskeys and the board rubber smashed the window and ended up on the street outside. He commanded me to go and pick it

up so he could throw it at me again. Children would regularly get injured by mahogany board rubbers and not think it worth a mention. 'Oh that [touches gaping head wound], just had Chopper.' 'Oh right.'

It is safe to say that I struggled to learn much at all in his lessons, so fascinated was I by Chopper's idiosyncrasies and propensity for rough justice. I lived in a perpetual state of fear that I would be the next recipient of board rubber justice and excitement that it might be someone else. You never quite knew where you were with Chopper. This was deliberate. Chopper was not a teacher ever in pursuit of relationships with his charges. He was not a man with empathy. At least, not at work.

When teaching, Chopper had four levels of emotion which were triggered by four key phrases delivered in a voice as deep and gruff as you can imagine. 'Pipe down' was level one – a general plea to the assembled teenagers that he wanted their attention. It was expressed almost casually, as if he knew it would be ignored. With an increase in volume and a sense of urgency, 'Will you pipe down' signalled a shift in his degree of frustration. The third and fourth levels were often indistinguishable. There was certainly no gap between the final, 'WOULD YOU KINDLY PLEASE PIPE DOWN' and the throwing of the hardwood (polished daily) blackboard rubber at the head of some unsuspecting young miscreant. The terror was at times amusing, often bruising, occasionally terrifying.

I am sure that you are not in the habit of shouting at children or throwing objects at them to make your point. However, you may have your own levels of frustration that trigger and accelerate your own emotions. Just check the next time you get annoyed: how 'playable' are you?

## THE UNPROVOKABLE ADULT

Adults like Chopper, who wear their heart on their sleeve, create an anxious climate. They undermine the emotional security they should be nurturing. The direct connection between the child's behaviour and the emotional state of the adult is obvious. Some children will immediately recognise the emotional state, empathise with it and change their behaviour. After all, they are able to accurately identify negative emotions and respond accordingly. Some children. Not mine. Not many. The obvious

temptation for any child is to see how they can provoke that emotion. To test that the link between their behaviour and the adult response is still there. To find out just how playable the adults are.

‘Joel, stop swinging in the chair. It’s annoying me.’

‘Emile, that tapping is driving me crazy.’

‘Jasmin, if you interrupt me one more time I’m going to explode!’

There may be a time, when trust has developed, for wearing your heart on your sleeve, but in the early days with a new class you might want to hide your heart up your jumper. There are better ways to build great relationships.

Attending a speed awareness course recently provoked the same temptation in me to play with the ‘adults’. Interestingly, the vigorous bonhomie and jovial style came to an abrupt halt when I dared to ask a difficult question. The course facilitators threatened me with exclusion from the room. Apparently, the booths at the Holiday Inn are for a different purpose. However, I was saved, beautifully, by the appearance of a latecomer who burst in, sat down and promptly fell asleep and started snoring. They didn’t like that at all.

If you lay out a buffet of adult emotions, don’t be surprised if some children want to try everything on the table. The connection between your emotion and their poor behaviour is one that you need to break. Instead, make the connection between their behaviour and the standards you expect in your lesson. Your behaviour → my emotion → emotionally fuelled punishment is a common chain of events. The change comes when you remove your emotion every time: your behaviour → our rules/standards/agreements → proportionate response.

What children really need is an unprovokable adult, especially one who lives with adults not afraid of losing their temper. An emotionally predictable learning environment is one where the negative emotion of the adults is all but absent. When you are talking to children about their behaviour, even in the calmest moments, be careful not to reinforce the connection accidentally.

‘Now, you know that I can’t stand it when ...’

‘That noise really irritates me ...’

‘The next person who shouts out/stands up/stage dives will not see another breaktime before adulthood!’

There must be no chance of the children controlling the adults. If you give children a route map of your emotions, you are giving them the opportunity to take control away from you at a moment’s notice. Any climate adjustment must be your planned decision, not shifted by remote control by a bored child.

## NURTURE FROM THE FIRST STEP

Nurture starts at the school gate and the classroom door, but shaking hands with students now feels like a tale from the old country. The COVID-19 interruption to our lives, and the physical distancing that has accompanied it, means things have changed. In recent times, you would be more likely to run a successful CPD session on Thinking Hats than you would to shake hands with every child. What was formerly a great way to meet and greet will now be a safeguarding concern.

We may need to adapt them for our socially distanced times, but the principles of meet and greet still apply. The connection may not be physical – no more handshakes, fist bumps or high fives – but we can still have fun:

- Air high five
- Bowing graciously
- Cheesy double thumbs-up
- Elbow bump
- Foot tap
- Hand on heart ‘shake’
- Namaste
- Salute

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Jaz Ampaw-Farr, John Bryant, Alistair Burnett, Gary Chambers, Elly Chapple, Chris Dyson, Mark Finnis, Simon Flowers, Ollie Frith, Russell Ingleby, Simon Kidwell, Jennifer Knussen, Lucie Lakin, Ruth McKay, Maureen McKenna, Andy Moor, Victoria Musson, Andy Oliver, Peter Overton, Sharon Pascoe, David Shakeshaft, Jon Tait and Darrell Williams.

And every teacher, head teacher, teaching assistant and support professional who has come on-board for the ride. Hold tight ...

When you have photographs of your work to share, there is a Gallery of Awesomeness on the When the Adults Change website that is constantly growing. Just email pictures of your blueprints, class recognition boards, positive notes, crazy recognition mechanisms, lanyard reminders, lunchtime recognition displays, Hot Chocolate Friday celebrations and any other innovations you have made using the books as a starting point.

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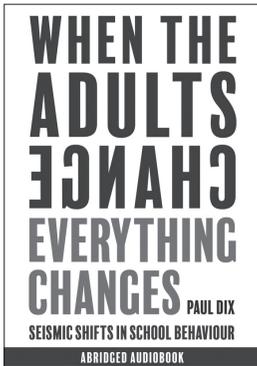


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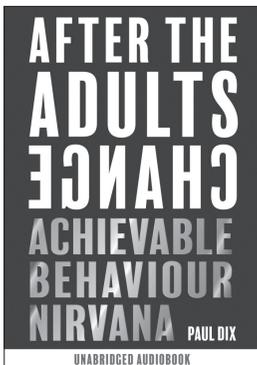
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The book also delves into the possibilities for improvement in teacher–pupil relationships, drawing further upon a hugely influential behaviour management approach whereby expectations and boundaries are exemplified by calm, consistent and regulated adults.

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In Paul Dix's awe-inspiring second book we understand the need for staff to sing from the same song sheet, and luckily Paul Dix has written a beautiful song.

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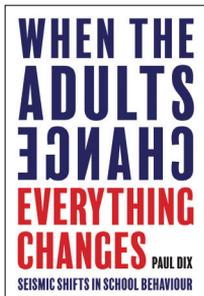
*After the Adults Change* does not shrink from the gritty realities of implementation. Excellent advice and accessible, essential reading for everyone working in schools.

**RUTH MCKAY, HEAD TEACHER, PORTOBELLO HIGH SCHOOL**

I already agree with his approach, and didn't need to be convinced – but I still found myself scribbling notes on how I could explicitly articulate the 'why' of this approach and also on how to improve our school's systems, making use of the many practical examples provided.

**STEPHEN KELLY, HEAD TEACHER, LIBERTON HIGH SCHOOL**

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As a teacher, leader and teacher trainer, **PAUL DIX** has been working to transform the most difficult behaviour in the most challenging urban schools, referral units and colleges for the last 25 years. In addition to working directly with schools, Paul has advised the Department for Education on the Teachers' Standards, given evidence to the Education Select Committee and done extensive work with the Ministry of Justice on behaviour and restraint in youth custody. Paul is a leading campaigner for the #BanTheBooths campaign ([www.banthebooths.co.uk](http://www.banthebooths.co.uk)) and is a member of both the IntegratEd Reference Group and the Ethical Leadership Group. [@pauldixtweets](https://twitter.com/pauldixtweets)

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ISBN 978-178135377-6



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