



Moving From Discipline to Behaviour Management

What KET principals already know about hitting, shouting and hurtful words in the early years – and what the evidence adds

If you only read one thing

- Hitting, smacking or shaking a child is against the law in South Africa – at an ECD centre and at home. It can be treated as assault.
 - Hurtful words are abuse too. Calling a child “stupid”, “naughty” or “useless”, threatening, mocking or shaming them is emotional abuse under the Children's Act.
 - Parents can report it, and legal action can be taken. If a child is physically or verbally punished at a centre, it can be reported to the police (SAPS) or a social worker. The person responsible can face criminal charges and can be found unsuitable to work with children.
 - ECD staff must report suspected abuse. This is a legal duty, not a choice.
- What works instead: a calm voice, a predictable routine, clear boundaries and a gentle pause.

“Parents think they've got to discipline instead of behaviour management...We want behaviour management, not discipline. I don't like the word discipline in ECD. It's learning to manage one's behaviour.”

–KET Partner principal

Every practitioner has been in this moment: a child won't listen, a classroom is loud, and shouting is the fastest thing that comes to hand. This brief isn't here to tell principals something they don't already sense. Behaviour management, not discipline – is the appropriate way to handle such moments. This brief exists to give that instinct some backing: why it holds up, and what to do with it on a hard day.

The Moment it Happens

Hitting and shouting are rarely planned. They happen in the gap between a caregiver's patience running out and a child's behaviour needing a response right now.

Two things are true at once, and this brief holds both: harsh discipline causes real, measurable harm to a developing child — and the caregivers who use it are almost always doing their best under real pressure. Poverty, overcrowding, and the intergenerational weight of how they themselves were raised all shape this. Supporting a child means supporting the adult too.

What the Evidence Shows

The period from birth to age 8 is the most sensitive window for brain development in a person's life — the foundations for language, emotional regulation, and learning are actively being built. When a child is hit or shouted at repeatedly during this window, their stress-response system activates as if facing real danger, whether or not that was the adult's intent.

1

A major meta-analysis of over 75 studies and 160,000+ children found physical punishment consistently linked to increased aggression, poorer mental health, and weaker learning outcomes — with no long-term behavioural benefit.¹

2

South African research found children who experienced physical punishment were significantly more likely to show depression, anxiety, and aggression.²

3

The South African Child Gauge found physical punishment remains one of the most common forms of violence against children in South Africa, across every province and income group.³

Shouting causes a version of the same response — children's brains often can't distinguish a raised voice from physical threat. It also measurably slows vocabulary growth, which matters doubly in South Africa's multilingual classrooms, where children are already building more than one language at once.

None of this means hitting or shouting make someone a bad caregiver. It means the tool doesn't do what it's often trusted to do — and it comes with a cost the caregiver usually doesn't see.

What we Say Matters

Harm doesn't only come from a hand. Words like “you're stupid”, “you're a bad child” or “nobody wants you” — or threats, mocking, and shaming a child in front of the group — can hurt as much as a smack, and the damage often lasts longer.

Young children believe what the adults around them say about them. A child who is told again and again that they are naughty or stupid starts to see themselves that way — and often begins to behave that way too. The Children's Act counts behaviour that harms a child psychologically or emotionally as abuse, in the same way as physical harm.

Most of these phrases are said without thinking, often the same words we heard as children. Swapping them is a habit that can be practised:

Instead of...	Try...
<i>“You're so naughty.”</i>	<i>“That wasn't kind. Let's fix it together.”</i>
<i>“Are you stupid? How many times must I tell you?”</i>	<i>“Let's try it again together.”</i>
<i>“Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about.”</i>	<i>“I can see you're upset. I'm here.”</i>
<i>“Why can't you be like your sister?”</i>	<i>“I saw how hard you tried.”</i>
<i>“If you don't listen, the police will come and take you.”</i>	<i>“First we tidy up, then we go outside.”</i>

The aim is to name the behaviour, never the child: **what you did** was not okay — **you** are still okay.

In Our Practitioners' Own Words

None of this is news to the women running KET's partner centres. Across dozens of interviews conducted for our Preschool Support Plan process, principals raised — unprompted — the same shift this brief is built around.

Why shouting doesn't work

“Other parents, they furious and shout. And the shouting is not a very good idea for the kids... as soon as you shout, you make the child nervous... I hate that. Even a parent shouting at a child in front of me, that's not working with me.”

–KET Partner principal

The same principal goes further — it's part of how she chooses her own staff:

“I'm very strict to that. I don't want a shouting helper in my class.”

–KET Partner principal

Emotional development first

"I felt that the ECD system focused too much on the alphabet and the numbers and too little on social and emotional development. So from the word go, I was very focused on their emotional development... I can see how they [practitioners] feel proud of themselves when they connect with a child, not just educate the child."

-KET Partner principal

Prevention, not correction

"Keep them occupied, then you won't struggle whether the child don't want to listen or doing naughty stuff."

-KET Partner principal

This is positive discipline in practice, in one sentence: a busy, engaged child rarely needs correcting in the first place.

What to do instead – A real example

Positive discipline isn't permissiveness. It's guiding behaviour with warmth and clear, predictable boundaries – protecting both the relationship and the child's developing brain. One KET-affiliated centre already has a working example.

One principal described a child whose big feelings were hard for her teachers to manage – energy building toward screaming, especially around transitions. A KET practitioner introduced a simple tool: a large box with a teddy bear inside. When the energy starts to build after morning ring, the child sits in the box for about 15 minutes before rejoining the group – not as punishment, but as a predictable pause. The message, in the principal's words:

"You can't go now, but you will come when the time is right."

-KET Partner principal

The result, months later

"No screaming. You'd say, 'go to the class, please.' She runs."

-KET Partner principal

Nothing about that tool involved fear, force, or shame. It gave the child a predictable structure for a feeling she couldn't yet manage alone – and it worked.



Supporting the Caregiver, Not Just the Child

Positive discipline asks a lot of the adult in the room — and the adults in our centres are themselves under real pressure: underpaid, overstretched, and often managing 20 or more children with little support. Expecting perfect calm from an exhausted practitioner isn't realistic. What is realistic is building in a way to catch it before it happens.

One principal shared exactly this, without being asked:

“Sometimes I'm getting a little bit worked up and I want to shout... I remind myself, don't shout, don't shout. And I say to the teachers, if you see I'm going to shout, you clap me on my back and say no.”

-KET Partner principal

That's the model worth spreading: not superhuman patience, but a simple, humble system — a colleague who's allowed to say “not now” before a raised voice happens. Centres could build something this small into their own staff culture: a quiet signal between teachers, a two-minute breather before responding, permission to hand a child to a colleague when patience is running thin.



Key Messages

- Hitting, shouting and hurtful words cause measurable harm to a developing brain and to the trust between child and caregiver — regardless of intent.
- There is no evidence that hitting improves long-term behaviour. It is also against the law in South Africa — at ECD centres and at home.
- Insults, threats and shaming are emotional abuse. Name the behaviour, never the child.
- Our own principals already know this. The shift from “discipline” to “behaviour management” is happening in KET centres right now.
- Prevention (keeping children engaged) and predictable structure (like the calm-box example) work better than correction after the fact.
- Supporting a caregiver's own stress and wellbeing is inseparable from protecting the child.
- It is never too late to change approach. Children are resilient when safety and warmth are restored.

The Legal Backing

The Constitution (Sections 12 and 28) guarantees everyone the right to be free from all forms of violence and from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and every child the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse and degradation.⁴

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 defines abuse as including deliberately injuring a child and exposing or subjecting a child to behaviour that may harm them psychologically or emotionally (Section 1). Staff and volunteers at partial care facilities, which include ECD centres, are legally required to report suspected abuse to a designated child protection organisation, the Department of Social Development or the police (Section 110).⁵

The Constitutional Court (2019) ruled that “reasonable chastisement” is no longer a defence. Physical punishment of a child, including by a parent at home, can be prosecuted as assault.⁶

The National Integrated ECD Policy recognises the quality of adult–child interaction in the early years as central to children's outcomes.⁷

For Principals: A Practical Checklist

1. Build a predictable daily routine — transitions are when big feelings surface most.
2. Agree as a staff on words you don't use with children: no labels, threats, mocking or put-downs.
3. Agree on a quiet staff signal for “I need a moment” before frustration turns into a raised voice.
4. Keep children occupied and engaged. Most correction-worthy moments start with boredom or overcrowding.
5. When a child is struggling, offer a calm, predictable pause (like the calm-box example) rather than a punishment.
6. Talk openly with staff about your own hard days. Modelling that self-regulation is a skill, not a given.
7. Know your legal duty: report suspected abuse to a social worker, the Department of Social Development or SAPS. Childline (116, free) can also advise.

A Closing Thought

Ubuntu — I am because we are — is lived out in how we treat children. Every principal quoted in this brief arrived at the same place independently: that raising a child well means managing behaviour with warmth, not fear. The evidence simply confirms what they already knew.



Sources

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3. Richter, L., et al. (Eds.) (2020 & 2022). *South African Child Gauge*. Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.
4. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Sections 12 and 28.
5. Children's Act 38 of 2005, Sections 1 and 110, Republic of South Africa.
6. *Freedom of Religion South Africa v Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development* [2019] ZACC 34.
7. Department of Social Development (2015). *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy*.

Futher reading

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