WHAT MOTIVATES BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour is our purposeful attempt at any given time, given the skills and knowledge that we currently possess, to satisfy one or more of our basic needs.

Therefore students will only learn and behave appropriately at school when doing so satisfied their basic needs. Therefore, students may choose to misbehave. Teachers can make them behave appropriately via a range of strategies and coercion, but change will be a conscious choice by the student. Appropriate choices occur when the student’s needs are met or because compliance is more favourable than the alternatives (but this is often short lived because the underlying need has not been met). The original behaviour may be repeated or an alternative trialled.

Five basic human needs (one physical and the other four are emotional) which spring from medical, emotional, environmental/organisational, family and relationship factors.

1. Survival – self centred and think little of other’s emotional needs. Students may lack sufficient food, suitable diet, adequate clothing, necessary educational resources, basic bodily hygiene, and a stable and safe home environment. Consider breakfast programs, uniform and clothing pools, textbook schemes, health nurses, chaplains, after school tutoring sessions. Watch out for becoming frustrated when children don’t do their homework as they may not have a stable and safe environment to do it in. Violation to school uniforms may be that the child does not own the correct clothing.

2. Love and Belonging – to receive and give affection and to be accepted as part of a group. This is a significant need in lower primary school children and is interpreted by teachers as “attention seeking” behaviour. If they can’t get the attention they want, they may resort to at least being noticed as existing and may do this through inappropriate choices. This can lead to “peer pressure.” Society has changed significantly and so it is hard for children to get this need met at home and in the broader neighbourhood/community. The school and teacher has become the source of satisfying these needs, often through need-seeking behaviours such as gang-formation, bullying and disruptive clowning. The teacher cannot be solely responsible and so it is important to create positive relationships amongst students and to provide structured opportunities for the students to work and play together in pairs and groups.

3. Personal Power – to feel capable in the world, having some control over what happens to oneself and some meaningful impact on the world. It is linked to self esteem. Students who do not excel in any particular area of schooling or who frequently fail, do not get teacher acknowledgement, and so do not get this need met in the school environment. That is why it is important to use encouragement rather than praise in the classroom. That is, praise is often results-based and reflects the teacher’s role as the authoritative judge and external motivator. On the other hand, encouragement is effort-based, reflects the teacher’s role as supporter and attempts to generate internal motivation in the student. By encouraging rather than praising, we recognise that abilities are different and students can get and ‘A’ for effort. But praise is still better than nothing at all. Other ways to satisfy this need is to display student work, provide opportunities for students to promote their strengths, acknowledge out of school efforts and provide meaningful class and school...
responsibilities. Failure to meet this need may lead to high risk behaviours such as graffiti, vandalism and dangerous stunts which all help children to feel that they have ‘made their mark’ on the world.

4. Freedom – the emotional need for independence and to be recognised as an individual. Freedom is not such a significant need among primary school children. They are more driven by the need to feel love and belonging. It is more significant for secondary students. If this need is not met, the student can become rebellious (wagging, drug-taking, power plays). The need for freedom is better catered for in the democratic classroom and school environment, where students have a role in developing rules and procedures, have input into curriculum presentation and where the teacher has a facilitative rather than controlling role. Teachers could try freedom in the form of choice in the classroom relating to methods of curriculum presentation, some environmental factors such as music, assessment devices and forms of acknowledgement (behaviour rewards).

5. Fun and Enjoyment – To take pleasure in pastimes, to relax, distress, to laugh and play and to exercise the ‘inner child.’ Traditional fun times have vanished from the classroom with specialist teachers. Try restructuring lesson presentations, include five minute joke sessions, one minute rest breaks, drink breaks, free time, stretch breaks, background music (provided by students), curriculum games (especially based on popular game show formats), outdoor games and sports, open discussions and manipulative learning experiences (computes, building blocks, experiments, art activities, physical movement).