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# Throwing! Suggestions for managing throwing behaviour

by Jill Hooper

Many children will go through a stage where they throw food, toys or other objects. Throwing is a developmental stage relating to the release of objects (such as food, toys, cutlery etc.) At this time, children are often learning about cause and effect, engaging in sensory exploration (eg sound and movement of objects), and beginning to develop functional play. The following provides some suggestions for managing this behaviour.

## **Why do children throw?**

Throwing can be attributed to a number of causes. These include:

### **1. Motor planning difficulties**

This is often characterised by the child throwing during an activity (eg peg board) and will often be a circular throwing movement where the item is not necessarily thrown at a target. The object will often land to the side or behind the child.

### **2. Attention seeking**

Attention seeking is a little more “obvious”. This is more likely where the child throws an object to provoke a reaction from others. For example, if you find yourself picking up objects and returning them, only to have them thrown again, attention seeking may be the cause.

### **3. Communication** (eg I don't want to do this)

When children have limited communication skills, they may use behaviour to get the message across. For example, a child may taste food then throw it to indicate that he/she does not want the food. Alternatively, a child may throw a toy to tell you that they do not want to play with that toy.

### **4. Avoidance**

This generally occurs when a child has no desire to complete the task or activity (eg playing with a toy or eating). The child may be thinking that if the toy or food is on the other side of the room, there is little likelihood that they will have to play with it or eat it. Avoidance may occur due to oppositional behaviour, or may be an indicator that the child is anxious.

### **5. Accidental reinforcement by others**

This may not be the original cause of the child's throwing, but may certainly be maintaining the behaviour. If the child's throwing behaviour results in a pleasant interaction with you or someone

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*The first step in managing throwing is to determine the cause of the behaviour.*

else, you may unintentionally be rewarding the throwing.

### **6. Combination of the above**

As with many behaviours, there may be more than one cause. Also, there may be one cause, but your reaction to the behaviour may in fact be encouraging the child to continue with the behaviour.

The first step in managing throwing is to determine the cause of the behaviour. Once you can determine the cause, you are better able to match an appropriate strategy for managing the behaviour. It is useful to monitor the throwing behaviour to determine the cause. An example of monitoring would be where you keep a diary of what happens before and after the behaviour, and any other significant information such as where and when the behaviour occurs. It can be helpful to have others monitor the behaviour as well. You could have another family member or an outsider help with the monitoring.

### **Which strategies should be used for each cause?**

#### **1. Cause – Motor planning difficulties**

Pattern the child through movements (eg use hand over hand) and always have a container for the child to place objects into (eg ice cream bucket for packing up blocks, or a bowl for putting sandwich into).

Work on play skills. Use hand over hand to teach the child skills for playing with various toys.

Gradually reduce the amount of assistance to facilitate independence. Praise and/or reward the child for “good playing” or “good eating”.

#### **2. Cause – Attention seeking**

Do not pick up the toy or food, as if you do so, the throwing can become a game.

Use planned ignoring for throwing of toys – this provides a logical consequence as the child will not be able to play with the toy if it is on the other side of the room.

A logical consequence may be used if the child then goes to the toy and throws it again. If this occurs, you may remove the toy for a short period (a few minutes) and say, “You haven’t been able to play nicely with the truck, so I am taking it away for two minutes”. After playtime, always have the child assist in cleaning up the area. This may mean that you will have to provide hand-on-hand help, but the child must learn that they have to contribute to cleaning up their mess. Praise and/or reward the child for assisting to clean up.

#### **3. Cause – Communication difficulties**

Prompt the child to use a communication strategy to indicate that they are finished with the toy. For example, you may say, “If you are finished, you need to tell me like this.” (Use hand-on-hand guidance to use Makaton sign for meaning “finished”.)

The child still needs to learn that sometimes they need to complete activities, even when they would prefer to finish (eg. “Just three more beads and then we are finished.”).

*If people are smiling ... or providing any positive interaction with the child for throwing, they may inadvertently be encouraging the throwing.*

Setting a limit of how many tasks must be completed can help the child understand that the activity will end. For some children, symbol strips may assist their understanding.

Praise and/or reward the child for completion of the activities or for using the “finished” sign.

#### **4. Cause – avoidance**

The child needs to learn that throwing an object to avoid a task will not be effective.

The suggested strategies for communication difficulties (point 3) are applicable in this case.

Praise and/or reward the child for completing the task.

#### **5. Cause – Accidental reinforcement by others**

It is important to monitor your own and other’s reaction to behaviours such as throwing. These behaviours might initially look “cute” but they rapidly become problematic. If people are smiling, laughing, giving the toys/food back, distracting the child with a fun activity such as bubbles, or providing any positive interaction with the child for throwing, they may inadvertently be encouraging the throwing.

Follow the suggested strategies for attention seeking (point 2) and ensure that no-one’s reactions are encouraging. Interaction with the child at this time must be very “matter-of-fact”.

Praise and/or reward others when they control their reactions to the throwing (eg particularly if you are requesting that other children do not laugh at the child who is throwing).

#### **6. Cause – Combination of the above**

An example of a combination would be where a child may have begun throwing because of motor planning difficulties, but continues to throw because family members either laugh at the behaviour or do not attempt to correct the behaviour. In this example, follow the steps for both motor planning difficulties (point 1) and accidental reinforcement by others (point 5).

Use similar combinations of strategies for similar combinations of causes.

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