

## GUEST COLUMN – March/ April 2023

### ‘Curious Not Furious’

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This extract is taken from an exciting new book and toolkit which presents practical tips and powerful case studies: empowering children to take charge of their brains and behaviour.

The authors lead [Changing Chances CIC](#), a community interest company focused on improving children’s life chances, especially those who are struggling at home, in the classroom or in their communities.

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### **Nobody rises to low expectations**

Once the first foundation stone of strong, positive relationships is firmly in place, we need to take a look at the second of those three foundation stones: working with young people to set clear, consistent and high expectations. You may have heard the saying that nobody rises to low expectations. That’s why we firmly believe that expectations should be set high for all young people. High expectations set the aspiration that young people and all those around them are able to be **safe, content and at their best.**

Whether you’re reading this as a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a foster carer or a social worker, you’ll find that setting expectations is a crucial first step. Think about it like this: there are certain things we do in life which may take some time and effort, but which prevent problems occurring down the line. We get our cars serviced to prevent breakdowns or we have dental check-ups to avoid fillings. Setting expectations is a bit like this. It takes time and effort at the outset, but can go a long way towards preventing big problems (and a lot of heartache) later on.

You may be wondering why we are using the word ‘expectations’, rather than talking about ‘rules’. We know that language is powerful, so our choice of these words isn’t a matter of chance. Looking at the origins of the words rules and expectations will shine a light on our thinking.

Expectation comes from a Latin word meaning 'an awaiting', a word that brings with it a sense of confident anticipation of something good that will happen in the future. Rule, on the other hand, has its origins in another Latin word meaning 'straight measuring stick', or ruler. This incorporates a sense of measuring people against a defined scale of right and wrong: controlling and directing them towards what is seen as right.

So, the word expectations underlines our belief that with time, and with the right support, **all** children and teenagers can develop the skills for success. It rejects the idea that some will inevitably fail when they are set against the measuring stick of right and wrong.

## **Agreeing expectations together**

Agreeing clear and meaningful expectations together with young people gives them a sense of control as they play an equal part in the decision-making process. It also puts the focus on the natural consequences of actions, rather than on apparently arbitrary punishments that are often attached by adults to rules that children may not understand or value.

Agreeing expectations together brings many benefits. It means that children and teenagers understand and have a stake in them, which may mean they are more invested in keeping to the expectations they have helped to shape. Also, setting expectations collaboratively involves discussing different people's needs, and this contributes to building emotional intelligence and empathy.

Setting agreed and clear expectations with children is one of the first things we need to do whether we are a parent or grandparent, a foster carer or neighbour, or a professional working with individuals, classes or groups. The key is having a conversation with a child or group of children about what needs to happen to make sure that everyone feels safe, content and able to be at their best in any situation. Try to keep in mind the mantra that whatever is agreed needs to be **good for me, good for you and good for everyone.**

How does this look in practice? In the home it might start with a conversation about what needs to happen so that everyone can get out of the house on time in the morning, without angry words, tantrums or tears. Everyone's perspectives need to be considered: an adult may have a train to catch; a young child may need a hand with getting ready; a teenager may struggle to find the belongings they're going to need that day.

In a classroom, the discussion could be about what needs to happen so that everyone can concentrate on their work and get the support they need. This might include sharing what different people need in order to be able to concentrate at their best. Some might need a quiet environment; others may need to move around; a few may need to be able to talk ideas through with a learning buddy.

Then comes the time for some group problem-solving: how can everyone's needs be met?

When agreeing expectations, we must aim to be collaborative, firm and kind rather than acting as authoritarian rule-givers. This isn't about being soft or fluffy; agreeing expectations collaboratively can be just as rigorous as laying down a set of rules and insisting that they are followed. The difference is that by being collaborative, we are working with the child, aligning ourselves alongside them, rather than pulling against them. When we position ourselves on the side of the child, we take on the role of a caring supporter who holds high expectations, believes that the child can meet them and is there alongside them if they are struggling.