

Speaker: Donna Sergeant (42nd Street)

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for having me here today.

I am going to be talking about *The Naughty Child*. My name is Donna Sergeant and I work for 42nd Street. 42nd Street is a mental health charity based in Manchester, and we work with 11- to 25-year-olds who have issues with self-esteem and other mental health challenges. We do that through creativity, one-to-one work, group work, and education.

So I've called this presentation "The Naughty Child: Reframing Behaviour Through a Mental Health Lens" because I want us to explore the word *naughty* and consider how it can hide distress and potentially delay the support we offer to students.

Why does this matter? It matters because behaviour is one of the most visible signs of distress. Labels like *naughty* still shape how young people are seen. Behaviour is a form of communication. It influences how young people are viewed by others and can ultimately help form their identity.

I once had a young person tell me that they would rather be excluded from school than be vulnerable. That spoke volumes to me. Sometimes we miss the real story of what's happening because we focus so much on the behaviour rather than the young person. There's a feeling behind every behaviour.

When I use the label *naughty*, it's not necessarily because I hear professionals, teachers, or adults using it. Quite often, it's young people themselves who use the word. They use it to describe themselves. Sometimes it's connected to shame. Sometimes it masks distress. Sometimes it's worn almost as a badge of honour.

Many young people see those who don't worry about consequences as being the "big I am." They don't care what other young people or adults think, and that can make them seem brave. But in reality, what's happening is that they're creating distance instead of connection. They're doing it deliberately as a way of protecting themselves.

So let's think about behaviour and mental health.

As I mentioned before, behaviour is a form of communication. It can reflect trauma, identity issues, and neurodiversity.

For example, I worked with a young person who was struggling with their identity and sexuality. Rather than saying, "I'm confused," or, "I'm having difficulties," or, "I don't know what's going on in my life," they expressed those struggles through acting out. The response was immediate punishment because they were causing disruption in the classroom. Nobody stopped to ask, "Why are you having these difficulties? Why are you behaving in that way?"

Thinking about trauma, I used to work for Manchester Living Care Services for many years, both as a practitioner and as a manager. I saw many young people repeatedly act out their trauma. Often they became trapped in a cycle of exclusion. These were some of the kindest, most caring, intelligent young people you could ever hope to

meet, but because of what was happening in their lives, they displayed behaviours that simply weren't accepted within the classroom or educational environment.

Neurodiversity can also present itself in many different ways, and those behaviours are often interpreted as bad behaviour. There can be a very thin line between what we see as a *troublemaker* and a *child in trouble*.

So what do children and young people need?

They need understanding before punishment.

Recently, a young person was caught graffitiing on a wall at school. They had only just started when they were caught. The immediate response was to shout at them and place them in detention. They were then put into isolation because the graffiti was considered gross misconduct on school premises. Eventually, the child was moved into an out-of-school provision.

We intervened and asked the school, "Do you think that 11-year-old knew the behaviour policy? Perhaps what could have happened instead was a conversation. You could have explained that it was inappropriate behaviour, told them not to do it again, and explained the consequences. For example, if it happened again, they might have to clean the wall themselves."

The child did not need to be excluded or punished in such a significant way when they didn't fully understand. That child certainly would not have read the behaviour policy. In truth, many staff members probably hadn't read it either—they were simply applying it in that moment.

I also think having a safe and trusted adult is incredibly important. Research has shown that one consistent person can make a huge difference. Having someone who listens to you, affirms who you are, and understands your needs can be transformative.

So what does this mean for us?

It means that all of us are in this together. This isn't about blame. It's about supporting one another so that we can better support young people and become better adults.

We need to reframe the whole system and work together. We need to become more curious. Let's ask questions rather than jumping to judgement.

If we work together, we can create the foundations of wellbeing. When young people's wellbeing is secure and they feel confident in who they are, they're then able to focus on their academic achievement. I've seen this happen time and again. Once that foundation is in place, young people can truly thrive in school and within educational settings.

We simply need to reflect. There is no blame here because we know the systems are often set up this way.

My final thought is this:

When we change how we see children, we change how we respond to them.

I want to thank you for the work you do every day—to hold space for young people, to look beyond behaviour, and to make support possible. Thank you.

If anyone would like to contact me, have a conversation, or learn more about what our service does, please feel free to get in touch at:

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Thank you.

Audience

(Applause)