
The Big Book of “What If?”

PRACTITIONER EDITION

Facilitator guidance, session structures, indexing by need, and recording
notes

PAW STEPS

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1 What this is

Two hundred everyday social situations, each with three or four possible responses and a question about what happens next.

It is **not** a scheme of work, a curriculum, or an intervention with a fixed number of sessions. It's a prompt bank. You pull one situation off the shelf when it's relevant and you spend eight minutes on it.

The design has one deliberate feature that separates it from most social-emotional resources: **the options aren't labelled**. There's no tick, no cross, no sad cartoon face. A child can pick the option you were hoping they wouldn't, and the material doesn't correct them — it asks what happens next.

That's the whole mechanism. Correction teaches compliance. Consequence teaches judgement. Only one of those survives contact with a playground you're not standing in.

2 The four beats

Every situation runs the same shape, and children learn the shape within about three sessions.

The situation. One or two lines. Deliberately thin — enough to recognise, not enough to solve.

The options. Three or four. At least one is what most children actually do rather than what they know they should do. That's on purpose. If every option is obviously good or obviously terrible, there's nothing to think about.

Play it forward. The consequence question. This is the working part of the page. Everything else is scaffolding for this.

Worth knowing. One line of adult perspective. Use it when the conversation stalls — not to close it down.

3 Running it

One to one — eight to ten minutes. Read the situation. Ask which they'd pick, *before* you offer any view. Ask *Play it forward*. Then ask it again about a different option. Close.

Small group of three to six — fifteen to twenty minutes. Read it, take a show of hands on the options, then ask the group to argue it. Children will change their minds mid-discussion, which is the point. Resist summarising at the end; a group that leaves still arguing has done more work than a group that leaves agreeing with you.

Whole class — ten to fifteen minutes. Works as a registration or circle-time slot. Show of hands, two or three contributions, move on. Frequency beats depth here.

Opportunistically. The strongest use. Something has just happened at break; you find the situation that matches and do it that afternoon while it's still live. This is where the material earns its keep, and it's why the index in section 6 matters more than the running order.

4 Five facilitator moves

Ask before you tell. Once you've given your view, the child's job changes from thinking to guessing what you want. You can't undo that in the same session.

Take the difficult choice seriously. If a child picks "shout at them", don't wince. Ask what happens next. Then ask what happens the day after. The option defeats itself far more convincingly than you can defeat it.

Play it forward twice. One step ahead is easy and often flattering to a poor choice. Two steps ahead is where most of them fall over. "And then what happens on Wednesday?" is the highest-value sentence in this guide.

Use silence. Six seconds feels unbearable and is usually where the real answer arrives. Count it if you have to.

Close on one sentence. Ask what they'll take away. One sentence, theirs, not yours. If they can't produce one, that's fine — say so and move on. A forced takeaway is worth nothing.

5 When it goes somewhere you didn't plan

The child picks the harmful option and defends it well. Don't win the argument. Ask what would have to be true for a different option to be worth it. You're looking for the condition, not the concession.

The child gives the answer they think you want. Common, and easy to spot — it arrives fast and sounds like a poster. Ask what they'd *actually* do, and make it clear the honest answer is the useful one. If you punish honesty here once, the resource stops working for that child permanently.

The child can't imagine any consequence. See section 7.

The child discloses something. See section 8. Stop the session.

The situation is too close to something live. Some children will recognise themselves. Watch for it, and be prepared to abandon the page. Naming it lightly — "that's a bit close to this week, isn't it, shall we do a different one" — is better than pressing on.

6 Index by presenting need

The situations are grouped by theme, but you'll usually arrive with a problem rather than a theme. Start here.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

SITUATIONS

Being excluded at break	3, 13, 50, 108, 184
Left out of a friendship group	1, 2, 4, 37, 50, 184
Falling out and not repairing	21, 22, 25, 38, 39, 40
Anger and shouting	41, 51, 57, 162, 190
Anxiety about the school day	43, 141, 142, 143, 155, 160
Sensory overload and needing to leave	48, 49, 51, 173
Refusing to own mistakes	26, 27, 61, 62, 80, 124
Lying to avoid trouble	27, 80, 124, 129, 144, 145
Conflict with staff	81, 82, 83, 90, 95, 100
Perceived unfairness	82, 83, 84, 85, 163
Low empathy / not reading others	101, 103, 107, 112, 113, 116, 117
Easily led / peer pressure	122, 123, 128, 129, 135
Bystander behaviour	86, 87, 108, 183
Struggling to access learning	141, 149, 156, 157, 158
Group and paired work breakdown	150, 151, 152
Sibling conflict	161, 162, 163, 172
Family change or upheaval	164, 169, 178, 179, 180
Online conflict	181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 189
Online safety concerns	186, 187, 188, 194, 200
Transition and starting somewhere new	9, 15, 154, 179, 198

7 Adapting it

Children who can't project forwards. *Play it forward* assumes a skill some children haven't built yet. Don't abandon the question — ladder it. Ask what happens in the next ten seconds first. Then the next ten minutes. Then tomorrow. Concrete and short before abstract and long. For some children the ten-second version is the whole intervention for a term, and that's a legitimate outcome.

Children who freeze on choice. Cut to two options and drop the rest. Four is too many when choosing is itself the difficulty.

Children who need it concrete. Swap the pronouns for named puppets, figures, or a third party. "What should he do?" is easier than "what would you do?" for a child who finds self-reference exposing.

Children who mask. They'll give you the poster answer every time and you'll learn nothing. Ask what someone *else* in their class would do. The honest answer often arrives via the third person.

Younger or lower reading age. Read it aloud rather than simplifying it on the page. The situations work well below the reading level of the text.

Blank template. Situation 201 is deliberately empty. Children generating their own situations is a stronger signal of progress than anything they say about yours.

8 Safeguarding

Nine situations sit close to safeguarding territory and are written differently from the rest. They drop the no-wrong-answers framing and give a clear line, because ambiguity is the wrong instrument for that material.

Situations 88, 121, 131, 132, 135, 186, 187, 194, 200.

Before using any of these:

Read the page yourself first. Know your setting's reporting route before you open the session, not after. Don't run these in an open group if you have a child on your caseload with a live concern in that area — do them one to one or not at all.

If a child discloses during a session, stop the session. Follow your setting's procedure. Don't ask follow-up questions to establish detail, don't promise confidentiality, and record what was said in the child's words as soon as you can.

This guidance does not replace your setting's safeguarding policy or your DSL's direction. Where they differ from anything here, they win.

9 Recording

Keep it light or you won't do it. Three lines per session is enough:

Situation used. Number and short title.

What they chose, and what they said would happen next. Their words. This is the bit worth having — the option chosen is far less informative than the reasoning offered for it.

Anything that shifted. A changed mind mid-session, a consequence spotted unprompted, a first-time contribution.

Over a term, the pattern that matters is whether the *Play it forward* answers are getting longer and further ahead. That's the progress. Not whether they're picking nicer options — a child can learn to pick nice options for you in a fortnight without changing anything at all.

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