

## Tip Sheet

### Supporting and Managing your Child's Behaviour

- 1. Try to remember that all behaviour, including misbehaviour, is your child communicating something.** Perhaps the manner in which they are communicating is unacceptable, but what they are communicating and why needs to be heard and understood. Taking a relational, emotion-focused approach to parenting means that we are trying to get behind the behaviour that our child is exhibiting to understand what is driving this behaviour. If we fail to respond to the meaning behind our child's behaviour, it is likely to escalate.
- 2. Catch your child being good.** Go out of your way to notice good behaviour. To do this, you need to have a clear sense of what good behaviour means to you. Very often, when parents are asked to think about the types of behaviour they would like their children to engage in, they end up thinking about the behaviours that they don't want their children to do. It is much more effective if you can have a clear understanding of what good behaviour looks like for you (e.g., rather than 'don't hit', you might ask your child to 'please play nicely'). This means that when you notice your child engaging in good behaviour, you can praise them, thus increasing the likelihood that they will engage in this behaviour again.
- 3. Teach your child how to talk about their feelings.** Support them in labelling their emotions and finding ways to communicate and discuss their emotional world. If your child often misbehaves, it may be that they have not yet learned how to communicate their needs or feelings appropriately. It is up to you, as a parent, to teach them more effective ways of expressing their emotions.
- 4. Teach your child how to solve problems** so that they learn how to identify and work through their own difficulties. You can do this by explicitly teaching them the steps involved in problem solving (i.e. naming the problem, brainstorming solutions, choosing the best option, working out a plan, putting the plan into action, and reviewing how it went) and then by modelling your use of these skills when facing your own difficulties.
- 5. You can name and empathise with your child's emotional experience, without agreeing with, or condoning the behaviour they are exhibiting.** For example, if your child is upset because they are not getting their own way, it might be helpful to acknowledge that they are feeling hard done by and that it's really frustrating for everyone when things don't go the way we want them to. Showing that you understand why they are feeling upset teaches them that their emotions are normal and that they must learn ways to tolerate these uncomfortable feelings. Dismissing their experience by labelling it as silly or immature in this instance is likely to escalate their misbehaviour, and might give them a sense that their emotions are unacceptable, unworthy of attention, or abnormal.

6. **Prioritise the parent-child relationship.** The research and clinical evidence all point to the fact that behaviour management strategies are only useful in the context of a much broader approach which primarily focuses on building the parent-child relationship and the communication that happens between parents and children. The balance on the scales must always be tipped in the direction of “positive parenting” if “positive discipline” strategies are to be effective.
7. **Use encouragement before correction.** Children need encouragement that is clear (have the child’s full attention, be sincere), specific (identify and label the behaviour that you wish to encourage), and personal (encourage in a way that within your child’s comfort zone). As a rule of thumb, children require far more encouragement than they need correction or criticism so for every one correction made, engage them in encouragement four times.
8. **When faced with difficult or challenging behaviour, press the pause button before responding.** Very often, when children misbehave, parents have a strong emotional response and feel fired up and ready to react. Sometimes, however, this can actually escalate the misbehaviour, and leave both you and your child feeling angry, hurt, and unheard. Rather than reacting, it might be useful to press the pause button. This means pausing to check out what’s happening. You might ask yourself:
  - (i) What might be going on for my child right now? What’s behind this behaviour?
  - (ii) How do I feel about their behaviour? Am I embarrassed, ashamed, angry?
  - (iii) How do I usually respond when my child behaves like this? Is this effective?
  - (iv) What might be a better way to respond?

By giving yourself some space and time to think about the situation before responding, you might gain a new perspective or understanding that could assist you in managing the situation more effectively.

9. **Use consequences to teach, not to punish.** We cannot force children to behave or do what we ask. All we can do is offer a choice between doing what we ask and a consequence to not doing so. The ideal is that the consequence is fair and just and helps the child to learn about the negative implications of misbehaviour so that they can make positive choices in the future. For example, if your children are fighting over a game, you might offer your children a choice: “you can either play nicely or the game will be taken away”.
10. **Parents have needs too!** Remember that for your children to develop into healthy, well-balanced adults, you need only be a good enough parent, not a perfect one! Looking after your child requires that you spend time looking after yourself by making time for your needs and interests. Spending special time with your partner will also help to keep your relationship fresh, while helping to keep you both on the same page with regards parenting. This will help you to parent in a more cohesive way.