

Supporting good behaviour in children

Parenting is probably the most important job you will undertake and can be both rewarding and challenging in equal measure. All children misbehave from time to time and this is normal. When parents struggle with aspects of their child's behaviour, it can be tempting to seek out a quick fix discipline strategy. However, no single strategy will fix everything and efforts to guide your child's behaviour work best when you are investing time and effort in building a positive and loving relationship with your child. However, the following may be worth considering:

Children's behaviour is a form of communication. Look behind the behaviour and ask 'what is my child trying to communicate through this behaviour?'

Walk the talk. The best way to change your child's behaviour is to change your behaviour. So model the behaviour you want to see more of. The opposite also holds true.

Emphasise the positives and catch your child being good. Pay more attention to the behaviour you want and less to the behaviour you don't want. Using your attention in this way shows your child that positive behaviour attracts positive attention and increases the likelihood that they will engage in this behaviour again.

Establish clear rules - but only about things worth worrying about. This means that as a parent you have to prioritise what is most important, which may mean letting other less important things go.

Have realistic standards and expectations – make sure that they don't exceed your child's level of ability, making them feel incompetent even if they perform at an age appropriate level.

Use do's rather than don'ts Children respond better to encouragement rather than reprimand so instead of saying 'don't do that', clearly state the behaviour you want to see and follow this up with specific praise and encouragement.

Make good behaviour easy for your child by giving choices. For instance, rather than saying 'go do your homework' you may give a choice such as 'you can start homework now, or have 10 minutes outside to play before you start homework'. This is much more likely to elicit cooperation.

Teach your child how to talk about emotions by supporting them in labelling their emotions and finding ways to talk about them. Naming your child's feelings—e.g. "It seems like you are cross right now" not only demonstrates that you understand why they are feeling upset, it also teaches them that these emotions are normal and that they must learn to tolerate uncomfortable feelings. It also models a different way of expressing emotions. In contrast, dismissing their experience by labelling it as silly may not only escalate the behaviour but also teaches them that their emotions are unacceptable or not worthy of attention.

Use the pause button –the biggest obstacle to good discipline is getting angry or upset as a parent. So rather than reacting automatically, which may be negative and escalate the situation further, hit the pause button, take a few deep breaths and become aware of your breathing, take control of your emotions and give yourself time to choose a response. Questions to ask that may help include;

- What might be going on for my child right now?
- How do I feel about their behaviour? Am I embarrassed, angry etc?
- How do I usually respond? Is this effective?
- What might be a better response?

Let your child experience the consequence of their behaviour but use to teach, not to punish. We cannot force children to do what we ask but we can offer a choice between doing what we ask and a consequence to not doing so. The ideal is that the consequence is fair and helps your 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 a choice: “you can either play nicely or the game will be taken away”. Consequences work best when fair, immediate and delivered in a neutral but firm tone.

Manage your stress levels Your capacity to attend fully to the parenting role is compromised when you are stressed, overwhelmed or exhausted. As parents, it is important to take time off for rest and to make time for your needs and interests. A little bit of self care goes a long way! Children need cared for parents as much as they need parents to care for them. This means looking after your needs without feeling guilty.

Be the ‘good enough’ parent

Remember that for your children to develop into healthy, well-balanced adults, you need only be a good enough parent, not a perfect one! Striving to be the perfect parent is setting yourself up for failure – often by either becoming overwhelmed and stressed or feeling hopeless as you fall short of your unrealistic expectations. If you find that the stresses of life and parenting become overwhelming, it is important to see out support from other people and linking in with your GP or local health service can be a good place to start.