

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Helping children with their behaviour

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Children learn how to behave

All children are individuals, because they are born with their own character. This is why even children within the same family do not react in the same way to similar situations.

Even so, a great deal of young children's behaviour is learned through experience. They learn from how important people in their life react when they behave well or not so well. They also copy ways of behaving – both 'good' and 'bad' – from adults. Children do not only imitate other children.

Young children need grown-up help to build habits of 'good' behaviour and your patience when they make mistakes. There will be times when they know what they should do, but are struggling to do it. They welcome caring guidance at these times just as they welcome help when they cannot manage to build their brick tower or pour their own juice. It may seem obvious with these activities that children need time and practice to learn what to do. The same is true of learning how to behave.

Be clear what you want

Children need boundaries set by grown-ups who do not change the ground rules to suit their own moods. The most helpful adults are 'firm but fair' people, who stick to 'No' when that is important. They also check themselves to make sure they are not saying 'No' as a habit, without thinking.

Ground rules cannot be mainly about what children should not do. If they are, children can end up trying to work out what is left after all the 'stop it's. For every 'don't do that' be ready with an alternative 'do'. With careful guidance, young children can learn that it is not alright to hit

people, even if they are very cross with Mummy or if another child has been completely 'horrid'. They cannot learn this if they are shouted at or smacked, because adults are actually using the behaviour they are trying to stop in the children. So what else are children to do with their cross or hurt feelings? They need help to use words, like saying, 'I'm cross with you, because ...' Young children learn, bit by bit, that if they would like the book or car that another child is playing with, it is not alright simply to grab and run. Instead, they need to ask: 'Please can I have ...?' or offer a trade. Ground rules like these help adults resist the temptation to smack. There are always other options that mean you avoid hurting young children – physically or emotionally. In times of stress, you may need to count to ten, take a deep breath or literally take several steps back.

Avoid labelling children

Sometimes a young child copes by using fierce words or actions. But this behaviour does not make him or her into a 'spiteful' or 'bad-tempered' child. Adults do not like it if children claim things like, 'You're always shouting at me!', or 'You never listen!' We want to be understood as having done our best, but that after four times of 'asking nicely' our patience has gone. Adults need to give the same courtesy to children and avoid the bad habit of labelling them as 'never like this' or 'always doing that'.

Try to take each episode of anger as a separate event. That way, the child is no longer seen as bad tempered by nature. By treating each angry moment as a one-off, grown-ups will find it easier to try and work out what caused the fury and help the child avoid it in future.

Focus on the positives

Make the effort to catch children out 'being good'. Children learn best when they receive generous encouragement for what they have actually done. You can use words, smiles and gestures like clapping.

- Children understand much more about sharing when they hear, 'Well done, you let Gary have some of your bricks'. A real example like this gives children much more information than vague instructions of 'You have to share'.
- Be encouraging about the 'little things' and avoid waiting for something that is 'big enough' to notice. Tell children, 'Thanks for waiting, you were so patient', or 'Good for you, you told me about your cross feelings. Now let's see what we can do about ...'
- Rewards and treats have a place but need to be used with care. It is unwise to let children learn to expect 'payment' by sweets, or anything else, for ordinary consideration and helpfulness.
- Avoid picking up on every little bit of 'bad' behaviour from a child. If you are having a hard time with a child, find and say three good things each day that he or she has done.
- Make sure that children are confident of your affection, no matter if you have to deal with serious squabbling or a huge mess. Definitely resist the temptation to say, 'I won't like (or love) you any more if ...' Children need to feel the emotional security that comes with, 'I like you. But I don't like what you've just done to Sunil.'

Help children to manage

Children need helpful adults when they have run out of options and the yelling and pinching has started.

- Be ready to step in and stop unkindness or physical hurt between children. But stay calm – in your face, your gestures and your voice.
- Avoid assumptions about who started it or is most to blame. So often you do not know for certain.
- Recognise children's strong feelings by saying something like, 'Darren, I can see that you're upset, and Sandra, I know you are cross.' You could then add, 'But that does not make it alright to hit each other'. Then ask in a calm way, 'What happened here?', or 'I can see there is a problem about the bike'.
- Listen to each child fairly and help by asking, 'What can we do about this problem?' Together you will find a less disruptive way out of the situation.

Deal in consequences rather than punishment

Babies and young toddlers cannot foresee the results of their actions. They do not know enough about how the world works. Very young children often need to be physically guided away because they cannot stop themselves – it is just too tempting to pull the cat's tail or climb up for another biscuit. Young children often need to be reminded of a ground rule or to hear a request again.

- Remain calm (not always easy!) and remind children with, for example, 'If you can't stay still in the library story time, then I'm going to take us out'. The pre-warning can create the sense of a 'fair cop'. It also gives children a chance to redirect themselves. You can then say, 'Well done' if they manage.
- Any consequence needs to make sense, given the children's behaviour. Children feel resentful if they lose a trip to the park because earlier in the day they were 'really cheeky'. This artificial consequence operates as punishment and they will maybe say, 'You are so unfair!'

- Finally, deal with children's behaviour at the time and then avoid harking back. Think for a moment about how you would feel if there was no fresh start when you made a mistake.
- Not surprisingly, children often copy what they hear and see from adults. Do your best to avoid any tactics that would bring a telling-off if the children behaved in that way. Adults who use yelling, sarcasm, swearing, threats or smacking, are setting such a bad example to the children.

Why do we find it hard sometimes?

No one is perfect. The best of adults get tired, run out of patience and make mistakes in the heat of the moment. A thoughtful adult will consider, 'Would I like a child to say or do what I have just done?' If necessary, we should say 'Sorry', just as we would expect from the children.

- Adults can have less good days and it is important that children do not get told off for the same action that was greeted with laughter yesterday. Of course, children learn that sometimes rules get bent a little. But they cannot manage if adult reactions change dramatically.
- It is hard to remain calm when you feel watched. But children deserve a chance to behave well, even if you feel embarrassed by the audience. Remember, not everyone is tut-tutting. Many people will admire your patience.

Whatever your own childhood experiences or the views of people you know, you can decide that warm encouragement does not spoil children or make them 'big-headed'. You can be firm that children learn best by telling them what they have done right and using fair consequences. It is your choice.

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Useful publications

Ros Bayley (2006) *More than happy and sad: young children and emotions*, London: Early Education.

Tanya Byron (2007) *Your child your way: create a positive parenting pattern for life*, London: Michael Joseph.

Andrea Clifford-Poston (2007) *When Harry hit Sally: understanding your child's behaviour*, London: Simon and Schuster.

Helen Dorman & Clive Dorman (2002) *The social toddler: promoting positive behaviour*, London: The Children's Project.

Jennie Lindon (2009) *Guiding the behaviour of children and young people* London: Hodder Education

Jennie Lindon (2006) *Care and caring matter: young children learning through care*, London: Early Education.

Useful contacts

Family Information Service (FIS) – your local FIS will be able to let you know of services dealing with this subject, whether provided through Sure Start, a children's centre, family centre or other organisation. For details of how to contact your FIS, visit Childcare Link: www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Fathers Direct: www.fathersdirect.com

National Family and Parenting Institute: www.nfpi.org.uk

Parentline Plus: helpline 0808 800 2222 www.parentlineplus.org.uk

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Early Education

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

