BEHAVE YOURSELF!

A guide to better parenting

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
Helping children to behave well

Most parents worry about whether they are getting things right. Of course there is no such thing as the “perfect” parent. Any parent can have difficulties and all worry about the effect they are having on their children. One of the things that parents worry about most is the question of discipline and how to get children to behave well. It can be a very difficult subject for many parents. Everyone seems to have an opinion on how to raise children successfully. Will too little discipline mean they are out of control? Will too much turn them against you? We know children need limits to feel secure, but it may not be easy to set them.

This leaflet is about positive ways of encouraging good behaviour in children. A positive approach means praising and encouraging the behaviour you want and making sure you give children attention when they are behaving well – it does not include smacking. Some parents worry that their children will be out of control if they do not smack them, but the opposite is true. The more you show love and respect, and the more children understand your reasons for wanting them to do things, the more they will want to please you.

Using this approach will help to ensure that any punishment will be a last resort.

Ten steps to better parenting

1. Love is the most important need for all children. It is also an important part of positive discipline. The more you show love to your child, by giving them hugs and kisses, by saying “I love you”, the more they will want to prove they deserve it. Love builds a child’s confidence and self-esteem.

2. Listen carefully to what your child is telling you. Take an interest in what they are doing and feeling. Reassure them that strong feelings are fine – if they are expressed in the right way. The more you do this, the less you will need to discipline at all.

3. Limits have to be set, even in the most loving, listening relationships. Part of being a parent is creating boundaries. Remember that it is natural and normal for children to test these boundaries. This is not naughty, it’s part of the learning process. Children feel more secure if you stick to the limits you have set, provided they are reasonable, even if they complain at the time.

4. Laughter can help diffuse an angry situation. Sometimes parents get so serious that the fun goes out of parenting. See the funny side and allow yourself to laugh whenever possible.

5. Seeing things from your child’s point of view and imagining how your child feels is the key to understanding behaviour. Remember how it felt when you were a child and how confusing the adult world seemed when you felt unfairly treated.

6. Praise and encourage your child. Expect them to behave well and encourage all their efforts. Praise the good behaviour and try to ignore the bad. The more you nag, the less your child will listen.

7. Respect your child as you would another adult. Involve them in decisions, especially when something affects them. Listen to their point of view. If you are tempted to say something hurtful, think how it would sound if you said it to an adult. Apologise if you sometimes get things wrong.

8. Set routines. Small children feel more secure and conflict can be avoided if there is a clear pattern to their day. They feel happier with regular meal times, bed times, or for noisy play.

9. Some rules are necessary in every family, but try to be flexible with very small children. Once you decide on your family rules, be consistent. It can be very confusing for children if you enforce a rule one day, then let it go the next. Sometimes you need different rules outside the home which must be explained to children.

10. Don’t forget your own needs! If it all feels too much like hard work, and your patience is running out, take some time out for yourself. Do something that makes you feel good. If you ever feel you are losing control or may start shouting, put your child down or smacking. Walk away, calm down and count to ten.
Positive choices for parents

- Show your child how to behave well by example
  Children learn by copying behaviour and they will copy yours.
- Change the environment, not the child
  It's better to keep precious, dangerous or fragile objects out of reach than to punish your child's natural curiosity.
- Be positive!
  Tell children what you want them to do, not just what you don't want.
- Make reasonable demands
  Remember to ask yourself if your requests are reasonable for your child's age and situation. You will need to be more patient with a very young child or one who is tired or ill.
- Don't rely too much on rewards and punishments
  As children get older, the power of rewards or punishments gets less. Explain the reasons behind your decisions. Negotiate with older children, use diversion tactics with little ones.
- Choose not to smack or shout
  Smacking may seem to work at the time, but parents may find themselves hitting harder and harder in order to achieve the same result. Shouting at children or constantly criticizing them can be just as harmful, and can lead to long-term emotional difficulties. These punishments do not help children develop self-control and respect for others.

Children have a right to positive discipline

The United Kingdom Government has agreed to abide by the rules of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This states that children have rights, and that one of these rights is the right to be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence and deliberate humiliation.

Giving children choices helps them to behave well

Don't get stuck in a power struggle with children about things that don't matter. Try to let them make some choices for themselves: what to wear or what to eat, so they don't feel resentful at always being controlled. This helps to cut down tantrums and difficult behaviour.

It makes you think!

Some facts that may surprise you...

- Sometimes naughtiness and disobedience is a healthy sign!
  Children are naturally enthusiastic and curious. This can make them behave in ways adults call naughty, but it would be very odd if a child never tried things out or made mistakes.
  This does not mean children should be allowed to do anything! They need to learn your family rules and how to co-operate with others. Helping children learn self-control takes time and patience.
- Often children do not understand why they were punished
  Studies show that children are often confused by adult rules. They do not always understand what they did wrong. This is particularly true if a child has been smacked, because they become too angry and upset to think clearly.

What some parents have told the NSPCC

I don't think smacking works, and you do alienate them by smacking when they are older. We do use some forms of discipline, like sending them to their room."

- It all depends on what mood I'm in. I try to explain why something is wrong, or I ignore the behaviour - both work well. But if I'm in a bad mood or lose control - that's when I shout or smack."

Parents are only human, and sometimes it all feels too much like hard work, particularly if other things are getting on top of you. When you are stressed, you may take it out on your child, but this usually makes you feel guilty afterwards!

Thus, this is understandable. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) believes it is wrong to hit children. Research shows that many parents do not want to smack children but use it as a last resort. Smacking children is not an effective way of getting them to behave well.

For more information

Contact your local NSPCC Family Centre for further information or support.

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