Encouraging better behaviour

A practical guide to positive parenting

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
About this guide

Being a parent isn't always easy.

This practical guide provides useful information on positive parenting and positive discipline and looks at why physical punishment is never a good idea for children of any age.

Of course, you can't just switch to positive parenting overnight. If you have always shouted and smacked, it will take time and some hard work to turn things around. It may even seem as if behaviour gets worse for a while - but keep at it! Eventually your children will behave better and you will find you are less stressed and your whole family's life is happier.

This guide has been written by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Parenting Advisor, Eileen Hayes, with the kind assistance of parents and practitioners.

The guide uses a simple step-by-step approach:

Understanding you and your child:
- About you
- About your child
- Positive parenting
- Why children misbehave

Reacting to your child’s changing needs:
- Babies
- Toddlers
- School-age children
- Teenagers

Being a positive parent:
- Why smacking is never a good idea
- Forget the smacking myths
- Better ways to cut stress
- Top ten ways to be a great parent
Not all parents are the same - how do you cope?
Which type of parent do you think is closest to you?

"I love my children, but understand they can't have and do everything they want"

Parents know it is their job to teach children family rules of behaviour and what others expect.
- Having clear, simple rules and expecting them to be met.
- Giving children some control and choices appropriate to age and stage of development.
- Using mainly positive methods and praise to encourage behaving well, showing disapproval but never using harsh punishments.

"Raising children is a constant battle"

Parents know best, children must learn
- Having lots of strict rules
- Using a lot of demands and threats
- Punishing harshly and smacking often

"I just want a quiet life"

Parents worried about doing anything to upset a child.
- Forgetting your own needs and ignoring all naughty behaviour, even when it is far from minor.
- Always giving in to whining
- Not encouraging independence, doing everything for your child

The truth is probably a bit of each depending on the circumstances. You may even know that the ideal sort of parenting, keeping both children and parents happiest, and having the best chance of children behaving well, is the first example, sometimes called positive parenting – but it can be hard to keep it up all the time.
Not all children are the same - does your child know exactly how to irritate you?
Which is closest to your child?

- Placid, easy-going, quickly do what you tell them - hardly ever gets into a battle with you.
- Can sometimes co-operate and behave well, but have moments when they seem determined to ignore your wishes.
- Almost never does what you ask without a battle - seems set on having their own way.

No two children are the same. Right from the start we can see how every baby is different. One is easy to comfort and settle to sleep, another has colic, fights sleep and you.

Research has shown that there are children who are more 'difficult' - that is, more active, less keen to do as they are told, play up more. This can make it extra hard work for parents trying to be positive.
What is positive parenting and positive discipline?

These are techniques that work well with every child, regardless of their age, temperament, background, culture or tradition.

They build on a child's wish to please you, guaranteeing a more well behaved happy child and less stressed parents.

Different approaches will work for different children in the family, and the rules change as children grow.

It works by:

- Creating a good relationship with your child by showing love and affection.
- Emphasising all the things that please you about your child.
- Being a good example - children will take their lead from what you do.
- Praising the behaviour you want and trying to ignore minor naughty behaviour.
- Listening to your child's views and negotiating solutions to problems together.
- Avoiding harsh punishments like smacking, or shouting excessively.
- Having clear limits that are fair and age appropriate; expressing your wishes in a way that shows you mean what you say.
Understand why children misbehave

Attention seeking  Children will do just about anything to get the attention they crave from parents.

Revenge  Trying to get back at someone they feel has treated them badly – a sibling, parent or friend. Children may not understand your reasons for insisting on a rule or limit - it helps to recognise their feelings of anger.

Feeling powerless  If a child feels upset at not having control, they may hit out or get mad, often to an older sibling or friend.

Feeling bad  A child of any age may be showing they are feeling sad or anxious by behaving badly, and need more sympathy and affection. Punishing will only make matters worse.

Stage of development  Some children are simply not able to do what their parents want because of their age or stage of development.

Remember - all children test limits you set and try to cross boundaries some of the time. This is an inevitable part of growing up, learning and becoming an independent person. Younger children are testing constantly. This is not being naughty or disobedient - it is the only way they can learn when you mean what you say, and what the limits to their behaviour are.