Encouraging better behaviour

A practical guide to positive parenting
Most parents don’t think hitting children is right, yet in times of stress, anger or frustration find themselves lashing out. But many feel guilty afterwards and want to find better ways of handling difficult behaviour.

We’ve collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you understand positive parenting and positive discipline, and that using physical punishment is never a good idea for children of any age.

Many parents say their children are the most important part of their lives. They bring joy and laughter and give you a stake in the future.

But sometimes being a parent isn’t easy. It can be challenging and exhausting. At such times, parents who are normally loving and caring can find themselves “losing it” and hitting their children.

“I was smacked as a child and promised never to smack my kids. Smacking never stopped me or my brothers being naughty, but I did resent my mum afterwards.”

Christine, mum of Natalie, 3, and Louise, 3 months

“I don’t believe in smacking as a method of punishment for a child who has done something wrong. I don’t think it works.”

Lorraine Kelly, TV presenter and mum of one
Which type of parent are you?

Read the following three descriptions and decide which one you think is closest to you:

“Raising children is a constant battle.”

You often:
- have lots of strict rules
- use demands and threats to keep your child under control
- punish harshly and smack often.

“I just want a quiet life.”

You:
- forget about your own needs and ignore all naughty behaviour, even when it is far from minor
- always give in to whining
- don’t encourage independence, instead doing everything for your child.

“I love my children, but understand they can’t have and do everything they want.”

You try to:
- have clear, simple rules and expect them to be met
- give your child some control and choices appropriate to their age and stage of development
- use mainly positive methods and praise to encourage behaving well, showing disapproval but never using harsh punishments.

The truth is that you are probably a bit of each type of parent depending on the circumstances. You may recognise that the ideal sort of parenting – keeping both children and parents happiest and having the best chance of children behaving well – is the last example in the list. This example is sometimes called positive parenting, but it can be hard to keep it up all the time.

Which is closest to your child?

Read the following three descriptions and decide which one you think is closest to your child:

- Placid, easy-going, quickly does what you tell them – hardly ever gets into a battle with you.
- Can sometimes cooperate and behave well, but has 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 child may be easy to comfort and settle to sleep, while another may suffer with colic and fight 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 and more likely to play up. Having a child like this can make it extra hard work for parents who are trying to be positive.
What is positive parenting and positive discipline?

Positive parenting and positive discipline are techniques that work well with every child, regardless of their age, temperament, background, culture or tradition.

These techniques build on your child's wish to please you, guaranteeing a better-behaved, happy child and less-stressed parents.

They work by allowing you to:

• create a good relationship with your child by showing love and affection
• emphasise all the things that please you about your child
• be a good example – your children will take their lead from what you do
• praise the behaviour you want to see in your children
• listen to your child's views and negotiate solutions to problems together
• avoid harsh punishments like smacking or shouting excessively
• have clear limits that are fair and age appropriate, expressing your wishes in a way that shows you mean what you say.

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

Understanding why children misbehave

All children test the 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 particularly may test constantly. This is not them 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.

Attention seeking

Children will do just about anything to get the attention they crave from their 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 sad

A child of any age may show that they are feeling sad or anxious by behaving badly and may need more sympathy and affection. Punishing them will only make matters worse.

Feeling powerless

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

Stage of development

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

It is important to remember that babies behave as they do in order to get their needs met. Their crying or not sleeping, for example, is not naughty or done to upset you.

At the beginning it is your important job to sort out your baby’s needs. Older babies may show a negative or stubborn streak – spitting out food they don’t like or wriggling away from a nappy change. All they are doing is trying to communicate likes and dislikes in the only way they can. They are not doing it to annoy you.

Positive discipline tips:

- Be loving and comforting with your baby from the start.
- Gradually introduce routines.
- Use distraction with older babies on the move – point out something happening out of the window when they head for the TV remote, or swap a toy for your keys.
- “Baby-proof” your home so your baby can enjoy challenges without battles.
- Show that sometimes you have to set limits – but gently. Prevent a poke in the eye by holding their hand; strap them into their car seat, saying “I know it makes you cross, but we have to do it”.
- Never smack your baby or shout at them.

“When our daughter was born she looked so pale and fragile, like a doll. We thought, ‘we can never hurt her’ – and we never did.”

Jo and Chris, parents of Bella, 6

Find out more

Cry-sis
Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.
www.cry-sis.org.uk
08451 228 669

Toddlers

Most behaviour in toddlers that adults call naughty is actually part of normal development.

All toddlers test limits, try to be independent, get into everything, get mad and have tantrums. Check with other parents of toddlers to realise they just can’t help themselves and that you are not alone.

Positive discipline tips:

- Avoid using orders and ultimatums with your toddler.
- Have clear, simple rules and routines to cut down the need for battles.
- Keep your use of “no” to a minimum – use “later” or “soon” if you can.
- Acknowledge feelings – “I know you are angry”.
- Praise every little bit of good behaviour you want to encourage and turn a blind eye to minor misbehaviour whenever possible.
- Try to ignore behaviour you don’t like, as this means it is less likely to be repeated.
- Remain calm and reasonable yourself, even when your toddler is in a rage, by taking a deep breath and waiting before you respond.
- Remember that smacking always makes toddler behaviour and tantrums worse and can make your child afraid of you.

“Lauren used to have a lot of tantrums and I used to completely ignore them. Eventually, she gave up and now she’s the most even-tempered child I know.”

Sophie, mum of Lauren, 7

Find out more

National Childminding Association (NCMA)
info@ncma.org.uk
www.ncma.org.uk
0800 169 4486

Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA)
www.nicma.org
0871 200 4486

Scottish Childcare
www.scottishchildcare.gov.uk