PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF 0-5 YEAR OLDS

NSPCC

Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
Why a guide for parents?
The NSPCC helps children and their families through its Child Protection Teams, projects and the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline. This work is vital, but it is also crucial to find out the causes of child abuse and work to prevent it from happening in the first place.

This booklet aims to encourage parents to:
- understand the needs of their children better
- think about how they can meet these needs
- think about ways of putting children first
- listen more carefully to their children
- take action to reduce the stress that may lead to children being harmed.

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How can I love my baby one minute, but feel resentment the next?

My relationship with my husband has changed since having children. We have to work extra hard at keeping it going.

You need to know before you have kids how much time will be taken out of your own relationship.

Being a parent is probably the most difficult and demanding job people ever do. It can also be quite a disappointing time for some parents, especially if they expected parenthood to be enjoyable all the time, or had unrealistic ideas about having the ‘perfect’ child. But for most parents, it is one of the happiest and most satisfying experiences of their lives.

This booklet is not about the practical side of bringing up children – there are plenty of other booklets available about that. It has been written to help you understand more about your child’s needs as well as your own needs, and to help you cope with some of the confusing emotions you might feel as your child grows up. It also contains a useful list of sources of advice and support.

There are some problems that can make being a parent even more difficult – such as lack of money, unemployment, cramped housing conditions, problems in your relationship, or if your own childhood was unhappy.

We do not claim to have all the answers – no one does. The important thing to remember is that there is no one correct way of bringing up a child. Provided their needs are met, children from all different kinds of social, religious or cultural backgrounds can still grow up to be happy, well-adjusted adults. You are the only experts when it comes to bringing up your children. And you will usually know best what works for your family.
GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHILD

Many parents find it difficult to understand what their children need. For some this is more true at the baby stage before the child can talk, but for others it becomes more of a problem later on. These are some helpful points to remember when getting to know your child.

The new baby

The world is a strange and terrifying place for a newborn baby. You can help your baby realize that it can also be a friendly, happy place by meeting his needs reasonably soon after they are felt, and by providing lots of cuddles and closeness. Remember, you can't spoil new babies — they have no idea about the world or the needs of others. All they can feel is their own needs.

If your baby cries a lot, it might help to realize that he may be finding it hard to adjust to this new and frightening world.

Crying is your baby's only language. He has no other way of expressing his needs to you. He doesn't know that he is supposed to sleep all night or that it might annoy you when he doesn't. Sooner or later all babies learn these things, but in the meantime it takes a lot of patience and understanding from parents. Often it might need more patience than you feel you've got, especially if you're very tired. If you feel you can't cope with your baby's crying, ask a friend or neighbour to take over even for an hour. You could also ask your midwife or health visitor for advice, or contact SureStart (see address on page 23).

The older baby

By the time your baby is a few months old, things will probably be much easier and you will understand much better your baby's needs and routines. You will notice your baby's personality developing, and the speed at which he develops will often surprise you. Accept that he does things at his own pace — he may do one clever thing very early on, but another quite late. It really doesn't matter. Now parents sometimes get upset by comparing their baby's progress to that of other babies they know. All babies, like adults, have their good and bad points, and you will be much happier if you try to accept your own baby as he is.

Most babies go through a very clingy phase, complaining loudly when you disappear from view, and showing a strong dislike or fear of strangers. Some parents find this irritating, but it's a natural sign that your baby has become attached to the most important people in his life.

When your child is old enough to feel attached to you, he will obviously be old enough to feel sad when you leave him. But it's better to explain and say goodbye properly than to flick away. Sometimes he may appear to reject you on your return or to prefer his babysitter. This is quite normal and does not usually last for long. He is simply showing you in the only way he knows, that he didn't like being left. Sooner or later he will grow out of this phase.
From 1 to 3

Until the age of about two your baby learns mainly through seeing, hearing and touching. Before they're about two, it isn't possible for children to be naughty because they do not mean to do anything wrong. For example, your one year old may discover that it makes a lovely splashing noise and an amazing pattern if you drop his food on the floor so he is quite likely to do this over and over again. If you get angry with him, he will be puzzled by your reaction, but will not necessarily connect it to his behaviour. It is very important to keep this in mind.

If the early days, providing food is so closely linked with giving love that it can become an emotional battleground later on. Always remember that, if your child refuses to eat your food, he is not rejecting you or your love. It's a good idea to allow children to feed themselves as soon as practical and to decide for themselves when they have had enough.

Learning through play

Playing is another important way babies can practise new skills and learn about the world around them. Only a very unhappy or ill child will not want to play. Through play you can help your child to learn all kinds of new skills so they never feel guilty about spending time playing with your child.

However, don't feel you have to join in all the time. Children need to make some of the exciting discoveries for themselves. Try to make life easier for yourself by moving any dangerous, breakable or valuable objects out of reach, so that your child can explore safely and you can feel more relaxed.

Provide a variety of toys — a wooden spoon and a plastic cup are just as exciting to your baby as expensive new toys. If you're not sure which toys are right for which age, ask your health visitor or friends with children.

Talking

By the age of two, most children will be trying to copy real words and will chatter to themselves. Encourage this as much as you can. Your child learns language from you, so talk to him as much as possible right from the start, even if you find it a bit embarrassing.

Giving praise

Your child needs to feel that you are positive about his efforts, or he will not get pleasure from new achievements and will stop trying so hard. Your child's view of himself is based almost entirely on what you tell him. So try to praise him, not just for achieving things but for trying, too. If you laugh and say he's stupid or clumsy, he will eventually believe this.

Terrible twos

This is the stage from about 18 months to three years, when many parents find the behaviour of their child either bewildering or annoying. If you are having a bad time with the terrible twos, try to remember:

- Children aged one to two do not understand the idea of 'mine' and 'yours'.
- They see themselves as the centre of the world and behave as if their own immediate needs are more important than anything else.
- They feel emotions more intensely than adults, and they express them more forcibly too.

So, if your child screams with rage if he doesn't get what he wants, or has a full-blown tantrum: try to be patient and realise that he is not doing any of these apparently selfish things on purpose. He is just finding out the hard way that he has to consider other people in the world and that he needs to learn to share.

This can make enormous demands on parents, but remember it is just a passing phase. By the time your child reaches three years or so, it will probably be over. In the meantime, if things get out of hand and you feel you're losing control, ask your health visitor or GP for help, or contact one of the organisations listed on page 22.

For advice on coping with difficult behaviour, see page 14.

Some common worries

- Many small children become very attached to a toy or object — like a dummy or blanket. This has been kept clean. If possible, try to comfort your child and help him feel secure. When he is given up when no longer needed.

- Some parents worry that their children are aggressive and tend to bully other children. You can teach children by example and gentle contact that it is never right to be cruel to someone. Try to be patient, especially if they are smaller and weaker.

- Many three to five year olds invent imaginary friends. This is a normal, healthy way of sorting out their inner feelings, and is nothing to worry about.

- You might be worried that your three or four-year-old is turning into a little prince or princess. This is a normal stage, but it is important to keep a balance in his life.

From 3 to 5

This age can be very rewarding for parents. At last your child seems to love you back, and to be concerned about the feelings of others. He is still learning through play and will now particularly enjoy messy games with sand, water and paint.

He will also want to learn from you, so try to be patient with what can seem like endless questions. It is a good idea to provide books and tapes if you can. Children of this age love stories, songs and rhymes, and will want to hear these over and over again.

- Grown ups seem to know a lot about things. So I think of as many questions as I can and just keep firing them at my mum and dad.

- Why do they always stop me doing exciting things?

From about the age of three, children begin to make friends and enjoy the company of other children. If your child is very shy, you might prefer just to watch others play for a while, or to play with him at home. He should soon join in when he feels ready.

Now is the time when most children will be ready to start going to a playgroup or nursery school, and many will start big school before they are five. This is when many parents realise, perhaps for the first time, that their parenting efforts are suddenly on view to the public.

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TIPS TO REMEMBER

- It can take time for love for your baby to grow, so don’t worry if you are one of the many parents who don’t feel love instantly.
- You can’t ‘spoil’ a new baby. The more you cuddle and attend to his or her needs, the more the love between you will grow.
- This is your baby, so try not to compare his or her progress or personality with those of other babies. All babies, like adults, are different.
- Listen to your baby or child to learn what he or she needs.
- Trust your own instincts more than the advice of well-meaning friends.
- Don’t tell your children they are being naughty when what you really mean is that you are finding it difficult to cope with their behaviour.
- Most two year olds have temper tantrums — usually because they are frustrated and want to do more than they are able to do. As they get older the tantrums should stop.
- Distracting children from behaviour you don’t like is much better than punishing them for it.
- Make separations easier for both of you by allowing as much time as possible for your child to get to know any new person who will be looking after him or her.
- Don’t expect too much of your child when he or she is learning to make friends and share in the big, wide world of nursery or school. It all takes time.
- Be positive about your children’s appearance and efforts, and give them lots of praise.

WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED?

Children have three essential types of needs — emotional, physical and intellectual. You may not be able to meet all their needs as successfully as you would like. What matters is doing the best you can.

Love

This is the most vital need of all. If you can love children without expecting anything in return, they will grow up feeling more confident and positive about themselves, and more able to love others.

If you feel unable to love your child in this way, think about possible reasons why. Perhaps you were not given enough love when you were a child. This is not your fault and there are lots of ways you can learn to overcome the problem. (For a list of contacts and sources of help, see page 22.)

Praise

Children need a lot of praise — not just for achieving things, but for trying, too.

Physical care

This includes warmth, regular, nutritious meals and plenty of rest.

Routines

Most children feel more secure if a few things happen at roughly the same time every day, and if any changes in routine are explained to them.

Stimulation

Try to provide a variety of creative, interesting things for your children to do. Encourage them to explore...