

GUIDE TO PARENTING

1. How Children Learn Best

For all children, learning is an important part of growing up. In many cases, adults are learning just as much from their children as their children are from them. Parenting is never going to be easy, but it can be helped along by following some guidelines (as listed below).

1.1. Communication with Children

It is very important that parents communicate *positively* with their children. Sometimes as parents, we talk to our children in *negative ways* because we are tired, stressed, have our own problems or do not know what to do.

1.1.1. Positive ways to Communicate with Children

- Always talk to your children with respect. Try not to shout at them.
- Give your children choices. As your children get older help them to make their own decisions.
- Parents have the right and responsibility to give advice and to teach children right from wrong. Older children may feel that their parents do not trust them to make decisions. It is important to give advice in a way that makes your child feel that they can make decisions and involve your children as they become older in setting the rules for acceptable behaviour and the consequences for not sticking to them.
- Encourage your children to express their feelings in a safe way. You cannot tell your children what to think and feel.
- Discuss with your children what you expect from them. Explain how you feel.
- Be consistent. Do not make different rules everyday. Introduce new rules when they become necessary.
- Tell them things without yelling or screaming. When you are screaming, your child may become anxious and unable to listen - the message is lost on them. They will understand you better if you speak clearly and normally.
- Do not deal with issues when you are angry.
- Hold family meetings and encourage everyone to talk and listen.

1.1.2. *Helpful and Unhelpful Messages*

Talking is the best way of teaching. We can encourage good behavior by simply explaining things to children. Children need to know that the lines of communication are always open.

Helpful messages can make children feel loved, wanted, worthwhile and safe whilst *unhelpful messages* can make them feel angry, confused and worthless.

<i>Unhelpful Messages</i>	<i>Helpful Messages</i>
Describing the person: <i>"You're a lazy slob."</i>	Describing the behaviour you want changed: <i>"Please pick up your clothes off the floor and put them away."</i>
Giving "don't" messages: <i>"Don't leave your bike there."</i>	Giving "do" messages: <i>"Put your bike into the shed."</i>
Giving "always" or "never" messages: <i>"You never do it right." "You're always so clumsy."</i>	Giving "next time" messages: <i>"When you tried to carry these dishes you dropped one - next time only carry two."</i>
Giving "you" messages: <i>"You're so annoying."</i>	Giving "I" messages: <i>"I feel annoyed you don't do your chores. It's more pleasant for both of us when you do them."</i>

1.1.3. Listening

Sometimes listening is difficult. We often have our own problems and do not give children all our attention when they talk to us. Sometimes we *interrupt* and decide what to say before children finish talking. Sometimes we only hear what we want to hear.

Tips to listening better:

- Try to find out more about the issue. Ask questions.
- Listen with all your attention. Try not to do other things when your children are telling you something.
- Be patient as children may not know how to say what they think or feel, and may take longer than adults.
- Watch the child's face. Watch their bodies. The behaviour and expression of children can sometimes tell you how they feel better than words.
- Repeat back to a child what you think they have told you. This will help you to check if you heard them correctly.

- *Acknowledge* and accept your child's different feelings and encourage children to express their feelings in a safe way. Children need to express all their feelings including excitement, disappointment and anger. However sometimes children may feel overwhelmed by their feelings and need guidance for safe expression.

1.2. Set Clear Rules and Stick to Them

Children need to know what is and isn't acceptable. Make sure children know why rules are needed and that if they are broken, there will be consequences. As children get older, encourage them to discuss the rules, the reasons behind them and help determine appropriate consequences.

1.3. Praise Good Behavior

Children, like anyone, feel good when they are praised, and will repeat the good behavior. Tell children how much you like the good things they do and ignore bad behavior. The bad behavior may disappear because the child will receive more attention if they behave positively.

1.4. Reward Good Behavior

Rewards work better than punishment. Whilst many parents reward their children with new toys or sweets, the best rewards are hugs, smiles, or showing an interest in them. This helps children associate good behaviour with emotional rewards and approval rather than material objects.

1.5. Criticise the Behavior, Not the Child

Remember that shouting, name-calling and threatening can damage the child psychologically just as much as hitting can. So criticize the behavior, not the child. For example, you can say; *"I know you are busy but can you please tidy your room"*, rather than *"You're such an untidy child."*

1.6. Let the Children Help in Some Decisions

Let the children help decide simple things like; *"Would you like to eat breakfast or get dressed first?"* However, don't give them a choice when none exists.

1.7. Behaviour you don't like or want

As long as it's not hurting anyone, try not to take any notice of behaviour you don't like or want. Many parents try to control every situation and then are constantly saying "NO!" If you really don't like what the child is doing, give them something different to do and if possible participate in the new activity with them for a while - attention reinforces behaviour.

1.8. Take away something the child enjoys or use "Time out"

If a child has behaved badly and they need to be disciplined (see Chapter 11), take one of their treats or privileges away, for example, riding their bike or watching a favourite TV programme.

When other techniques have not worked, put the child in a safe place where nothing is happening. Two or three minutes is long enough to give everyone time to cool down. The child's bedroom is sometimes chosen for time out, but it is better not to use this for time out, as it is better for a child to regard their bedroom as a private, safe space. It is better to use somewhere like a hall or laundry (with detergents out of reach).

1.9. Keep your Sense of Humour

When all else fails, try and see the funny side - it may help!

2. Difficult or 'Special' Children

Sometimes we have a child whose behaviour is particularly difficult. From the beginning this child seems to try our patience and wear us down. They seem "different" and because of this, we treat them with less affection. The child soon senses this and feels bad.

Difficult or 'special' children may have a particular problem such as *Attention Deficit Disorder* or *Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder* which may require them to follow a specific diet and/or need assistance with medication. For many children facing these obstacles, parents and caretakers may even have to adopt different methods of behaviour management than one might use with children without these difficulties.

Children with these kinds of problems may be very difficult and frustrating to parent. If a parent or caretaker is at a loss as to how to manage their child's behaviour or special needs, it may be helpful for them to telephone a helpline and chat to a counsellor, or to join a support group for parents of special needs children if one exists in the area.

3. Raising Boys and Girls

Parents often treat girls and boys differently. Parents teach girls to be gentle and obedient, and to consider other people's feelings. Boys are taught to be assertive, strong and to hide their feelings. Children need to know that both boys and girls can show how they feel, be strong and assertive, and solve problems without violence.

In addition, society has evolved to be a more egalitarian one. This means that many jobs and roles between the sexes are now seen as being equal. By raising children according to their gender, stereotypes are reinforced causing children not to live up to their true potential.

Following are some guidelines for raising boys and girls equally.

- Make sure that both boys and girls help at home (this includes helping with all tasks, washing dishes and ironing as well).
- Let boys and girls play outside, and encourage both genders to play sport.
- Encourage both girls and boys to give their opinions.
- Encourage boys and girls to show and talk about all their feelings, even if they want to cry.
- Teach both genders safe ways of expressing difficult feelings such as anger and frustration.
- Do not tell your children, *"Girls do this and boys do that"*.
- Give girls the same praise as boys.
- Apply the same discipline to boys and girls.
- Do not excuse your children's behaviour by saying, *"That's what boys or girls do"*.
- Teach boys and girls that they have the right to say no.
- Teach boys and girls to respect each other and that being of one gender does not give rights to manipulate or control others of a different gender.
- Remember that the parent/caretaker of a child is a role-model of their gender and of adult behaviour.

4. Building a Child's Self-Esteem

It is hard for anyone to survive and succeed in the fast paced world we live in. If you have low self-esteem it is even harder because you don't have the courage to stand out and be counted.

Whether you are an investment banker or a social worker, having good self-esteem enables you to be well-grounded and to make the right decisions about your life.

Following are ways to build a child's self-esteem:

- **Encourage activity.** Praise a child for trying and help them to use their imagination, intelligence and playfulness.
- **Encourage children to talk.** Children need to talk about their feelings and ideas, even if they are different from yours.
- **Make children feel special,** which you can do by spending time doing things they like to do.
- **Tell them that they are special,** this will help them to feel wanted.
- **Be trustworthy.** Every one wants to be with someone they can count on.
- **Hug and kiss the children (both girls and boys) in your life.** You will be showing them that you love them.
- **Make children feel important.** This can be done when you share your feelings and ideas; discuss family and community events with them; help them feel good.
- **Make children feel an important part of the family.** Give them tasks to do in the home and let them help with planning activities and outings.
- **Give children a chance to make choices** and help them understand what happens when they make these choices.
- **Encourage children to talk about what they believe in** and help them to understand their beliefs. It also helps to discuss your beliefs with them.
- **Do not be judgmental.** When your children open up to you and talk about their beliefs, don't judge them and try to change their minds. Listen to them. Healthy discussion never hurt anyone.
- **Help children to set goals.** Discuss what they want out of life with them.
- **Be consistent.** Do not change a rule without discussing it with the children.
- **Praise children when they do things you approve of.** Recognise what they are good at.

5. Behaviour that is Harmful to Children?

Some families are not 'picture perfect', where everyone talks to each other in a civilized manner, respects each other and are emotionally connected. Some families behave in a way that is harmful to the child. This also applies to families going through difficult times.

Although the behaviour of some parents and caregivers is understandable it is never acceptable to harm children.

Behaviour that is harmful to children include:

5.1. Constantly screaming at children.

Children are emotionally harmed by being yelled at. They may grow up to believe that shouting is the only way to communicate or to solve problems. Children may also then withdraw and never communicate with their parents and caregivers about issues that matter to them or about things that are worrying them.

5.2. Swearing, threatening and belittling children.

Apart from being another unacceptable form of communication, swearing in front of or at children may make them feel insecure and threatened. This leads to them growing up to be unhappy adults. Emotional or verbal abuse (such as threatening them or calling them names) can be just as devastating as physical abuse and the effects just as long-lasting.

Sometimes parents caught in a cycle of family violence may need to get help otherwise 'violence will beget violence'.

5.3. Fighting or arguing in front of children.

Fighting or arguing in front of a child "even if you think they're asleep or can't hear" is harmful to that child. When a child sees or hears their parents fighting it is very real and frightening for them. They don't know how it will stop or what will happen. They may even become scared of their parent.

Parents say that the whole family benefits when they stop arguing, yelling, or swearing in front of the children, and stop using 'put downs'. The family home becomes happier and more peaceful. Parents feel more in control, and the child is calmer, has more confidence, more respect for them, and responds better when asked to do things. Children learn to resolve problems without arguing.

6. Summary of the Effects of Harmful Behaviour on Children

Children may feel:

- fear, including fear for others;
- worth very little, and criticize themselves constantly;
- self-blame (guilt and shame, feeling responsible for self or others receiving poor treatment);
- like taking feelings like anger, frustration, powerlessness and fear out on other people (bullying others, being violent or anti-social);
- anxiety, depression, withdrawal; and/or
- a need to act like a parent, caring for other children or parenting the parent.

Of these, the longest lasting and the hardest to heal may be damage to a child's sense of being valued (self-worth).

7. Learning with our Children

There are no super parents!

There is no such thing as the perfect parent. Everyone learns something new about being a parent everyday.

There are often times when a parent says or does something they wished they hadn't. The action or word can't be taken back and sometimes it causes much hurt. It takes a great parent or caregiver to admit when they have done something wrong or behaved out of turn. Apologising does help the situation a little but should also include a statement on what will be done the next time conflict occurs.

Example: "I'm sorry for (yelling, swearing, calling you names). Next time I feel like that I'll... (say how I feel in a calm voice, go and let off steam before I talk about what I don't like, talk about the action and not pick on the person)."

However if a parent or caregiver is constantly apologizing and not changing their behaviour, the child will soon recognize that the apology means nothing. Conflict in the family is normal. Everyone has disagreements and it is naive to think that everyone will agree with each other and there will be no conflict. Dealing with it constructively is what is important.

For example, if conflict in the family is ongoing, perhaps holding a family meeting to discuss the problems will be helpful. Not only will the child feel involved, but it will open the lines of communication between parent/caregiver and the child. Who knows, the parent/caregiver may learn a thing or two from the child!

8. The Role of Fathers

It is a sad fact that in today's society men are often portrayed as the main perpetrators of violent crime, abuse, and other behaviours that are harmful to their families and communities. However, men have a very important role to play in their families and in raising children.

Although many men and women are raised to believe that bringing up children is a woman's job, it is important that men and women alike understand the important role that men play as fathers. Fathers also have a very important role to play to help build their children's *self-confidence* and *self-esteem*. Both mothers and fathers should take *responsibility* for everything to do with the child's upbringing. This includes being present in the child's life as much as possible and taking an active and nurturing role in the child's upbringing.

9. Parents/Caregivers also need 'time out'

Being a parent can be a very tough job. All parents need help sometimes - and it's okay to ask for help from family, friends and neighbours. Sometimes hurtful things get said or done in the heat of the moment. This can happen more often when we are stressed or lack support.

If parents and caregivers don't talk about their feelings with their partners or friends, they may start to take their feelings out on the children. Good parenting takes up a lot of time and energy, so it's important to be healthy, confident and relaxed.

9.1. Staying healthy, confident and relaxed

We all need to have some time to ourselves occasionally, and to do something different. Try these suggestions:

- Get a babysitter and go to the movies or walk, exchange babysitting services.
- Meet someone for a cup of coffee and talk.
- Take up a hobby or do some different work.

- Talk to someone if you are feeling over-whelmed.
- Spend 'alone-time' with your partner. If your relationship is under strain, your parenting will also be.
- "Families that play together, stay together." Do something fun with your children regularly
- Just taking time out from the routine may give you something else to focus on.

9.2. Danger signs for parents and caregivers

It's normal to have bad feelings sometimes, but it doesn't do children any good to let these feelings build up. All have warning signs that tell one it's time to slow down or take a break. Here are some of the danger signs:

- If a parent has more bad feelings than good, and these feelings seem to be lasting longer and getting stronger.
- If a parent can't face getting out of bed in the mornings - a real dread of coping with the new day.
- If one cries more than usual and one feels confused about this.
- If one has feelings of anger, panic or despair when the baby cries, and one feels like one might lose your control and hit the child or try to hurt him or her.
- If one can't think of any fun things to do with the child and feels too depressed and exhausted.
- If one feels utterly trapped and alone and can't talk to anyone because no one understands.
- If one thinks the child would be better off without one.
- If one feel anxious and then angry when the baby cries.
- If partners are arguing a lot, or fighting.
- If one's partner leaves one alone to cope when there are problems with the children.
- If one feels angry when the child dirties a nappy.
- If one is afraid to be alone with one's child.
- If one feels there are times when one can't cope and have no one to turn to.
- If one feels the children demand too much when one get home from work.
- If one often leaves the house when the children are arguing or crying.

9.3. Danger signs especially for moms and dads...

- If one finds it hard to show any feelings except anger or sexual feelings.
- If one feels one is only a money machine that must grind on.
- If one would rather go to the pub than go home and face the kids.
- If one feels it's not one's job to help a partner change nappies or do the housework.
- If one feels it's a partner's job to look after the children.
- If one is hitting or hurting one's partner or children or finding it hard to control anger.
- If one is always feeling frustrated and unimportant after dealing with one's boss or other people in power.
- If one feels one has no power over one's life.