



How to handle difficult behaviour in Young Children

If problem behaviour is causing you or your child distress, or upsetting the rest of the family, it's important to deal with it.

- Do what feels right

What you do has to be right for your child, yourself and the family. If you do something you don't believe in or that you don't feel is right, it probably won't work. Children notice when you don't mean what you're saying.

- Don't give up

Once you've decided to do something, continue to do it. Solutions take time to work. Get support from your partner, a friend, another parent or your health visitor. It's good to have someone to talk to about what you're doing.

- Be consistent

Children need consistency. If you react to your child's behaviour in one way one day and a different way the next, it's confusing for them. It's also important that everyone close to your child deals with their behaviour in the same way.

- Try not to overreact

This can be difficult. When your child does something annoying time after time, your anger and frustration can build up. It's impossible not to show your irritation sometimes, but try to stay calm. Move on to other things you can both enjoy or feel good about as soon as possible.

Find other ways to cope with your frustration, like talking to other parents.

- Talk to your child

Children don't have to be able to talk to understand. It can help if they understand why you want them to do something. For example, explain why you want them to hold your hand while crossing the road. Once your child can talk, encourage them to explain why they're angry or upset. This will help them feel less frustrated.

- Be positive about the good things

When a child's behaviour is difficult, the things they do well can be overlooked. Tell your child when you're pleased about something they've done. You can let your child know when you're pleased by giving them attention, a hug or a smile.

- Offer rewards

You can help your child by rewarding them for behaving well. For example, praise them or give them their favourite food for tea. If your child behaves well, tell them how pleased you are. Be specific. Say something like, "Well done for putting your toys back in the box when I asked you to." Don't give your child a reward before they've done what they were asked to do. That's a bribe, not a reward.

- Avoid smacking

Smacking may stop a child doing what they're doing at that moment, but it doesn't have a lasting positive effect. Children learn by example so, if you hit your child, you're telling them that hitting is OK. Children who are treated aggressively by their parents are more likely to be aggressive themselves. It's better to set a good example instead.



Things that can affect your child's behaviour

- Life changes – any change in a child's life can be difficult for them. This could be the birth of a new baby, moving house, a change of childminder, starting playgroup or something much smaller.
- You're having a difficult time – children are quick to notice if you're feeling upset or there are problems in the family. They may behave badly when you feel least able to cope. If you're having problems don't blame yourself, but don't blame your child either if they react with difficult behaviour.
- How you've handled difficult behaviour before – sometimes your child may react in a particular way because of how you've handled a problem in the past. For example, if you've given your child sweets to keep them quiet at the shops, they may expect sweets every time you go there.
- Needing attention – your child might see a tantrum as a way of getting attention, even if it's bad attention. They may wake up at night because they want a cuddle or some company. Try to give them more attention when they're behaving well and less when they're being difficult.

Extra help with difficult behaviour

Don't feel you have to cope alone. If you're struggling with your child's behaviour:

- talk to your health visitor – they will be happy to support you and suggest some new strategies to try
- visit the Family Lives website for parenting advice and support, or phone their free parents' helpline on 0808 800 2222
- download the NSPCC's guide to positive parenting or call their free helpline on 0808 800 5000

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/dealing-with-difficult-behaviour/>