

LOOKING AFTER CHILDREN WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR

The guide for lone parents



Contents

Introduction	2		
About this booklet	2		
Understand the demands on you as a parent	2		
Children's 'challenging' behaviour	3		
Children test the rules	3		
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	3		
Changes in behaviour	4		
Unacceptable behaviour	5		
What is 'aggression'?	5		
Recognising what is unacceptable behaviour	5		
Acknowledge that there is a problem	6		
Getting help	7		
When is it time to get help?	7		
When aggression turns to violence	8		
Where to seek help for your child	9		
Talk to people you trust	9		
Talk to community agencies	9		
Parenting: what works?	11		
Being a confident parent	11		
Giving children your time and attention	11		
Helping children to develop and to learn	12		
Changing aggressive behaviour	14		
Dealing with children's conflict and anxiety	14		
Young children and conflict	15		
Older children and adolescents, and conflict	16		
If your children have grown up with violence	17		
Action you can take to help your children	18		
Think about what's happening at home	18		
Anticipate situations	19		
		Look after yourself	20
		Children's rights and responsibilities	22
		Renegotiating as they grow up	22
		Youth justice	23
		Further help	24
		Organisations that will help	24
		Groups to join	26
		Information from One Parent Families	27
		Books and videos	27
		Books for you and your children about events affecting family life	28

Introduction

About this booklet

This booklet is written to help give you confidence in dealing with difficult situations that arise when raising children; to give you guidance in thinking about ways to improve your relationship with your children; and to give you information so that you

can judge when your children's behaviour is not acceptable to you.

It is important that children do not hurt themselves or anybody else with their behaviour.

Understand the demands on you as a parent

Bringing up children isn't easy for anyone all of the time.

Shortage of time and energy, or money, can mean that you are feeling a bit anxious and stressed a lot of the time. But it can all become a lot more overwhelming when your children's behaviour becomes difficult.

When this happens your family life can feel undermined and your child's future can feel threatened.

If you feel you lack confidence in yourself as a parent this may be for several reasons including not having had a good relationship with your own parents.

All of this can make it more difficult to deal with your children's problems.



Children's 'challenging' behaviour

Children test the rules

Children test the rules at all ages. By testing the rules they learn to trust you and to trust the limits that you set.

Temper tantrums or saying 'no' and 'I want' a lot are ways of testing their boundaries. They are challenging your rules, not your authority as a parent.

What you expect of your children

What do you want for them?

How do you want them to behave?

Our children are a part of us and a reflection of us, but they are also people in their own right.

What is realistic to expect of them?

What is 'normal'?

Children behave differently at different ages with different things to learn and different skills to master, for example:

- a child of 2 is learning physical coordination and acquiring language;
- a child of 10 is learning to understand her/his emotions and to understand the behaviour of her/his peers; and

- an adolescent of 15 will be working on deeper psychological tasks such as developing a sense of her/himself and a sense of belonging in the world.

The way you put parenting into practice has to remain flexible and will take shape depending on the ages of your children and their personalities. Your parenting style will change as you learn new things and they grow up.

However, the same principles apply no matter what age your child is; and if you are consistent in the way you apply the rules, your children will feel safer.

Why does challenging behaviour happen?

Sometimes children express their feelings through their behaviour because this is the only way they know how to tell you how they feel.

Feelings of anger, frustration or uncertainty about something, or feelings of guilt or shame, can make your child feel overwhelmed, tired or physically unwell; or they can result in emotional or behavioural outbursts.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Children who are restless and full of energy may be described as 'hyper'. In children with ADHD the

behaviour is extreme and may hurt or cause anxiety to the family and others around them.

CHILDREN'S 'CHALLENGING' BEHAVIOUR

Children with ADHD have a very short attention span and are overactive, particularly at times when you would like them to be calm. Their difficult behaviour may include not waiting their turn, acting without thinking or breaking rules thoughtlessly.

These children also suffer themselves and may underachieve at school or find it difficult to make friends. They may be prone to accidents and temper tantrums and may sleep poorly.

ADHD is a medical condition treatable by therapy or drugs. Getting help early can help your child and your family, and make life at home and within your community more positive.

For help in finding out if ADHD is the cause of your child's behaviour, contact your GP. For further information and advice on help and treatment available see **ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER INFORMATION SERVICE** on page 26.

Changes in behaviour

When your child's behaviour becomes difficult, ask yourself:

- What is different now, or changing in my child's life?
- What feelings might be behind this challenging behaviour?

Children find major changes or transitions in their lives stressful, for example:

- a change of school;
- a loss of friendships; or
- changes in their own physical development as they grow up.

Other upsetting experiences might be:

- too much change to their normal routine all at once;
- emotional loss, for example, if a parent or carer has moved away or died;
- problems at school, for example, with bullying, a learning difficulty or peer pressure;
- suffering or witnessing physical, emotional or sexual abuse; or
- using drugs or alcohol.

Unacceptable behaviour

What is 'aggression'?

If the behaviour directed at you *feels* like aggression, then it *is* aggression.

Bear in mind the age of your child: a two-year-old running at you and screaming would feel different to a teenage son running at you and screaming.

Be aware that you may feel particularly sensitive to feelings or acts of anger because of experiences you may have had.

When you are on the receiving end and it feels like 'too much', you can say what is not acceptable to you.

Recognising what is unacceptable behaviour

These two lists of behaviours are to help you to decide what is unacceptable for you. You may find some of the behaviours in the 'common' list unacceptable. Do you agree with these lists?

Common aggressive behaviours

You can begin to try to change things yourself and may find it helps to talk to your friends and family. See PARENTING: WHAT WORKS? on page 13. Common aggressive behaviours include:

- swearing at you, at siblings and/or at others, or yelling and screaming;
- name-calling or put-downs;
- physical force towards people: for example, pushing, shoving, elbowing or tripping;
- threatening to use physical force;
- ignoring you, or using the 'silent treatment';
- teasing someone about a sensitive issue – a physical trait or family history; or
- invading someone's personal space – trespassing into someone's room, reading

someone's private diary or purposely standing too close to them.

Although these kinds of behaviour are quite common, when the situation feels like more than you can cope with, then it is time to seek some help.

Excessively aggressive behaviours

Excessively aggressive behaviours are behaviours that could harm your child, you or other people.

Excessively aggressive behaviours include:

- harming others physically, using their physical strength, height or physical build to overpower and/or hurt others;
- bullying siblings, schoolmates, and/or you – including using taunts, threats and intimidation to make other people fear them;
- spreading damaging rumours about someone else;
- purposely mutilating or killing a small living animal or pet;

UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR

- purposely destroying someone else's property and belongings;
- stealing and the destruction of public property;
- harming her/himself with self-cutting, self-harm or a suicide attempt; or
- sexually abusing another child.

In these serious situations, or when the common aggressive behaviour feel like more than you can cope with, you should seek support as soon as you can, not only from your friends and family but also from the wider community as well. See **WHERE TO SEEK HELP FOR YOUR CHILD** on page 11.

Acknowledge that there is a problem

Sometimes it is difficult to acknowledge that there *is* a problem. If you feel quite threatened by your child's behaviour you may feel tempted to ignore it in the hope that it will go away, or you may be hoping that your child will 'outgrow' this stage of conflict.

Acknowledging that there *is* a problem is the important first step to deciding that you no longer want to put up with it.

Remember, you are doing the best you can for your child: you do not need to feel guilty. The day-to-day stress of being a parent can be demoralising and it takes great courage to step back and try to do things differently.

If you have experienced domestic violence from a partner, it may feel particularly difficult when your children get angry with you or fight with others.



Getting help

It is a good idea to look for help when you feel overwhelmed with thoughts of worry or when everyday tasks, or your health, are being adversely affected. If your other children are suffering from witnessing or experiencing this abusive behaviour, then this is also a good time to look around for possible help.

When is it time to get help?

If you answer 'yes' to the questions below, it is time to enlist the support of other people to help your child manage her/his aggressive behaviour.

Do you find that you:

- try to sort things out yourself, but nothing changes;
- feel overwhelmed and uncertain what to do;
- feel guilty that you are not managing better;
- have difficulty managing day-to-day tasks;
- feel constantly frustrated; or
- struggle on alone, fearing how other people will react or think of you and your child?

Do you fear:

- that your child might have to go and live with their other parent;
- that your child might be taken into care; or
- for your own safety, or fear going home?

Don't keep it to yourself

Asking for help is not easy, particularly for lone parents. You can easily get into the habit of feeling that you must be self-sufficient and self-reliant.

But remember: in asking for help you are recognising your limits, acting responsibly and setting a good example to your children.

Is your child's behaviour:

- hurtful or abusive towards you or to other people;
- making you fear for the safety of other children;
- making you fear for your own child's safety; or
- disrupting her/his school performance or attendance?

Are these things becoming more difficult:

- your relationship with your child;
- trying to help your child with things like homework;
- your child's relationships with other members of the family, friends and neighbours; or
- your own relationships with everyone around you, thus affecting your health and happiness?

GETTING HELP

Are you worried that:

- your child has a particular problem, for example, at school, with friends or with drugs

or alcohol? See ORGANISATIONS THAT WILL HELP ON page 26.

When aggression turns to violence

If you suffer injuries caused by an older child's aggression or if you do not feel safe at home, then it is important that the violence be stopped. It is important that you get some outside help and that you are *not* left on your own to deal with it.

If you have any legal concerns contact your solicitor or consult the CHILDREN'S LEGAL CENTRE ON page 26. If there is persistent violence by an older or adult child, you may want to call the police or Social Services. See TALK TO COMMUNITY AGENCIES ON page 11.



Where to seek help for your child

Talk to people you trust

When you feel able, talk about your anxieties to a friend whose opinions you respect, or talk to someone who may have been through a similar situation.

Try to involve other people in supporting you in your parenting role – for example, other parents that you know or local parent groups that your library can help you to find.

People who have responsibility for your child

In your community there are other people who know, care for or have responsibility for your child.

If they are nursery workers, teachers, coaches or youth club leaders they can tell you more about

your child's behaviour while they are with them, any changes there may have been and about how your child behaves in other situations. They are people with responsibility for your child who can teach by example and can tell you what the rules for behaviour are at the nursery, school or club.

They may be able to offer practical advice or tips. You can work together in setting limits for your child and use the same rules.

Your GP may be able to help by putting you in touch with a family therapist or child psychologist. For a young child your Health Visitor may also be able to help.

Talk to community agencies

Your child's school, Social Services or the police can all be helpful in offering support or assistance – especially if you call them at a stage when the behaviour is troublesome but before it becomes threatening.

These community agencies work in different ways:

SCHOOLS encourage parents to take part in teacher–parent meetings. They are important influences in children's lives, and can be a source of information about out-of-school activities in your area.

If you involve the school, the teachers will better understand your child's difficulties. You and the school will be able to support each other in the way you deal with discipline and managing difficult behaviour.

SOCIAL SERVICES are committed to helping families to help themselves, especially when it is the parents who contact them. They can be an important source of information and support.

When you feel that your child's behaviour is too much out of your control, and you and the rest of the family are suffering as a consequence, Social

WHERE TO SEEK HELP FOR YOUR CHILD

Services may be able to help. They can assign you a family social worker or provide someone to give your child one-to-one attention and help them to manage their anger.

As a very last resort, if you are unable to cope at home they may arrange for temporary foster care for your child.

When children are being abused or neglected, then Social Services' other role is to get involved to protect them. See also One Parent Families' booklet, *Parental Responsibility*.

YOUR LOCAL POLICE STATION might be able to offer information on community resources such as youth mentoring programmes or youth crime reduction groups.

If your child gets into trouble with the police, the court can make a parenting order to offer you practical help in supporting your child to stay away from trouble. This would require you to attend a parenting programme. See **YOUTH JUSTICE** on page 25.

PARENTING PROGRAMMES can give you ideas to try out at home, can often act as a supportive network of friends and can help you to be more

knowledgeable about your children's health and development.

Your library, Health Visitor, Social Services or a local voluntary organisation will be able to tell you about these and other parenting groups.

See also **FURTHER HELP** on page 26.

Be in control of the situation

It is preferable that you be the one to contact these agencies to ask for help so that, as much as possible, you remain in control.

If the school, police or Social Services become involved in your family because of someone else's intervention, you might feel that you no longer have control.

For example, if your child's behaviour begins to affect people outside your home, a neighbour could take action over the situation and contact one of these agencies before you do.

If you can make contact with these outside agencies on your own, remind yourself that you are helping your child and your family, and that you are being a responsible parent. You are taking care of your family and yourself in a responsible way that you have thought through.

Parenting: what works?

Being a confident parent

Skills you have and skills to practice

The ideas in this section will hopefully remind you what you are doing well and help to give you confidence.

Some ideas you may have forgotten in living with stress and others you may have learned through experience, or from friends and family.

Remember: you know your children best and you know what works well for them.

Giving children your time and attention

Time for each child

Each of your children need your time and you need the time to listen to them.

By being genuinely interested in what they are saying, doing and feeling – not just when they are being difficult but also when they are being reasonable – you will be there to catch problems early.

Love is what your children need most to build their self-confidence. Show them that you value each of them as a person.

Take time to do things one-to-one, for example, reading together, playing a game, doing a sport or shopping together.

Praise for each child

Find opportunities for smiles, praise, hugs or thanks. We all feel better and more appreciated after receiving a compliment.

If you compliment your children on their good behaviour and their personal qualities and abilities, you will help them to grow in confidence.

Instead of judging them, try instead to talk about what you see and feel. In this way children will feel you are noticing, and acknowledging their experiences. For example:

- 'I saw you walk away when Anna was calling you names in the playground... I feel proud of you for going to find someone else to play with.'

Sum up your child's praiseworthy behaviour with words such as:

- 'You left a hard situation. That kept you safe.'
- 'I'm glad you told me. I like knowing what you have to deal with.'

PARENTING: WHAT WORKS?

Identify each child's feelings

Children's frustration and physical outbursts may come from not being able to say exactly what they feel. Learning to identify and describe their feelings is part of growing up and it helps to make their emotions less intense.

Listen carefully to what your children are saying. Try to see things from their point of view. Help them to say what they feel and this will help them learn to understand and manage their feelings.

For example:

- teach them names for their feelings: 'I guess you're shouting because you feel angry';
- show you understand what they feel: 'I wish I had the magic power to make Superman appear and chase your fears away';
- show you can accept and understand their feelings, even though you want them to change their behaviour: 'I can see you're angry

with Tim. Tell him what you want with words, not with your fists'.

Although you still set the limits, you are showing you understand how they feel by 'putting yourself in their shoes': you are showing empathy. You might say something like:

'You probably feel frustrated that you can't have that, but no, I can't buy that for you right now.'

This may be difficult to remember to do but it is very helpful if you can. You might find it actually helps to deflate a child's angry or frustrated tantrum rather than – as you might fear – to 'fan the flames'.

Some parents worry that to acknowledge feelings like anger or frustration is the same as accepting the temper tantrum, or being OK with aggression. But by acknowledging the feeling you are validating the child's feeling – it is 'OK' to have feelings. And you can still say 'no'.

Helping children to develop and to learn

Helping your child to learn cooperation

Help your child to see the problem from the other person's point of view. For example, you might say, 'How do you think your sister feels?', instead of saying, 'You're so selfish, you never think of anyone else'.

- Help with simple information, for example, instead of 'How many times do I have to tell you not to scream?' try 'Too loud. That hurts my ears'.

- Say it with a word or simple sentence, for example, 'Gently!', rather than a long message when your meaning might get lost.
- Talk about your feelings. Rather than, 'Stop that clinging!', say 'I don't like having my neck pulled. I like soft hugs'.
- Write a note, for example, stuck on the TV: 'Before watching TV, have you put your toys away?'.

'Watch what I do, do what I do'

Children watch and learn from the people around them.

If your children are shouting or swearing and you try to outdo their loudness, you are just providing them with an example that force and power are the way to solve conflicts.

Try instead to be calm and reasonable. Make it clear that you can see how they're feeling: 'Yes, it is frustrating, I agree', but at the same time tell them what the consequences will be of their behaviour.

See DEALING WITH CHILDREN'S CONFLICT AND ANXIETY ON page 16.

Help your child to learn independence

As children grow, they are constantly testing new ground. Making a choice or a decision for themselves is the way they learn independence and this is an important life skill.

YOUNGER CHILDREN might be offered a limit of two choices, both of which are OK with you. For example, 'Do you want to share this toy or should I replace it with another?'

OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS are often wanting to 'talk through' different scenarios: what the outcome might be, what they would like to see happen, and the risks or advantages in different courses of action. You are still the parent and can always say what is not negotiable.

Show respect for their struggles

If, for example, they are finding it hard to make friends, you could ask them about it or let them invite classmates home after school.

Don't ask too many questions. For example, just say, 'I'm glad to see you', instead of, 'What went wrong?', or 'Did you get into trouble?'

Take your time to answer, for example, 'Good question. What do you think?'

Encourage your child to ask others. For example, say, 'I'm not sure; how about asking your teacher?'

Give your child hope. For example, say 'So, does that interest you?', rather than 'Forget it'. Or say 'I wonder if there's a way', rather than 'That's impossible'.

Use realistic, consistent rules

Children learn by making mistakes and they naturally test the rules as part of their learning. At the same time they like to know what the limits and rules are.

At home the rules should be as clear as they are in the classroom or as in sports and games. Try to keep them realistic and appropriate to your child's age.

You could put up the 'house rules' in a place where everyone can look at them.

Keep the consequences of misbehaviour simple and clear too. If you threaten to remove a privilege then you have to be ready to do this. With younger children, the more immediate the reward or the consequence to the actual behaviour, the better.

Reward positive behaviours

Notice when your children are being good.

Notice and reward the behaviour you would like to see more of. At the same time, reduce the attention you give to unwanted behaviour.

Any time you spend on noticing and remarking on behaviour will make it more likely to happen again. So, focus on the behaviours you want.

Changing aggressive behaviour

Dealing with children's conflict and anxiety

Show them by example

Helping your children to deal with conflict and anxiety is one of the most important skills that you can pass on to them.

Show them through example, through your own actions, that it is possible to deal with conflict constructively so that no one gets hurt. Show them that it is better to talk and that asking for help when you need it is a good thing.

Discipline

Discipline is for the benefit of your child. It helps to protect her/him from danger and helps to ensure that her/his behaviour is not anti-social.

Many people still associate 'discipline' with physical discipline, that is, corporal punishment. However, you can discipline your child without resorting to violence.

Violence is not the way

Violence is not the way to resolve conflicts or frustration or anger: people get hurt.

If you choose to hit your children, this will be teaching them that it's OK to hit the people you love. They will get very mixed and confusing messages to grow up with into adulthood.

Also, hitting and smacking a naughty child does not help them to understand what they have done

wrong. It won't necessarily stop the bad behaviour from happening again.

Physical punishment is dangerous; it can do permanent damage. In some countries it is illegal. Small slaps might escalate into bigger smacks. In the end your child is angry and hurt but has not had the chance to understand how to put things right.

Worst of all, children could learn to be violent to smaller children when they feel upset.

By removing your children from violent situations or distracting them from violent behaviour, you are teaching them that violence is not okay and that no one deserves to be treated that way.

Rules and rewards

There have to be rules at home so that each member of the family can live comfortably with the others. But the rules, and the way your family functions, will change as the children grow up.

You can provide a reminder to the children by posting up house rules, and by posting up the rota for chores they must do. You could have a system of star charts to show everyone you appreciate it when your children do what they are expected to do.

Young children and conflict

Find out what's upsetting them

Young children may say they don't have anyone to talk to when they are concerned about something. In fact, it may be that they don't know how to say what it is they are concerned about.

If you can read story books together about children in similar situations, you can talk about what's happening in the story – this might help you to find out what is upsetting your child and causing her/his difficult behaviour.

Another way they can explain their feelings is through their play or their drawings. When you can talk about what worries them, you will then be able to talk about behaviour and the effect this has on them and on other people.

Find alternatives to punishment

Teach your child to be helpful:

- 'I'd like you to play with your lego or draw a picture while I speak on the phone', instead of 'You're going to get it if you do that again'.

Show that you disapprove of your child's behaviour, but not of them as a person:

- 'Calling people names is horrible. It upsets them', instead of 'You're always so rude'.

Give information rather than threats:

- 'It's better to write on paper not the walls', instead of 'If you do that again you'll get a smack'.

Take action and problem-solve:

- 'If you're angry, you can kick a ball outside – that won't break like the glass did'.

Be clear about what you expect and what you like:

- 'We like kisses and cuddles in our family, not smacks that hurt'.

Show your child how to make amends:

- 'Please say sorry and tell Ali what you will do differently next time'.

Give your child a choice, for example:

- 'You can walk away and count to ten, or tell a teacher'.

Explain the consequences to your child of his/her misbehaviour:

- 'If you hit me I feel sad and angry, but when you talk about your feelings I want to help'.

Alternatives to physical punishment

If you think your child is being deliberately naughty, withholding a treat or privilege will be more effective than any physical punishment.

If the bad behaviour seems uncontrollable, it may help your child to be removed away from the group, or from the activity that they are disrupting, to be on their own until they have calmed down.

Prepare for difficult situations

Small children feel happier with regular meal times, bedtimes or times for noisy play. Children may find it difficult if their routine is disrupted, or if you are going to have to attend to something or someone else, such as other adults or children.

Prepare them for these changes to their routine, or guide and support them through the new situation. Give them time to prepare by telling them in advance what's going to happen that day, in the next hour and so on. You might find it helpful to repeat this a few times.

Older children and adolescents, and conflict

Be fair and firm

When you are trying to deal with persistent bad behaviour and breaking of rules, try to be both fair and firm.

First, give yourself time to think about how important the issue is and whether you really need to do something about it.

Your careful thought will help your child to learn by your example how to behave and manage themselves in difficult situations.

If you fear a violent response

If you have decided that you do have to confront an older child or adolescent about something and you are worried about a violent response, try this approach:

- first, give yourself time to cool down and think about what you want to do and say;
- then tell them that there is something you want to discuss; and
- set a time to discuss it, perhaps the next morning.

If you can plan to talk about the issue calmly, your child might respond less violently. This will also help you to avoid saying something in the heat of the moment that you might later regret.

When the time comes, explain to your child how you feel about what they have done and then give them time to say how they feel about it.

What happens next

Talk about ways that the child, with your help, can try to improve their behaviour so that it is more acceptable to you and other people around them.

You might find you are able to agree on a compromise which, although not perfect, you can live with and which seems to be acceptable to your child.

Talk about what the penalties will be if you cannot agree a compromise or if an agreement is not kept to over time.

When there has to be a consequence

If you decide there must be some punishment, try not to make it too harsh. Make it fit the behaviour. You might decide that your child must stay in or there may be a treat or activity that could be withdrawn.

Smacking or shouting is unlikely to be effective. If you show that this is the way adults deal with anger and frustration, children will feel it is acceptable to react aggressively when they are upset.

Your children may be more frightened than you think when you are angry or refuse to talk to them.

If it does not work

If you feel you are not getting anywhere with this kind of approach, try to enlist some help. See **FURTHER HELP** on page 26.

If your children have grown up with violence

If your children have witnessed or experienced violence at home, this does not mean that they will automatically behave aggressively themselves, or grow up to be violent adults.

Some may behave aggressively, while others may purposely reject any use of violence, and other still may become more withdrawn in their behaviour.

'Acting-out' or challenging behaviour under these circumstances is actually a normal reaction to an abnormal and dangerous situation.

Help their self esteem

Look for opportunities to show your child a new picture of themselves:

- 'That was brave and good balance, when you climbed along that wall.'

Put your child in new situations where they can see themselves differently:

- 'I would really appreciate it if you would help me put away the shopping.'

Let your children overhear you talking proudly about them:

- 'She really takes the trouble to help other children understand the sums.'

Never compare your child to the abuser, stick to behaviour:

- 'None of us like hitting. We talk about feelings now and sort out our problems.'

Point out their good qualities, and what you like and appreciate about them.

Talk about the past and the present

Save up special memories and moments:

- 'I remember yesterday when you...'

Separate the past from the present and future:

- 'That happened when we lived there but we left because we didn't like it. What we do now is help each other. If you get us cushions, I will read you a story.'

Look for opportunities to use these ideas. The best conversations may happen while you are doing something else – like washing and drying dishes, sitting in a car or playing sports.

Be honest with your children about your own feelings and how you feel about something that has happened.

Action you can take to help your children

Think about what's happening at home

Think about reasons for difficult behaviour

Think about why your children might be behaving badly.

They may simply be tired, hungry, bored or even over-stimulated, and these are all possibilities that you can do something to prevent.

Is something bothering your child now, that perhaps they are worried about telling you?

Think back to when problems started

When things started to go wrong:

- could something have happened that worried your child, even though for you it's in the past?
- did you play something down thinking that it would be soon forgotten?
- was something too difficult to talk about so you blotted out your own feelings and so didn't give your children a chance to say how she/he felt or to talk about her/his worries?

Your bottled-up feelings

You may have become good at bottling up your feelings and, perhaps unconsciously, you are expecting your children to do the same.

Children's bottled up feelings can come out as angry, aggressive or selfish behaviour. An event in the past might be causing long-term unhappiness, and the fact that you didn't talk with them about it may be making them feel angry and resentful.

Talk about what's going on

If you can be open and talk about what's going on, it will give your children opportunities to ask you questions and it will help them to feel less anxious and more secure.

Chat about relatively minor issues and you will find it easier to discuss the more important things as they come up.

Let your children know how you feel. Tell them what has gone well for you and what you have enjoyed, as well as some of the things that have been difficult.

In time you and your children may be able to discuss what's going on now as well as what has happened in the past. They will begin to understand that you are not necessarily to blame and neither are they.

Anticipate situations

It helps to think ahead and anticipate problems and conflicts that may arise when there will be changes in your children's lives. Think about how you will manage and how you will help your children to adjust to the change.

Situations that can cause anxiety and unhappiness

Some situations that can cause anxiety and unhappiness to your children, and which could be a cause of difficult behaviour, include:

- your separation, divorce or a new partner;
- a new baby or new older siblings;
- starting school or changing school;
- if you have a chronic illness or disability;
- violence in the family;
- a death in the family; or
- moving to a new area.

Their world may feel turned upside down. They may feel rejected. Insecurity might change their behaviour – to naughtiness in younger children or anger and aggression in teenagers.



ACTION YOU CAN TAKE TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN

Separation can mean children suffer other losses: loss of their home, the way of life they are used to, old friends, relatives, even pets. They may have to change school and make new friends.

Try to reduce their anxiety

When you talk about the change in their lives, remind your children that you still love them. Continue to be interested in them and sensitive to their feelings.

After a separation reassure them that they will be cared for and that they don't have to lose their

relationship with the other parent, even if your relationship was difficult. Discuss your children's needs and feelings with the other parent, if possible.

To help build your children's sense of security, try to continue with the usual activities and routines as much as possible.

Explain why things have happened. Listen to the opinions of your older children but remember that major decisions, for example, on child contact and residence, are ultimately the adults' responsibility.

Look after yourself

It is most important that you look after yourself. If you feel healthy and supported you will be better able to help your children.

Share your experiences

Do not wait for a crisis. Talk something through when it first becomes a concern and the crisis will probably not happen.

Try joining a parents' group in your local community, or reading helpful parenting books, see **BOOKS AND VIDEOS** on page 29. You could also look for useful newsletters or websites, or try calling a parent helpline.

Find out about local one-parent family support groups: there may be a professional there who can help you with specific problems; others may be more informal. They may be based around school, playgroups, community centres, churches, mosques, temples or synagogues.

Your local library or Citizens Advice will tell you about local groups. Explore what is best for you by talking to them and asking questions. You could develop your own informal support group by asking people round to your home and discussing each other's parenting concerns and ideas.

Plan and organise

You can make life less stressful by:

- keeping your children to a regular, daily routine and bedtime: routine is good for children because predictability makes them feel safer and it is also good for you because you will know when you will have a little time during the day to yourself;
- making lists of things to be done and putting them in priority order; and
- planning ahead and thinking about how to make the stressful parts of the day less difficult.

Did you have a difficult childhood?

If you suffered abuse as a child, whether it was neglect, or emotional, physical or sexual abuse, there may never have been an opportunity to think and talk about how you felt at the time. And there may never have been an opportunity since then.

If you have blocked out your feelings about your past, this could make it harder for you to understand and deal with your own child's anger and frustration.

If you can talk to someone who is a specialist in helping with the kind of experiences you have had, this may help you to understand yourself better and to understand the difficulties your child is going through as well. See **ORGANISATIONS THAT WILL HELP** on page 26.

Time for yourself

You may be feeling isolated and lonely as a parent on your own, and these feelings will be worse if you have a child with behavioural problems.

Give yourself some time to think about what you like doing. Try to find half an hour in the day – or longer if possible – to do something on your own that you enjoy.

Think about how you can occasionally go out in the evening. If you have young children, could you arrange for them to sleep over at a friend's house?

Time in the day for yourself is essential, whether it is to collect your energy or to get something important done.

Know your limits and know when it is time to get outside support

When you are overwhelmed and feel you cannot cope, or when you find yourself taking out your frustrations on your children, then it is time to get outside support.

Call any of the parent helplines for anonymous help, or ask a trusted friend or family member for their ideas. See **ORGANISATIONS THAT WILL HELP ON** page 26.

Your GP can be a good person to talk to. They can also refer you to family specialists. See **WHEN IS IT TIME TO GET HELP?** on page 9.

Make your own list of all the contact numbers you might need in a hurry. Include friends, school, your doctor and your support group, and pin them up somewhere where you can find them quickly.

Children's rights and responsibilities

Legal rights are acquired gradually as your children get older.

Remind them that rights are always accompanied by responsibilities, and help them to be prepared for their newly-acquired rights.

Some age-related rights in the UK

They can, from:

- age 10 – be convicted of a criminal offence if they knew they were doing wrong;
- age 12 – buy a pet;
- age 13 – get a paper round or other part-time job;
- age 14 – go into a pub, but they cannot buy alcohol there;
- age 16 – leave school and work full-time, buy cigarettes and fireworks, consent to sexual intercourse and leave home with parental consent;
- age 17 – hold a driving licence;
- age 18 – being legally adults, they can do most of the things that adults are allowed to do.

Renegotiating as they grow up

Teenagers want to assert their independence and their increasing self-reliance. It is a time for renegotiating what is acceptable. Give your children realistic choices to help build their sense of responsibility and involvement.

Teenagers need your time to talk and may demand it at inconvenient times. Equally, you may wish to talk at a time when they need privacy and to be on their own. If necessary, arrange a mutually convenient time to talk.

If your children don't seem to want to talk much:

- make it clear that you are interested in them and what they do, but don't just ask questions;
- listen to what they do say and try to understand what they are saying and how they are feeling;
- respond to what they are saying, especially feelings, to show you care and want to understand how they are doing;
- whatever happens, don't read their diaries – you may not know how to talk about what you have read.

Safety when children are out and about

You must be the judge of when your children can play out on their own, or walk to the shops, or head to school or to an after-school club on their own. Some suggest that children under age nine should not be expected to walk anywhere by themselves.

You can help your children by agreeing rules with them. For example, they should stay with their friends and not wander off alone, or they should phone you when they arrive at their friends'

house or when they are about to come home (they will be more likely to come straight home and feel cared for as they do so).

Youth justice

Children understanding the consequences of crime

Young people may need help in understanding how their rights and responsibilities develop as they grow up.

Age-related rights are spelled out quite clearly but the issue of responsibility for a crime they may commit is less straightforward.

From the age of 10, children are assumed by the law to have sufficient maturity to be able to understand the implications of any crime they commit and can be held responsible for that crime.

However, they are treated as children in need of protection under the law, from sexual exploitation and from exploitation in the workplace.

If you fear that there is a risk that your child's violent or abusive behaviour will happen outside your home as well, you can help your child to understand their responsibility and the likely consequences of anti-social behaviour.

Orders a court can make

When young people are found guilty of a crime or anti-social behaviour, there are different orders that a court can make:

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR ORDERS can be imposed by the police or the local authority to restrict the movement and activity of a child age 10 and above.

CHILD SAFETY ORDERS can be requested by the local authority to prevent a child under age 10 from becoming involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour.

CHILD CURFEWS can be requested by the local authority to ban children under age 15 from a specified area.

PARENTING ORDERS require you to attend parenting sessions if your child has committed a crime, or if you do not make sure your child attends school regularly.

FINAL WARNING leads to a child being referred to a youth offending team for assessment of what can be done to prevent re-offending.

REPARATION means that a young offender must do something for his/her victim or for the community to pay for their offence.

Further help

Joining a parents' group, reading a book or watching a video about being a parent, even taking a course on parenting – all or any of these activities will help to give you confidence at a difficult time.

Being a more confident parent will really help you to try out and follow through some of the ideas described in this booklet.

Organisations that will help

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER INFORMATION SERVICE

Tel: 020 8906 9068

www.addiss.co.uk

Specialist help and advice is available free.

CHILDLINE

Tel: 0800 1111

24-hour helpline for children in danger or distress.

CHILDREN'S LEGAL CENTRE

University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ

Advice Line: 01206 873 820 (Mon–Fri 10am–12.30pm)

Free, confidential advice on any legal issue relating to children and young people.

CONTACT A FAMILY

209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN

Freephone: 0808 808 3555 (Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm)

Helps families who care for children with special needs and are a main source of information about rare disorders.

CRUSE BEREAVEMENT CARE

Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR

Helpline: 0870 167 1677

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Offers counselling, advice and opportunities for social contact to all bereaved people, including children.

DADS UK

85a Westbourne Street, Hove, East Sussex BN3 5PF

Tel: 07092 391 489 or 07092 39092 39 0210 Mon–Fri 11am–10pm, Sat–Sun 2–6pm

www.dads-uk.co.uk

Information, advice and support for single or gay fathers, and bereaved husbands.

FAMILY MATTERS

13 Wrotham Road, Gravesend, Kent DA11 0PA

Helpline: 01474 537 392

Offers counselling, listening and information to both adults and children aged 8 and over, who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood.

FAMILY SERVICE UNITS: REACHOUT

Helpline: 020 7402 5175 24 hr

Run family centres for marginalised and excluded families; also work with disruptive and bullied children. Work to link support for the child with support for the whole family.

HOMESTART

National Information Line: 0800 068 6368

Email: info@home-start.org.uk

www.home-start.org.uk

Support, friendship and practical help from volunteers for people in their own homes who have at least one child under five.

MEET A MUM ASSOCIATION

376 Bideford Green, Linsdale, Leighton Buzzard LU7 2TY
Post-natal Helpline: 020 8768 0123 Mon–Fri 7pm–10pm
www.mama.org.uk

Puts mothers who are isolated, lonely or who have post-natal depression in contact with one another for friendship and mutual support.

NATIONAL FAMILY MEDIATION

9 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SN
Tel: 020 7385 5993

Provides information about affiliated mediation services. Can provide a booklist about divorce and separation for children of different ages.

NCH ACTION FOR CHILDREN

85 Highbury Park, London N5 1UD
Tel: 020 7226 2033
www.nch.org.uk

Provides family centres throughout the UK offering advice and help to those coping with stress and practical difficulties.

NFPI (NATIONAL FAMILY AND PARENTING INSTITUTE)

Tel: 020 7424 3470
www.nfpi.org

Publications for parents.

NSPCC CHILD PROTECTION HELPLINE

Tel: 0800 800 5000 – staffed 24 hrs by qualified social workers for anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.
Tel: 020 7825 2775 for publications and information Mon–Fri 9am–4pm.



FURTHER HELP

PARENTLINE PLUS

Helpline: 0808 800 2222 24 hrs

Textphone: 0800 783 6783 availability is variable between 9am and 5pm, otherwise answerphone

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Provides advice and support for anyone in a parenting role, including stepparents and grandparents.

YOUNG MINDS PARENTS INFORMATION SERVICE

Tel: 0800 018 2138 Mon and Fri 10am–1pm, Tues, Wed, Thurs 1–4pm

Publications cover a range of issues that young people might be dealing with. For parents and carers who are concerned about the mental health and emotional well-being of a child or young person. They also provide local information.

Groups to join

Joining a group can provide new friends and acquaintances away from family and your neighbourhood where you can relax and socialise, or find others with similar experiences with whom you can exchange ideas.

GINGERBREAD

7 Sovereign Close, Sovereign Court, London E1W 3HW

Advice Line 0800 018 4318 Mon–Fri 9am–5pm.

www.gingerbread.org.uk

There are over 100 Gingerbread groups around the country organising different activities, for example, daycare schemes, advice and practical help. All provide the opportunity to socialise with other parents.

SINGLE PARENTS ACTION NETWORK (SPAN)

Millpond, Baptist Street, Easton, Bristol BS5 0YW

Tel: 0117 951 4231

www.singleparent.org.uk

National network of self-help organisations for lone parents, particularly concerned with poverty, racism and women's issues. SPAN can help new groups set up.

Information from One Parent Families

Tel Helpline 0800 018 5026 for One Parent Families helpline for a list of organisations for lone parents in your area. Contact the Helpline to order the following booklets from One Parent Families.

Publications for lone parents

Parental Responsibility – the Guide on Legal Rights and Responsibilities, and Contact Arrangements for Children.

Safe Contact Arrangements – A Guide on how to avoid violence and threatening behaviour in relation to contact arrangements.

Take Action – a short, practical guide to dealing with domestic violence.

Families Just Like Us – A guide to books for and about one-parent families.

Courses to take

Confident Parents, Confident Children, course for parents with children between the ages of two and eight, by Open University

Courses for parents that aim to help them to improve their relationship with their children are also run by Parentline Plus

Books and videos

Books and videos can be useful. Have a look in your local library for something that suits you. These are just a few of the titles you may find.

Raising Happy Children, Jan Parker, Jan Simpson and Dorothy Rowe, Hodder and Stoughton 1999.

Getting Positive About Discipline: A Guide for Today's Parents, Barnardos and Young Minds leaflets.

Teenagers in Trouble and Teenagers in the Family – Skills for Parents videos from the Trust for the Study of Adolescence, 2000.

Over the Top Behaviour in the Under Tens – highlights the differences between normal misbehaviour and where there might be more serious problems, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and where to get help.

From Breakfast to Bedtime – video and booklet with realistic advice on coping with young children and discipline at difficult times of day or in difficult situations.

Parents Together – guide for parents on how to benefit from getting together with other parents.

Books for you and your children about events affecting family life

Behaviour difficulties can stem from events that have affected your family life. You and your children might want to read some of these books either on your own or together. Again, have a look in your local library first.

Divorce, separation, family break-up

Divorce, Anne Charlish, Hodder Wayland 1998

What Do You Know About Divorce and Separation?, Pete Sanders and Steve Myers, Gloucester Press 1998

Dealing with: Family Break-up, Kate Haycock, Hodder Wayland 1995

My Parents' Divorce, Julia Cole, Franklin Watts 1997

We're Talking About Divorce, Anne Charlish, Hodder Wayland 1997

What Do We Think About Family Break-up ?, Jullian Powell, Hoder Wayland 1998

Bereavement

Dealing with Death, Emma Haughton, Hodder Wayland 1995

Remembering Mum, Ginny Perkins and Leon Morris, A&C Black 1996

What's Happening? Death, Karen Bryant-Mole, Hodder Wayland 1998

Changing families

Parent Problems, Bren Neale and Amanda Wade, Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood 2000,

Feeling Jealous, Sally Hewitt, Franklin Watts 1999

Joining Together, Sheila Byrne and Leigh Chambers, British Association for Adoption and Fostering 1997

My Family's Changing, Pat Thomas, Macdonald 1999

My New Dad, Gianna Williams, Evans Brothers 1999

My Two Families, Althea Braithwaite, A&C Black 1996

Other situations and events

Dad's in Prison, Sandra Cain and Margaret Speed, A&C Black 1999

Feeling Safe, Sheila Byrne and Leigh Chambers, British Association for Adoption and Fostering 1997

FURTHER HELP



Looking After Children with Difficult Behaviour:
The Guide for Lone Parents
ISBN 1 85199 224 3 £4.00

If you are a lone parent and would like to find out about our other services call for information, free publications and details of other helpful organisations on the Lone Parent Helpline, 0800 018 5026 or visit our Helpdesk at www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/helpdesk

If you belong to an organisation which works with lone parents and you want to order publications or find out about our training services and resources for professionals, contact:

One Parent Families
255 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2LX
info@oneparentfamilies.org.uk www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk
Tel: (020) 7428 5400 Fax: (020) 7482 4851
Registered charity number 230750

The FamilySafe project is supported by the Family Support Grant of the DfES.