

# Encouraging better behaviour

A practical guide to positive parenting



# About this guide

## Being a parent isn't always easy.

This practical guide provides useful information on positive parenting and positive discipline and looks at why physical punishment is never a good idea for children of any age.

Of course, you can't just switch to positive parenting overnight. If you have always shouted and smacked, it will take time and some hard work to turn things around. It may even seem as if behaviour gets worse for a while – but keep at it! Eventually your children will behave better and you will find you are less stressed and your whole family's life is happier.

This guide has been written by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) parenting advisor, Eileen Hayes, with the kind assistance of parents and practitioners.

## The guide uses a simple step-by-step approach:

### Understanding you and your child:

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Not all parents  
are the same -  
how do you cope?



## Which type of parent do you think is closest to you?

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

Parents know it is their job to teach children family rules of behaviour and what others expect.

- Having clear, simple rules and expecting them to be met.
- Giving children some control and choices appropriate to age and stage of development.
- Using mainly positive methods and praise to encourage behaving well, showing disapproval but never using harsh punishments.

### **“Raising children is a constant battle.”**

Parents know best, children must learn.

- Having lots of strict rules.
- Using a lot of demands and threats.
- Punishing harshly and smacking often.

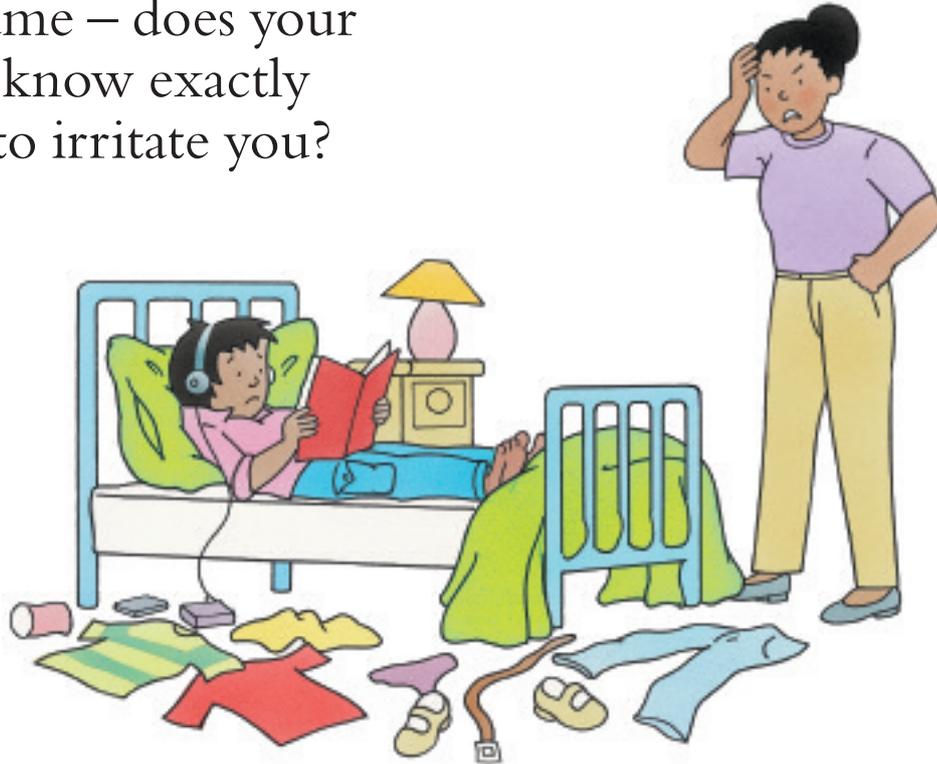
### **“I just want a quiet life.”**

Parents worried about doing anything to upset a child.

- Forgetting your own needs and ignoring all naughty behaviour, even when it is far from minor.
- Always giving in to whining.
- Not encouraging independence, doing everything for your child.

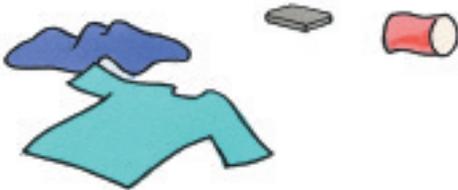
**The truth is probably a bit of each depending on the circumstances. You may even know that the ideal sort of parenting, keeping both children and parents happiest, and having the best chance of children behaving well, is the first example, sometimes called positive parenting – but it can be hard to keep it up all the time.**

Not all children are the same – does your child know exactly how to irritate you?



## Which is closest to your child?

- Placid, easy-going, quickly do what you tell them – hardly ever gets into a battle with you.
- Can sometimes co-operate and behave well, but have 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 is easy to comfort and settle to sleep, another has colic, fights 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, play up more. This can make it extra hard work for parents trying to be positive.**

## What is positive parenting and positive discipline?

**These are techniques that work well with every child, regardless of their age, temperament, background, culture or tradition.**

**They build on a child's wish to please you, guaranteeing a more well-behaved happy child and less stressed parents.**

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

### **It works by:**

- Creating a good relationship with your child by showing love and affection.
- Emphasising all the things that please you about your child.
- Being a good example – children will take their lead from what you do.
- Praising the behaviour you want and trying to ignore minor naughty behaviour.
- Listening to your child's views and negotiating solutions to problems together.
- Avoiding harsh punishments like smacking, or shouting excessively.
- Having clear limits that are fair and age appropriate; expressing your wishes in a way that shows you mean what you say.



## Understand why children misbehave

**Attention seeking** Children will do just about anything to get the attention they crave from 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 powerless** If a child feels upset at not having control, they may hit out or get mad, often to an older sibling or friend.

**Feeling bad** A child of any age may be showing they are feeling sad or anxious by behaving badly, and need more sympathy and affection. Punishing will only make matters worse.

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



**Remember – all children test 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 are testing constantly. This is not 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.**



Not all ages are  
the same – are you  
reacting to their  
changing needs?



# Babies

Remember – babies behave as they do to get their needs met. Their crying, or not sleeping, 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, not doing it to annoy you.

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

## Positive discipline tips

- Be loving and comforting 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 video, 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 – preventing a poke in the eye by holding their hand; strapping them into the car seat saying “I know it makes you cross, but we have to do it.”
- Never smack or shout at a baby.

# Toddlers

Remember – most behaviour adults call naughty in toddlers is 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 you are not alone.



## Positive discipline tips

- Avoid orders and ultimatums.
- 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.
- Ignoring (or trying to) behaviour you don't like means it is less likely to be repeated.
- Remain calm and reasonable yourself, even when your toddler is in a rage, take a deep breath and wait before responding.
- Smacking always makes toddler behaviour and tantrums worse and can make your child afraid of you.

## School-age children

Remember – what you see as cheeky or disobedient may be a natural desire in your child to assert independence and show they have a mind of their own with their own thoughts and needs. These qualities may seem irritating, but they are vital for adult life. Even though children may seem very independent, they still need lots of love and reassurance.

### Positive discipline tips

- Describe exactly what you want your child to do. Give reasons, listen to their side of the story.
- Try not to give too many orders. “Do this”, “Don’t do that”, can overwhelm a child.
- Listen carefully to your child about their friends, their day, be alert to any worries that may make behaviour worse, talk about areas of conflict.
- Use specific praise, describing what it is for and let minor misbehaviour go.
- Keep criticisms to a minimum - and only criticise a behaviour, not your child.
- Don’t be trapped into pointless arguments – a “broken record” approach can work well – calmly repeating what you expect your child to do.
- If your disappointment or mild disapproval doesn’t work to change a behaviour, try consequences. They don’t do homework when you ask, they will be in trouble at school, or they mess up their room, they must clear it up.
- Never smack – this gives a bad example of how to handle strong emotions and makes your child angry and resentful, which can damage your relationship.

# Teenagers

Remember – from pre-adolescence on, it is normal for young people to challenge you more – their friends exert a greater influence and they just can't go along with everything parents want.

“I used to smack my son. When he was 14 I went to hit him. He grabbed my hand and said, ‘No you don’t’. I never raised a hand to him after that.”

## Positive discipline tips

- Don't take bad behaviour personally. Try to understand how hard it is to gain independence and a sense of identity and think back to how you felt at that age.
- Keep communicating – your teenager still needs your love and respect.
- Try to be non-judgemental about your teen's behaviour.
- Keep criticism to a minimum – trust your child to make the right decisions. Sometimes they need to learn from their mistakes.
- Accept that some conflict may be inevitable.
- Think of your job as guiding towards adult life.
- Have clear rules and limits with reasonable consequences.
- Try not to use threats or orders.
- Talk and negotiate solutions when there is a disagreement.
- Never hit a young person. Harsh physical punishment only make defiant, teenage behaviour much worse and can cause damage to self-esteem.
- Appropriate sanctions might be withdrawal of a privilege, cutting pocket money or “grounding” – refusing to allow out for a specified time.

**Working at positive discipline takes a lot of energy and no parent can do it perfectly all the time. There will be days when you are too tired or busy, and feel that you can't be reasonable or put in the effort required.**

**All parents behave in ways they regret some of the time – shouting or smacking, for example. If it happens, say you are sorry, kiss and make up and try again. This teaches children a very valuable lesson in understanding that parents are human, make mistakes and can apologise.**

## Why smacking is never a good idea

Some parents find it hard to imagine how they could cope without smacking. They accept that the more positive discipline methods are valuable, but believe there are situations where only a smack will do.

### The more defiant child has to be smacked

**“I didn’t smack my two sons, but I did smack my daughter because she was so wilful. One day, when I smacked her, she said, ‘That didn’t hurt!’ I knew then that I mustn’t smack her again, because I was afraid of what might happen, and I never did.”**

If you feel your child is particularly stubborn and strong willed or shows a lot of defiance – being more cheeky and disobedient and would try the patience of a saint – you may be convinced that you have to smack to make an impression.

It can be very tempting to think this. Unfortunately strict punishments and smacking always make matters worse with a naturally strong-willed child. They are likely to display more defiance, answer you back, even hit back, and may fear but not respect you.

**“You can’t make me.”**

**“That doesn’t even hurt.”**

Things can very quickly spiral out of control.

### Smacking always carries a risk

**“I smacked my little boy when he was about three. We were in the kitchen and he slipped and banged his head on a cupboard. There was such a bang – my heart stopped. I would never have forgiven myself... I’ve never forgotten it.”**

Sometimes parents find they need to smack harder and harder in order to get a result.

**“You have to smack them if they try to do something really dangerous.”**

Your small child lets go of your hand and tries to dash into the road, or they head for the cooker, hand outstretched. For many parents in these situations a smack is a natural reaction. They are overwhelmed by emotion, shock, horror, panic and show this by the smack.

But from your child’s point of view, a firm hug, quickly lifting out of danger and the tone of your voice already demonstrate the lesson clearly enough. The hurt or sting of a smack just adds confusion to an already confusing situation.

**“He bit his sister, so I had to smack him.”**

Sometimes parents feel a behaviour is so outrageous that they want to demonstrate to their child that it is totally unacceptable. Unfortunately, smacking or biting back gives a very confusing, contradictory message – that it is okay to use force or to hit physically when you are angry or to make a point. This does not teach the child why their behaviour is unacceptable.

**“Smacking works faster.”**

Smacking may look like it has the desired effect – it stops the behaviour in its tracks, maybe your child cries or seems apologetic, it may even release tension for parents.

But it can have a downside, and some undesirable long-term consequences.

**“Sometimes they just wind you up to a point where you can’t take it.”**

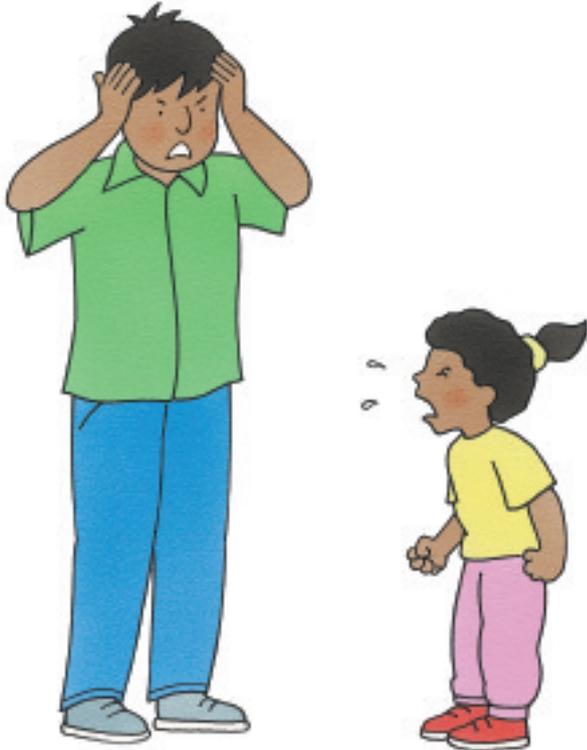
It can feel very hard when a small child seems to know exactly which buttons to press to make you feel annoyed and irritated.

You may have been feeling in a great mood, then your toddler starts whining or older children start fighting.

It is important to understand what is going on. Small children very rarely behave as they do just to annoy adults. The youngest toddlers don’t even understand what winds you up. They are trying to get your attention, or trying to get some need of their own met. When you smack, it is to relieve your own annoyance.

**“When I am feeling really wound-up I just can’t help myself smacking. It helps release my tension, and I feel able to be more rational afterwards.”**

There are times when we all feel stressed. The washing machine may have just packed up, you can’t find the PE kit your child needs for school, you had a row with your partner last night, everybody expects you to do a million things at once. Whatever the reason, being on a short fuse means you are much more likely to over-react by smacking. It may feel as if you have made yourself feel better but this doesn’t usually last for more than a minute or so. Most parents say that they feel guilty soon afterwards.



### **The downside to smacking:**

- Even though they may not show it at the time, children feel emotionally hurt, resentful and angry. Over long periods this spoils family relationships.
- Children who are often smacked learn that is how to behave. They may hit or bully other children.
- Children learn how to avoid the unpleasant outcome of smacking as they grow up – but the behaviours they use may not be those parents want to encourage – like lying, or hiding how they feel.
- Some children are likely to become more defiant and challenging, so discipline is increasingly harder as they grow older.
- Others may become withdrawn and not develop independence.
- When you give out love, you get it back. When you give out harsh punishments – screaming, yelling or hitting, this means you are eventually likely to get anger and resentment back.

If smacking works,  
why do you have  
to keep on doing it?



## Forget the myths

**“A good smack.”**

**“Spare the rod and spoil the child.”**

**“You’re making a rod for your own back.”**

**“You have to show them who is boss.”**

It is odd how many phrases have sprung up to justify smacking children. It almost seems to suggest that smacking is an essential part of a parent’s toolkit – that without smacks children will be uncontrollable and go off the rails – when in fact the opposite is true. Research shows that positive parenting keeps children out of serious trouble.

These also make it sound like being a parent is a battleground, with children and parents permanently on different sides.

But it doesn’t have to be like that. Many parents find that once they get the positive habit, they hardly need to think about discipline at all.

**“But I was smacked as a child – did my parents get it wrong?”**

Ideas on bringing up children have changed. We know a great deal more now about why children behave as they do, and about the effects of smacking.

Our parents did the best they could with the information available at the time. Modern parents choose positive discipline, and realise that smacking is rapidly becoming outdated. It is now banned in many countries, as well as in our schools and child care settings.

**“It’s always been a part of our culture to smack.”**

Hitting children should never be seen as excusable for some groups of parents or children. Positive parenting and discipline works best for everyone.

## Better ways to cut stress



**There are much better, and fairer ways to reduce your stress. Try some of the following:**

### **Talk and listen**

Communication is the key to all good relationships. Unless you ask for what you need, you probably won't get it. Unless you say what you think, you'll end up feeling frustrated.

### **Get organised**

Make lists of things to remember.

### **Plan ahead**

Work out the possible stress points in your day and think about what you can do about them.

### **Take time off**

Make sure you have some time to yourself – every day if possible.

### **Try to relax**

Find ways to help yourself relax. Exercise, peaceful music, a quiet cup of tea alone, some gardening – whatever works for you. Visualise a beautiful, peaceful scene, or your own idea of paradise. This can help to calm you down.

### **Plan a treat for yourself**

When things really get you down, choose something that makes you feel good – a hot bath, a visit to the shops, a night out with your partner or friends.

### **Congratulate yourself**

If you have coped with something difficult, you have a right to feel proud of it.

### **Look on the bright side**

Concentrate on what you like most about being a parent, and the good times in your life.

### Remember that stress is catching

If your children see you getting upset and angry when things don't go right, they will probably react in a similar way in their own lives.

### Get help

This is a positive, useful step to take – not a sign of weakness. Remember that you're not the only parent who feels that outside help would be useful. Ring your partner or someone you can talk to. The problem may not seem so bad once you've shared it with another adult. Also don't assume that just because you're a parent you are the only one capable of meeting your child's needs.



## Managing anger

Some parents may have become so stressed that anger is never far from the surface. Others may never have learned acceptable ways of handling the anger they feel – this may go right back to when they were children themselves and to feeling that their own needs were never met. Whatever the reason, it is essential you take steps to deal with serious anger and to get help if you can't do it by yourself.

### Try some of the following:

- Breathe slowly and deeply and count to 10.
- Go outside for a breath of fresh air.
- Leave the room and scream if you feel like it. It's better to shout at the walls than at the children.
- Go into another room on your own for a minute and think about why you are angry. Is it really because of your child or is something else upsetting you?
- Make it a priority to remain in control. Tell yourself "I am not going to lose it, I will calm down", and take the time to let this happen before dealing with your child's behaviour.



Unfortunately,  
hitting your children does  
teach them a lesson



## Top 10 ways to be a great parent without smacking

- 1** Show your child love and warmth as much as possible – the more they get used to this, the more they want to keep it that way.
- 2** Have clear, simple rules and limits. Be consistent in expecting them to be met.
- 3** Demonstrating by your example, giving reasons, talking and listening to teach your child how to behave.
- 4** Praise good behaviour, catch them being good, and it will increase.
- 5** Ignore behaviour you don't want repeated as much as possible.
- 6** Criticise behaviours you don't like, not your child; use mild disapproval and reprimands when a rule is broken.
- 7** Give rewards for good behaviour (hugs and kisses are best).
- 8** Distract younger children instead of nagging or punishing, use humour to lighten up difficult situations.
- 9** Allow children some control – making choices, encouraging joint decisions.
- 10** If punishments are necessary, letting your child experience natural consequences, imposing a consequence, removal of privileges, or “Time out” all work better than smacking.

**The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)** is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. The NSPCC offers a wide range of leaflets for parents that are available free of charge.

For a catalogue please send an A4 SAE (with 70p in stamps) to: NSPCC Publications, Weston House, 42 Curtain Rd, London EC2A 3NH. You can also view and order online at: [www.nspcc.org.uk/publications](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/publications)

The NSPCC also operates the NSPCC Helpline – a free, 24-hour service which provides counselling, information and advice.

NSPCC Helpline  
**0800 800 5000**

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, you can access the service in the following ways (Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm):

Textphone: **0800 056 0566**

Via British Sign Language interpreters on video phone: **020 8463 1148**

Via British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam: [nspcc.signvideo.tv](http://nspcc.signvideo.tv)

The service is also available in Welsh (Monday to Friday from 10am to 6pm) and Asian languages (Bengali/Sylheti, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu, Monday to Friday from 10am to 6pm). Outside the operating hours calls will be answered by the main NSPCC Helpline.

Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)  
Visit: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

#### **Children Are Unbeatable Alliance**

An alliance of more than 300 organisations, campaigning for children to have the same legal protection against being hit as adults and promoting positive, non-violent discipline. For further information and advice including a resource list of information on positive parenting and alternative discipline visit: [www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk](http://www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk) or call: **020 7713 0569**.

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