Managing Behaviour at Home

One of the biggest challenges parents face is managing difficult or defiant behaviour on the part of children. Whether they’re refusing to put on their shoes, or throwing [full-blown tantrums](https://childmind.org/article/why-do-kids-have-tantrums-and-meltdowns/), you can find yourself at a loss for an effective way to respond.

**ABC’s of behaviour management at home**

To understand and [respond effectively to problematic behaviour](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-handle-tantrums-and-meltdowns/), you have to think about what came before it, as well as what comes after it. There are three important aspects to any given behaviour:

* **Antecedents:** Preceding factors that make a behaviour more or less likely to occur. Another, more familiar term for this is **triggers.** Learning and anticipating antecedents is an extremely helpful tool in preventing misbehaviour.
* **Behaviours:** The specific actions you are trying to encourage or discourage.
* **Consequences:** The results that naturally or logically follow a behaviour. Consequences — positive or negative — affect the likelihood of a behaviour recurring. And the more immediate the consequence, the more powerful it is.

**Define behaviours**

The first step in a good behaviour management plan is to identify target behaviours. These behaviours should be **specific** (so everyone is clear on what is expected), **observable**, and **measurable** (so everyone can agree whether or not the behaviour happened).

An example of poorly defined behaviour is “acting up,” or “being good.” A well-defined behaviour would be running around the room (bad) or starting homework on time (good).

**Antecedents, the good and the bad**

Antecedents come in many forms. Some prop up bad behaviour, others are helpful tools that help parents manage potentially problematic behaviours before they begin and bolster good behaviour.

**Antecedents to AVOID:**

* **Assuming expectations are understood:** Don’t assume kids know what is expected of them — spell it out! Demands change from situation to situation and when children are unsure of what they are supposed to be doing, they’re more likely to misbehave.
* **Calling things out from a distance:** Be sure to tell children important instructions face-to-face. Things yelled from a distance are less likely to be remembered and understood.
* **Transitioning without warning:** [Transitions](https://childmind.org/article/why-do-kids-have-trouble-with-transitions/) can be hard for kids, especially in the middle of something they are enjoying. Having warning gives children the chance to find a good stopping place for an activity and makes the transition less fraught.
* **Asking rapid-fire questions, or giving a series of instructions:**Delivering a series of[questions or instructions](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-give-kids-effective-instructions/) at children limits the likelihood that they will hear, answer questions, remember the tasks, and do what they’ve been instructed to do.

**Antecedents to EMBRACE:**

Here are some antecedents that can bolster good behaviour:

* **Be aware of the situation:**Consider and manage environmental and emotional factors — hunger, fatigue, anxiety or distractions can all make it much more difficult for children to rein in their behaviour.
* **Adjust the environment:** When it’s [homework time](https://childmind.org/article/strategies-to-make-homework-go-more-smoothly/), for instance, remove distractions like video screens and toys, provide a snacks, establish an organized place for kids to work and make sure to schedule some breaks — attention isn’t infinite.
* **Make expectations clear:** You’ll get better cooperation if both you and your child are clear on what’s expected. Sit down with him and present the information verbally. Even if he “should” know what is expected, clarifying expectations at the outset of a task helps head off misunderstandings down the line.
* **Provide countdowns for transitions**: Whenever possible, [prepare children for an upcoming transition](https://childmind.org/article/how-can-we-help-kids-with-transitions/). Let them know when there are, say, 10 minutes remaining before they must come to dinner or start their homework. Then, remind them, when there are say, 2 minutes, left. Just as important as issuing the countdown is actually making the transition at the stated time.
* **Let kids have a choice:** As kids grow up, it’s important they have a say in their own scheduling. Giving a structured choice — “Do you want to take a shower after dinner or before?” — can help them feel empowered and encourage them to become more self-regulating.

**Creating effective consequences**

Not all consequences are created equal. Some are an excellent way to create structure and help kids understand the difference between acceptable behaviours and unacceptable behaviours while others have the potential to do more harm than good. As a parent having a strong understanding of how to intelligently and consistently use consequences can make all the difference.

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**Consequences to AVOID**

* **Giving negative attention:** Children value attention from the important adults in their life so much that any attention  — positive or negative — is better than none. Negative attention, [such as raising your voice](https://childmind.org/article/calm-voices-calmer-kids/) actually increases bad behaviour over time. Also, responding to behaviours with criticism or yelling adversely affects children’s self-esteem.
* **Delayed consequences:** The most effective consequences are immediate. Every moment that passes after a behaviour, your child is less likely to link her behaviour to the consequence. It becomes punishing for the sake of punishing, and it’s much less likely to actually change the behaviour.
* **Disproportionate consequences:** Parents understandably get very frustrated. At times, they may be so frustrated that they overreact. A huge consequence can be demoralizing for children and they may give up even trying to behave.
* **Positive consequences:** When a child dawdles instead of putting on his shoes or picking up his blocks and, in frustration, you do it for him, you’re increasing the likelihood that he will dawdle again next time.

**EFFECTIVE consequences:**

Consequences that are more effective begin with generous attention to the behaviours you want to encourage.

* **Positive attention for positive behaviours:** Giving your child positive reinforcement for being good helps maintain the ongoing good behaviour. Positive attention enhances the quality of the relationship, improves self-esteem, and feels good for everyone involved. Positive attention to brave behaviour can also help attenuate anxiety, and help kids become more receptive to instructions and limit-setting.
* **Ignoring actively:** This should used ONLY with minor misbehaviours — NOT aggression and NOT very destructive behaviour. Active ignoring involves the deliberate withdrawal of attention when a child starts to misbehave — as you ignore, you wait for positive behaviour to resume. You want to give positive attention **as soon as** the desired behaviour starts. By withholding your attention until you get positive behaviour you are teaching your child what behaviour gets you to engage.
* **Reward menus:** Rewards are a tangible way to give children positive feedback for desired behaviours. A reward is something a child earns, an acknowledgement that she’s doing something that’s difficult for her. Rewards are most effective as motivators when the child can choose from a variety of things: extra time on the iPad, a special treat, etc. This offers the child agency and reduces the possibility of a reward losing its appeal over time. Rewards should be linked to specific behaviours and always delivered consistently.
* **Time outs**: Time outs are one of the most effective consequences parents can use but also one of the hardest to do correctly.
* **Be clear:** Establish which behaviours will result in time outs. When a child exhibits that behaviour, make sure the corresponding time out is relatively brief and immediately follows a negative behaviour.
* **Be consistent:** Randomly administering time outs when you’re feeling frustrated undermines the system and makes it harder for the child to connect behaviours with consequences.
* **Set rules and follow them:** During a time out, there should be no talking to the child until you are ending the time out. Time out should end only once the child has been calm and quiet briefly so they learn to associate the end of time out with this desired behaviour.
* **Return to the task:**If time out was issued for not complying with a task, once it ends the[child should be instructed](https://childmind.org/article/how-to-give-kids-effective-instructions/) to complete the original task. This way, kids won’t begin to see time outs as an escape strategy.

By bringing practicing behavioural tools management at home, parents can make it a much more peaceful place to be.

Source: <https://childmind.org/article/managing-problem-behavior-at-home/>