



# Pointers on parenting under pressure

## *Evidence-based support for families getting through difficult times*

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## Tip 1: Keeping positive and motivated

*Key message - that as a person and a parent you are special and important, and you need to look after yourself.*



- ★ We often hear it said that being a parent is such an important role – perhaps the most important role in society; but sometimes it doesn't feel like that – rather it feels like a thankless task.
- ★ If things are not going well with your children and they are being difficult to manage you can start to feel down and worried that you are not a good enough parent.
- ★ It's so easy for this to turn into a negative habit of thinking which makes you start to lack parenting confidence. In turn this makes it harder for you to take control, which often leads to the children playing up more.
- ★ It's vital that you break out of this negative cycle of thinking and take the pressure off yourself. The best way to do this is -
  - to recognise that parenting is a real challenge, that some children are just more difficult to parent than others, and that everyone messes up at some time or another – nobody is perfect; and
  - to understand that small changes in the way you parent can really improve matters with your child – that is what the other seven Tips are about. Don't lose hope.
- ★ Once you have switched into a more realistic and positive cycle of thinking you need to make sure you look after yourself so you can keep this new sense of perspective. We suggest that you do this by:
  - making sure you take the opportunity to take time out from the hurly-burly of daily life in the family to relax and do things you enjoy; and
  - reach out to family or friends – not just to talk about your children and parenting – although it can be particularly helpful if you have a person you trust who sees things the way you do. Don't feel embarrassed or shy to talk about the challenges you face - they will probably find it as useful as you will to share different viewpoints and ideas.
- ★ Doing these things will provide a great platform for the next set of Tips.



## Tip 2: Making sure everyone knows what is expected of them

*Key message - every family needs clear house-rules and that they are an essential starting point for the management of difficult or disruptive behaviour by your children.*

- ★ These rules are especially important during the current times when families are under pressure because they set out clear boundaries about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in your family; the behaviours that you as a parent want to encourage your child to do and, on the other hand, things you want to discourage them from doing.
- ★ They also promote respect between family members.
- ★ In fact, children actually like clear rules as long as they are fair, and they are applied with justice – it gives them confidence in their surroundings.
- ★ To set up these rules first arrange a meeting between all the adults in house – decide what your priorities are so you can focus on what is really important to you. You don't want too many rules, or they might be hard to remember and get too complicated.
- ★ Decide what will happen if rules are broken – will there be specific sanctions?
- ★ Some rules will be relevant for everyone in the house and some for the children only.
- ★ Once the adults have decided on the rules it is vital to get the children on board as well. You need to take time to explain the reasons for the rules.
- ★ Get everyone to make a commitment to follow the rules – including people from outside the family if appropriate – like grandparents, for instance.
- ★ Put the rules on a poster so they are displayed for everyone to see – perhaps stick it on the fridge.
- ★ Be consistent - make sure all the adults in the house apply the same rules in the same way – don't let the children play one parent off against another and don't have favourites.
- ★ Regularly review the rules as a family – how are you all doing? Are the rules still relevant? Do they need to change?





### Tip 3: Building your child's self-confidence and trust in you.

*Key message - children who feel positive about themselves and confident in their place within the family are less likely to misbehave and that positive feedback during joint activities is a great way to nurture these feelings.*

- ★ There are lots of reasons why children misbehave and become disruptive and disobedient.
- ★ In times of uncertainty, when the family feels under pressure, children might start to doubt themselves and feel insecure in their relationships with other family members.
- ★ These feelings can lead them to be hostile with parents and other family members and become disruptive.
- ★ It is a natural reaction for a parent to try and tackle “fire-with-fire” in such situations and try and clamp down on this sort of misbehaviour before it gets out of control by using sanctions.
- ★ Although there may be a place for this at some point (see Tip 8) using sanctions should not be the first line of response.
- ★ It is more important to try and find an opportunity to talk to your child about their concerns and take time to listen carefully to their answers.



- ★ This will give you an opportunity to provide them with reassurance about your feelings for them and help them to feel secure in their position within the family.
- ★ At the same time pay attention to your child's positive actions and achievements – give them lots of positive feedback and encouragement.
- ★ Don't be shy to praise your child – this will bolster their self-esteem and strengthen their confidence in their relationship with you.
- ★ Find things to do together as a family that you all enjoy – play together with your children – it's a great opportunity to show how much you care, to praise and build your child's confidence.



## Tip 4: Getting your child to follow instructions.

*Key message - if you want your children to follow your instructions then you need to be sure that they are listening to you and that they understand what you are saying.*



- ★ Clear communication between parents and children is the key foundation to reducing parent-child conflict and promoting better behaviour in your child.
- ★ If your children don't know what it is you want from them – either because they don't hear what you say or because they don't understand what they hear – then it is unreasonable to tell them off when they don't do what you want.
- ★ If you do tell them off in such circumstances, it will be no surprise that they get upset with you.
- ★ The good news is that there are some very simple things you can do to improve the way you communicate with your child to make sure this doesn't happen.
- ★ There are two parts to this – getting your child's attention and then making sure you are understood.
- ★ Getting attention
  - First, although it sounds obvious, move to the same room as your child – don't shout from room-to-room.
  - Second, get everyone's full attention - remove distractions like phones or computers – either yours or theirs.
  - Third, make eye-contact – make sure your child can see your eyes and mouth and you can see theirs.
- ★ Being *understood*
  - Speak slowly
  - Use simple short sentences – including only one idea or point per sentence.
  - Check that they have understood what you have said by asking them to explain it to you.
  - If you want to get your child to stop doing something give them good warning – count down the time till they have to stop.
  - But the way you communicate is not just about getting attention and then being understood– it's about your style of talking as the parent - you need to display authority but also be a good role model.
  - Be calm and firm – don't plead.
  - Be polite and respectful. Respect breeds respect.



## Tip 5: Promoting better behaviour

*Key message - selectively using rewards can encourage better behaviour in children and help them to follow the agreed house rules.*

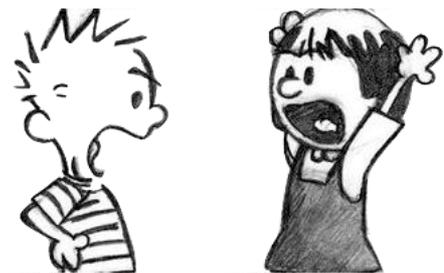
- ★ Consequences influence behaviour – if someone gives us something we like, a reward, when we behave in a certain way then we are more likely to behave in that way again.
- ★ Parents can use rewards in this way to improve their children’s behaviour and the extent to which they will follow the house rules that have been agreed.
- ★ To do this, parents should be -
  - relevant – give rewards that the child really values – agree what these are with your child.
  - realistic – don’t give rewards that are too large, expensive or disruptive to the rest of the household; stickers or points can be put on a chart and saved up to get a larger treat.
  - fair - use similar reward systems for the different children in your family.
  - selective – only give rewards when your child behaves in the way you are trying to encourage.
  - consistent – always give rewards when the behaviour you are trying to encourage happens.
  - clear – make sure your child understands what you are rewarding.
  - timely – give the reward as soon as possible after the behaviour you are trying to encourage happens.
  - “as good as their word” – always follow through on a reward that you promise.
- ★ Rewards can be used to encourage effort - so that you encourage trying to follow the rules as well as succeeding.
- ★ Parents should work together as a team – so that both parents (if there are two) are using the same reward system in the same way.
- ★ It can be very motivating if rewards (stickers or points) are recorded on a chart which is displayed publicly.





## Tip 6: Limiting conflict

*Key message - parents can help reduce conflict in the house by using simple and common-sense strategies.*



- ★ When families are living under pressure it's easy for this to affect everyone's behaviour for the worse – frustrated and/or worried children are more likely to react negatively when things don't go their way and find things they can normally tolerate, provocative.
- ★ It's also important to remember that some children are just naturally more likely to do this than others –being more sensitive if things don't go their way, get upset more quickly and also find it harder to calm down. Children with autism or ADHD, for instance, might be like this.
- ★ However, there are things that parents can do to help reduce the chances that these sorts of reactions will occur.
- ★ First, you need to try as best you can to keep your children occupied.
- ★ Second, in the same way that children can appreciate the structure and certainty that house rules can bring they like the order that routines bring. It will really help if you can have a clear plan each day, so everyone knows what is happening when. The best way to do this is to get your heads together with your children to make the plan for the day ahead. If plans have to change, give clear explanations why this is the case and use warnings and reminders when things will be different. Many children react badly to (negative) surprises.
- ★ Third, when you are making your plans try to avoid including tasks that you know your child will find frustrating, upsetting, provoking or just too exciting. If you are not sure what these might be take time to learn from what has happened in the past. Try to get to know your child's strengths and weaknesses better.
- ★ Fourth, if despite all this planning you see your child starting to get upset with something (or someone) you can nip the problem in the bud by using distraction. For instance, you can talk about something they enjoy or find funny.
- ★ Finally, if your child still really works themselves up into a state you can create a safe and secure space in your home where you can take them, and they can calm down. Different children will take different amounts of time to settle down and you shouldn't rush them. You might want to keep an eye on them so that they are OK.

## Tip 7: Keeping calm when your kids act up.

*Key message - Parents are only human - sometimes we over-react and lose our temper when our children misbehave. This is unfortunate and can only make the situation worse - ultimately increasing conflict and making it harder to get the children to follow the family rules.*

- ★ Parenting can be an emotional business – even though we may love our children very much, perhaps because we love them very much, they can make us so upset that we lose our temper with them and do or say things that we regret.
- ★ However, parenting is most effective in reducing conflict in the family and promoting good behaviour when it combines a sense of calm authority with kindness and respect.
- ★ Losing your temper as a parent – although it's not the end of the world – never helps a situation – it may lead to more conflict and make it harder to establish control.
- ★ Children react in different ways when they see parents lose their temper with them. They might become frightened or upset or react angrily themselves. They may also lose confidence in, and respect for, their parent. When this happens children may become more difficult to deal with.
- ★ There are some common-sense ways to reduce the chances that you will over-react to your children:
  - ★ First, avoid situations where you know you find it hard to keep calm.
  - ★ Second, when trying to get your child to follow what you want, get into the habit of using a firm, steady and respectful tone of voice. Not critical or harsh – just confident. You are the parent – you should start by expecting your children to listen to you.
  - ★ Third, if you can feel yourself getting upset, take a breath and collect your thoughts before continuing. Counting to 10 can help or perhaps thinking of something pleasant.
  - ★ Finally, if you really get upset, walk away to a safe space at home where you can go to calm down.
- ★ If you are really having a problem with your temper when parenting it might be worth talking to your GP about it – it's nothing to be ashamed of and they may be able to suggest something to help.





## Tip 8: Using sanctions carefully

*Key message - Sanctions can be useful as a last resort to encourage your children to follow rules.*

- ★ We talked earlier about how the proper use of rewards can encourage children to follow the agreed house rules.
- ★ However, sometimes the use of rewards isn't enough and parents may decide to turn to the use of sanctions to stop rule breaking.
- ★ By sanctions we mean taking away something that the child likes when they break one of the agreed rules.
- ★ Our advice is that sanctions should be used only as a last resort to discourage persistent rule breaking when rewards on their own clearly haven't worked.
- ★ Before starting to use sanctions make sure everyone in the family knows what is going to happen and for which behaviours. It's vital that all adults in the family support the plan and don't undermine it by changing their mind.
- ★ Perhaps have a meeting to highlight this and to get everyone's buy-in.
- ★ Choose sanctions that are practical, reasonable and relevant - make sure the sanction is something the child will miss, that it's not too big and that you can deliver it without inconveniencing the whole family.
- ★ When the time comes to impose a sanction its vital that you stay in control and have a sense of authority in your voice. Don't get emotional.
- ★ First, calmly remind your child what rule they have broken and what the agreed sanction is and why you need to use this approach – i.e., “because you keep breaking the rule X”.
- ★ Remember, that at this point it's not a negotiation between you and your child – you are just putting into practice what has been agreed.
- ★ Many parents find “time out” – removing your child from normal interaction in the family by getting them to sit on a chair or the step for a short period of time – very helpful. The amount time you need for this will vary from child to child depending on their age and temperament.
- ★ Third, be consistent - always follow through on what you say you will do.
- ★ Finally, don't overuse sanctions - they will lose their effectiveness and they may be perceived as oppressive by the child.

