

# Supporting Behaviour

By the Flitwick Mental Health Support Team



**East London**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Understanding Behaviour

Behaviour is how children communicate their needs, feelings, and experiences, especially when they don't have the words or confidence to express them directly.

It includes:

What they say (e.g., arguing, shouting, using kind words)

What they do (e.g., hitting, withdrawing, helping, running away)

How they respond to situations (e.g., becoming anxious, excited, angry, or defiant)

Sometimes behaviour is positive and helpful. Other times, it can be challenging, confusing, or worrying.

All behaviour can be seen as a form of communication, even if that reason isn't obvious at first.

# Psychological Theories

## **Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969):**

- Children's early relationships shape how they feel safe, loved, and secure. A strong bond with a caregiver builds the foundation for managing emotions and behaviour.
- A secure attachment, where a child feels safe, understood, and cared for, helps them regulate their emotions and build positive relationships.
- Children may not say "I'm scared" or "I need you"; they may show it through behaviour.
- When parents respond with warmth, patience, and consistency, it strengthens the attachment and helps the child feel more secure and settled.
- Important to focus on warm and nurturing parent-child relationships through social-emotional coaching, praise, and incentives.

# Psychological Theories

## **Coercion Theory (Patterson, 1982):**

- Describes how negative behaviour patterns can accidentally be reinforced in families, creating a cycle of arguments or defiance.
  - E.g.
    - If a child throws a tantrum and a parent gives in (“Okay, fine, have the toy”), the child learns that misbehaving works to get their way.
    - If a parent shouts and the child stops misbehaving, the parent learns that shouting works, even though it may damage the relationship long-term.
- Important to give more attention to positive behaviours rather than negative behaviours as the child will learn that good behaviour gets better results than bad behaviour.

# Psychological Theories

## **Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977):**

- Children learn by watching others, especially parents, siblings, and peers. Behaviour is copied and reinforced by what they see happening around them.
- How it impacts behaviour:
  - If a child sees adults handling stress calmly, they're more likely to copy that behaviour.
  - If they see shouting, blaming, or hitting, they may learn that those are “normal” ways to deal with conflict.
- It's important to model the behaviour you want to see. How you handle stress, respond to others, and show kindness or frustration all teach your child how to behave.

# Psychological Theories

**Operant conditioning (positive reinforcement), (Skinner, 1963):**

This theory suggests that behaviour that is rewarded will be repeated.

Skinner identified 3 types of responses following behaviour:

**Neutral response:** responses that provide no stimulus. This neither increases or decreases the chances of this behaviour occurring again.

**Reinforcers:** These are responses that increase the likelihood of a behaviour happening again.

**Punishers:** These are responses that will decrease the likelihood of a behaviour happening again. Punishment weakens behaviour. (*We would advise using consequences scarcely otherwise they end up not meaning anything*)

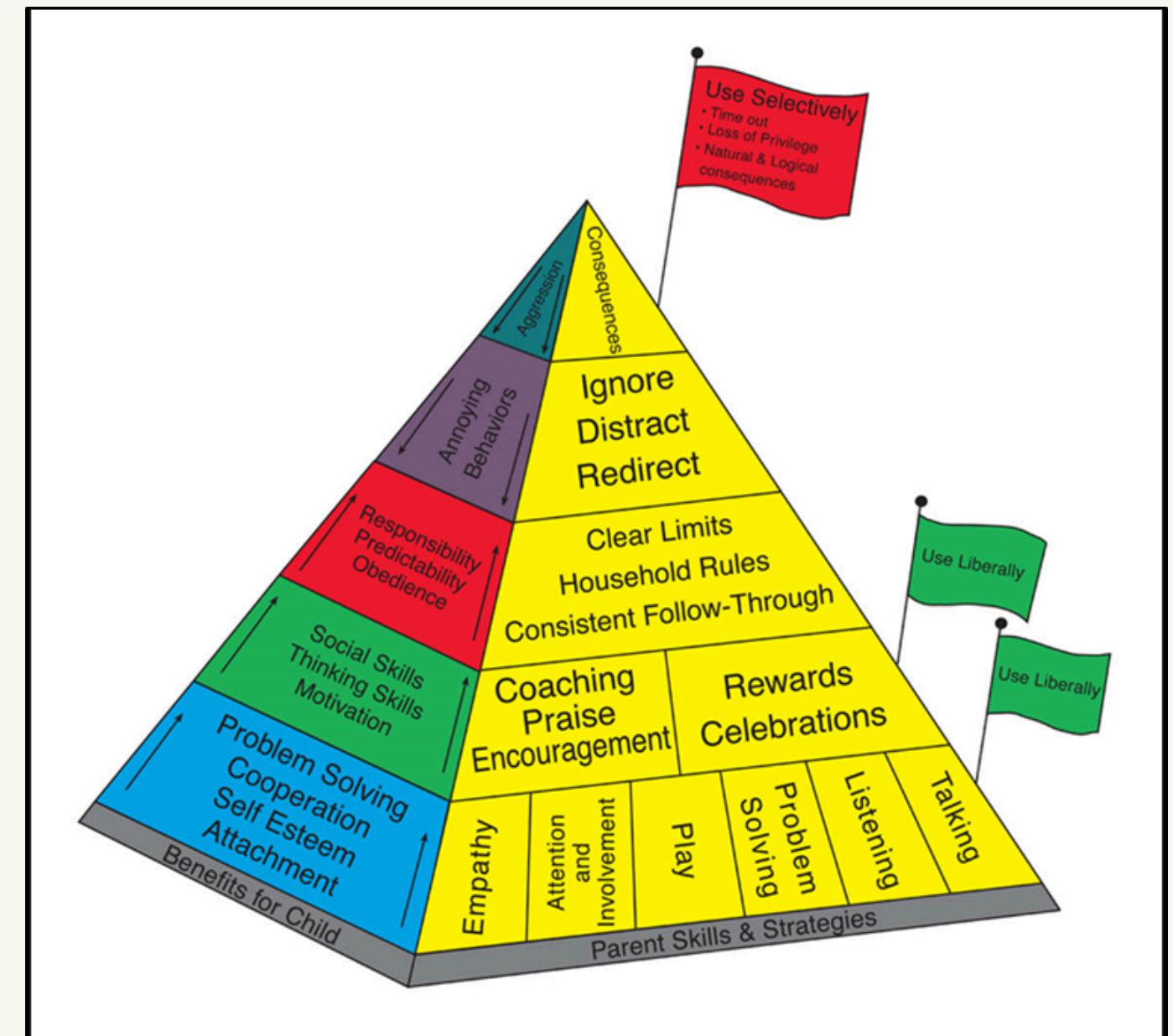


# Parenting Pyramid

The parenting pyramid illustrates how to build strong, positive relationships with children while also encouraging good behaviour and reducing challenging behaviour.

The foundation (bottom layers) must be strong before the top strategies (like discipline) can work effectively.

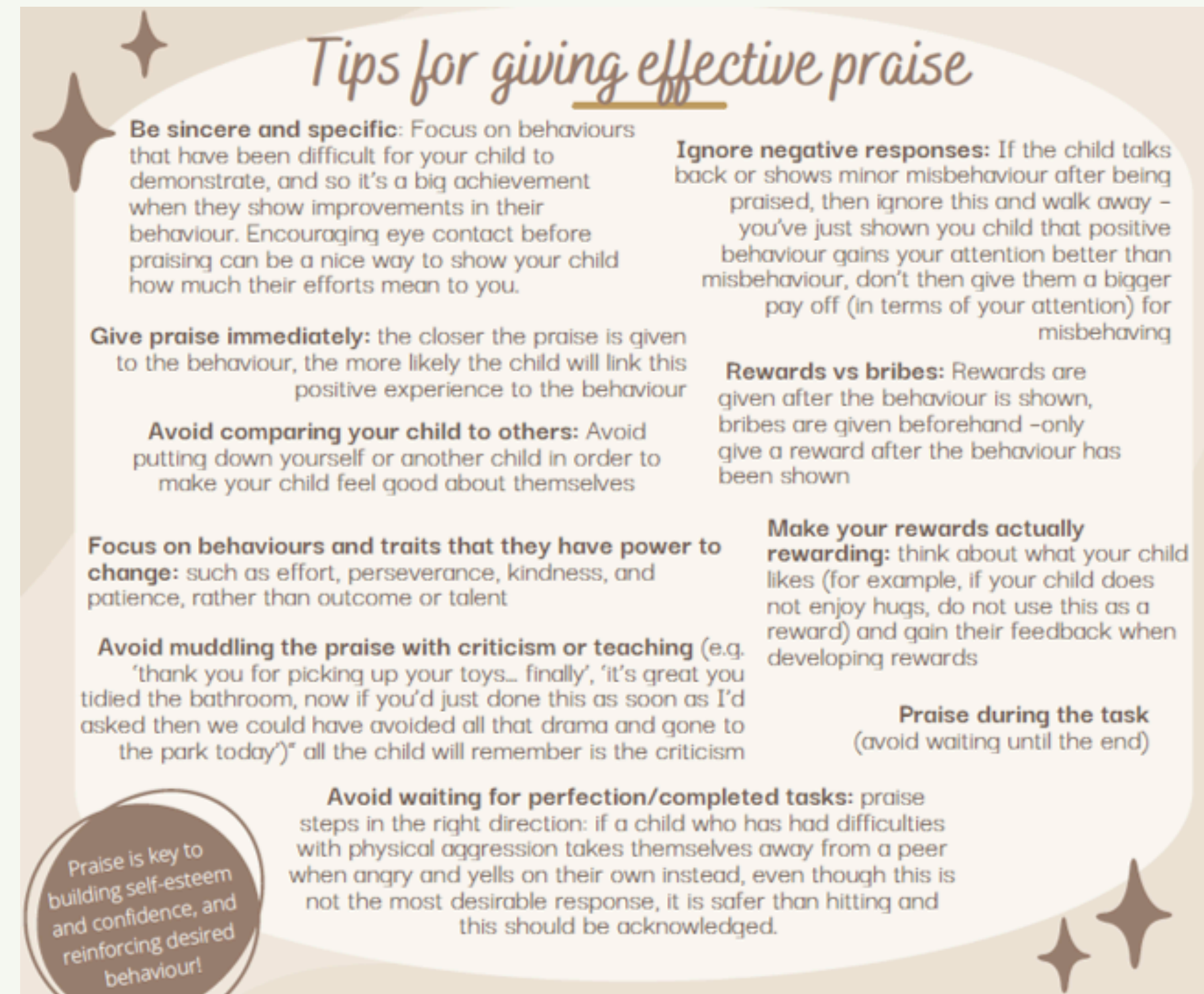
- First: implement ways of increasing positive interactions (teaching children they can gain positive parental attention in other ways rather than misbehaving)
- Then: use techniques that remove attention from misbehaviour (so the child learns, the bad behaviour doesn't achieve anything)



# Praise

Praise is a form of positive reinforcement that strengthens good behaviour and helps children feel proud and motivated.

- Generic praise = nice for children to hear (e.g., ‘good job’, ‘well done’)
- Specific praise = helps children to understand exactly what they did that caught their parents’ attention and so increases the likelihood of the child doing it again
  - e.g. ‘Well done for putting the cars in the box’, ‘you did what I asked straight away, I’m so proud of you.’





# Rewards

Rewards are positive consequences given after a child behaves well. They motivate children to keep trying and show them that good behaviour brings good outcomes.

## Tips:

- Be immediate - give the reward soon after the behaviour.
- Involve your child - what motivates them?
- Avoid bribery - 'stop screaming and I'll give you chocolate.'
- Pair rewards with praise.

### Social Rewards:

#### Verbal Praise

- Non specific verbal praise ('Good', 'Well done')
- Specific/labelled verbal praise tied to an identified behaviour ('Well done for putting the cars in the box', 'you did what I asked straight away - I'm so proud of you')

#### Physical Affection

- Hugs, kisses, high fives, tickles

#### Time with Child

- Joining their play, showing interest/excitement in their activity

### Tangible Rewards

#### Inexpensive items

- No or low cost is best: stickers, treats, pound store toys

#### Special Choices and Privileges

- Screen time, choosing dessert, choice of film

#### Special activities

- Going to a movie, trip to the park, riding bicycle

#### Special time with child

- Baking, extra bedtime story, choosing a board game to play with parent

# Emotional Coaching

Emotion coaching is when parents respond to children's feelings with empathy, help them name their emotions, and guide them through managing those feelings in healthy ways.

Research has shown that emotionally coached children are better at calming themselves, have fewer behavioural problems, and form stronger relationships.

Feelings/Emotion Literacy		Examples
____ happy	____ caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "That is frustrating, and you are staying calm and trying again to figure it out."</li><li>• "You seem proud of that drawing."</li><li>• "You are confident of the plot and characters of that story."</li><li>• "You are so patient. Even though it keeps falling apart, you just keep trying to see how you can make it more complex. You must feel pleased with yourself for being so patient."</li><li>• "You look like you are having fun spending time with your friend, and he looks like he enjoys doing this with you."</li><li>• "You are so persistent. You are trying out every way you can to make it work out."</li><li>• "You are forgiving of your friend because you know it was a mistake."</li><li>• "You are so curious and asking good questions."</li></ul>
____ calm	____ curious	
____ proud	____ interested	
____ excited	____ embarrassed	
____ sad	____ disappointed	
____ helpful	____ courageous	
____ jealous	____ persistent	
____ brave	____ having fun	
____ loving	____ confident	
____ shy	____ frustrated	
____ afraid	____ worried	
____ anxious	____ patient	
____ angry	____ pleased	
____ mad		
____ forgiving		

# Emotional Coaching

## Ways to support your child to talk about emotions:

- Playing emotion games.
- Acting out emotions.
- Talking about a time you have felt different emotions.
- Watching films/TV programmes
- Discussing characters in books
- Emotion check-ins
- Model discussing your own emotions

## What not to do...

- Don't try and get rid of big emotions.
- All emotions are normal, healthy and out of our control. It is important to teach your child that it is okay and natural to have 'bad' emotions and it is about understanding and managing these emotions.
- Talking about something does not make it worse!



# Emotional Coaching

1. I SEE THAT YOU ARE HAVING A  
DIFFICULT TIME, LET ME HELP YOU.

2. TAKE A DEEP BREATH.

3. IF YOU NEED TO HIT SOMETHING,  
HIT THIS PILLOW.

4. THAT CAN BE SO FRUSTRATING,  
LET'S FIGURE THIS OUT TOGETHER.

5. I SEE THAT YOU ARE MAD, HOW  
DOES THAT FEEL IN YOUR BODY?

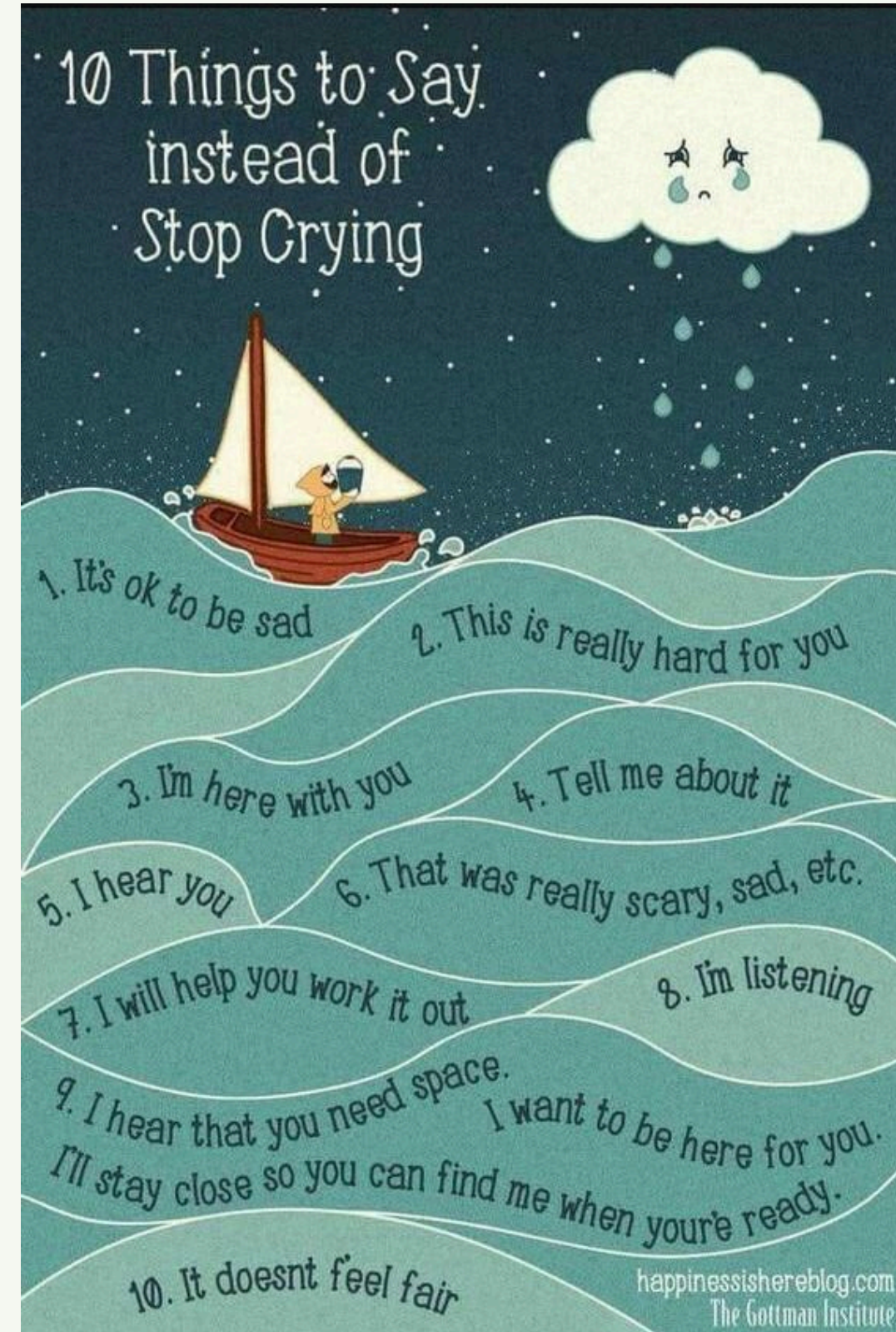
6. COUNT TO 10.

7. WANT TO SQUEEZE MY HAND?

8. HOW ABOUT A BIG HUG.

9. LET'S FOCUS ON FIXING THE  
PROBLEM TOGETHER.

10. IF YOU ARE FEELING SAD, YOU  
CAN TELL ME ABOUT IT.



# Social Coaching

Social coaching can strengthen empathy, cooperation and friendship skills.

We can do this by modelling appropriate behaviours and actions. Thinking back to Bandura’s social learning theory, we know that children learn from watching those around them and then copying this.

Some of the best things to model would be waiting, sharing and taking turns. You can do this in normal, everyday life such as during mealtimes, shopping trips or anything that requires some cooperation from your child. There is also lots of opportunity to practise this during play with your child.

Social/Friendship Skills	Examples
<div><div></div> helping</div> <div><div></div> sharing</div> <div><div></div> teamwork</div> <div><div></div> using a friendly voice (quiet, polite)</div>	<div>“That’s so kind. You shared that with your friend and waited your turn.”</div> <div>“You are both working together and helping each other like a team.”</div>
<div><div></div> listening to what a friend says</div> <div><div></div> taking turns</div> <div><div></div> asking</div> <div><div></div> trading</div> <div><div></div> waiting</div>	<div>“You listened to your friend’s request and followed his suggestion. That is very friendly.”</div> <div>“You waited and asked first if you could use that. Your friend listened to you and shared with you.”</div> <div>“You are taking turns. That’s what good friends do for each other.”</div>
<div><div></div> agreeing with a friend’s suggestion</div> <div><div></div> making a suggestion</div> <div><div></div> giving a compliment</div> <div><div></div> using soft, gentle touch</div> <div><div></div> asking permission to use something a friend has</div> <div><div></div> problem solving</div> <div><div></div> cooperating</div> <div><div></div> being generous</div> <div><div></div> including others</div> <div><div></div> apologizing</div>	<div>“You made a friendly suggestion and your friend agreed with you. That is so friendly.”</div> <div>“You are helping your friend build his model.”</div> <div>“You are being cooperative by sharing and helping.”</div> <div>“You both solved that problem together. That was a great solution.”</div> <div>“You really thought about your friend’s feelings and were generous.”</div>



# Questioning technique

Sometimes, what we consider to be 'bad' behaviour can come from feeling anxious.

We use the questioning technique to get to the bottom of what is really bothering children.

Some questions that can be used are:

**What is worrying you?**

**What do you think will happen?**

**What is the worst thing that could happen in this situation?**

**What is it about (this situation) that is making you scared/worried?**

We can offer suggestions if they are not sure, eg. **Are you worried about going to this new place because you think it might be busy?**

# Problem-solving

This is something adults do without thinking sometimes.

It is an invaluable skill that may need specific teaching to your child.

There are clear steps to problem solving.

- 1 - Write down the problem in one or two sentences - this can help to focus their mind on a solution rather than worrying about the problem.
- 2 - Write down a list of all the possible solutions to this problem that they can think of - regardless of if they are feasible or not!
- 3 - Make a table and come up with pros and cons for each idea.

# Problem-solving

4 - Ask your child to choose one idea that they feel is going to work, maybe the one with the most pros.

(This is difficult when you believe this is the wrong choice!)

5 - Get your child to make a plan of how they will have a go at this solution. They could consider these questions:

**What will you do?**

**How will you do it?**

**When will you do it?**

**Who will help you?**

**Can you see any problems that might come up?**

6 - Have a go!!

# Problem-solving

Step 7 - the one we all forget sometimes!

After they have attempted the solution, help them to review it.

Was the solution helpful?

Did they achieve what they wanted?

If not, could they do something differently?

Did they achieve anything from trying this out - even if it's a small achievement?

What did they learn?

If it didn't go the way they wanted, could they go back and try another idea from their list?

# Problem-solving

**An example:**

**Problem:**

I wanted to play with my friend at playtime but they invited Jenny to play and I don't like her.

**Solutions:**

Go and play with another friend

Tell them that Jenny can't play

Sit by myself for the playtime

Tell the teacher

Play with Jenny as well for this one playtime

Invite others to play as well so it doesn't feel as awkward.







# Behaviour Management

You can help your child to understand what they are feeling and link this to what is happening in their body.

You can use something like this thermometer and fill it in together so that it is individual to them.

When they start to become dysregulated, you can support them by using some emotion coaching, eg. I can see that you are feeling a little frustrated right now, why don't we try...

FEELINGS THERMOMETER		
Colour the thermometer to represent the emotion:	Write what this emotion looks and feels like:	What can I do?
	I feel out of control, angry, furious, scared, jealous, disgusted. My body hot and tense. I might shout, scream, hit or kick.	Take a break, tell an adult, go for a walk, count from 1 to 10, exercise, use grounding techniques, pop a balloon, write feelings on a piece of paper and rip it up.
	I feel worried, embarrassed, unsure, irritated, tense and stressed. My body feels fidgety and clenched. I might fiddle, cry or avoid.	Use positive self-talk, use grounding techniques, take deep breaths, pause and ask for help, talk to an adult, write down thoughts, use my self-soothe box.
	I feel happy, calm, content, proud. My body feels relaxed. I am focused. I might smile or laugh.	Help someone else, enjoy this feeling, keep listening, share with your friends, smile, laugh, journal, read, play a game.
	I feel sad, bored, miserable, disappointed, lonely. My body feels slow and heavy. I might cry, move slowly or rest.	Talk to an adult, take deep breaths, get or give a hug, listen to calm music, go outside for a walk, exercise and stretch, use positive self-talk.

Created by Harley Ladbury, Education Mental Health Practitioner, Leighton Buzzard MHST

# Life at Home

Children's digital environments, including YouTube and gaming, influence children in a number of ways.

## **How Screens Affect Sleep:**

- Blue light from screens delays melatonin (sleep hormone) release.
- Fast-paced content (especially games or intense YouTube videos) keeps the brain alert.
- Children may struggle to wind down, delaying bedtime and reducing sleep quality.
- Sleep-deprived children may become more irritable, forgetful, anxious, or hyperactive.

## **How Screens Affect Behaviour:**

- Violent games or videos can desensitise children to aggression and increase the likelihood of them copying what they see.
- Reduce attention span - real-world tasks seem boring. Used to instant gratification.
- Poor emotional regulation - overstimulating and intense content can cause meltdowns
- Social withdrawal - preference for being online
- Low self-esteem - negative comparison to influencers
- Addiction-like behaviors - emotional outbursts when asked to come off

# YouTube

## Risks:

- Inappropriate language or violence even in videos that seem child-friendly
- Unfiltered ads or clickbait
- “Rabbit hole” effect: algorithms that lead to more extreme or mature content
- Influencer culture that may distort self-image or promote consumerism

## Tips:

- Use YouTube Kids for younger children.
- Check “watch history” to review what they’re seeing.
- Watch a few videos with them, ask open questions like “What do you like about this creator?”

# Gaming

What to look out for:

- Changes in mood or sleep after watching/playing
- Mimicking aggressive or inappropriate behaviour
- Becoming withdrawn or secretive about online activity
- Big emotional reactions when asked to switch off

Tips:

- Use PEGI age ratings to check age-appropriateness.
- Set up parental controls on consoles and phones.
- Create a family agreement about screen time and game types.
- Talk about how they feel after gaming, tired? angry? happy?

# Creating a Healthy Environment

## Create Tech-Free Zones and Times

- No devices in bedrooms, especially after 7:30–8:00 PM.
- Make mealtimes and family time screen-free zones.
- Make it a family rule

## Build a Calming Wind-Down Routine

- Power down screens at least 30–60 minutes before bed.
- Replace screen time with quiet, soothing activities:
  - Reading or audiobooks
  - Drawing or colouring
  - Stretching, yoga, or mindfulness
  - Listening to calming music

## Use a Screen Time Agreement

- Set clear, age-appropriate rules around:
- How long they can watch/play (e.g., 1 hour/day on school days)
- When screens are allowed (e.g., after homework/chores)
- What types of content are okay
- Involve your child in creating the agreement

## Encourage Reflection: How Does It Make You Feel?

- Help your child notice the emotional effects of screen use.
- “Did that video make you feel relaxed or jittery?”
- “How did your body feel when the game got hard?”
- “What would help you calm down after that?”
- This builds self-regulation and helps them manage emotions independently



# Padlets

**A-Z of Mental Health Resources for Parents and Caregivers**

Central Bedfordshire Mental Health Support Teams Free Padlet

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IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP