

## Break the bad habit: How to cope with your children's bad behaviour

Kate Hilpern looks at why some children display challenging behaviour, and examines ways of responding in the best interests of all concerned

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"No means no... Oh, OK then, anything for a quiet life." Let's face it, kids can be feisty and demanding, and sometimes it's easier just to say "yes". For other parents, it's a case of seeing their little cherub's distraught face, and thinking: "My child's going to hate me if I go on like this." Only last month, a survey by Cadet150, which carried out the study to mark the 150th anniversary of the Army Cadet Force, found that one in four parents does not tell their children off for fear of upsetting them.

"There has been a growing trend towards parents attempting to befriend their children," reports Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at Kent University. "But the problem with replacing limits with protracted negotiations is that the outcome is inevitably to give in. Of course, there are times when it makes sense to give in – times when you realise it's a foolish battle – but at the end of the day, kids need to understand it's not about pushing an open door, and that there are things beyond discussion."

Furedi does not advocate harping back to draconian punishments – just that we're a bit stricter, which one in four parents in the survey said they wished they'd been because their children tended to be tearaways. "The liberalisation of family life is no bad thing, but one of the upshots is it has made the parent-child relationship more confused," says Furedi. "There was a time when discipline was seen as good or neutral, and now it is seen as inevitably bad. Couple this with the trend towards adults wanting not to feel cut off from things such as Facebook and the same music that youngsters listen to, and you can see why parents find it increasingly difficult to fulfil their role as parents and may wind up behaving in a way they shouldn't."

None of this is helped by the fact that, historically, there was a degree of solidarity in the socialisation of children – a sense that all adults are in this together, says Furedi. "You'd get aunts reprimanding kids, and strangers too. But now, mums and dads are seen as in sole charge, and if others hear kids shouting, swearing or yelling, they don't intervene, and that makes the issue of discipline at home even more difficult. After all, kids find they can do what they want everywhere else without being disciplined."

There are, of course, a myriad of other reasons why some children display challenging behaviour. Some may be distressed – perhaps as a result of something identifiable, perhaps not – while others may have an actual condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Meanwhile, the vast majority are simply doing what children do – testing boundaries. But the good news, says Jeremy Todd, chief executive of Parentline Plus, is that there are tried and tested techniques for different age groups that can help even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Toddlerdom, he says, can be one of the most shocking stages for parents. Your smiley, happy baby can suddenly act like the devil incarnate. "Toddlers will often go stiff or throw themselves on the floor, which can be incredibly alarming for parents – first,

because the child could hurt themselves, and second because, if in public, it can leave you hot with embarrassment and stress."

Although a challenge, the only way to deal with this, he says, is to stay calm, lower your voice if you speak instead of raising it, and keep very still (not drag them to where you want to go). "Although some recommend walking away, I don't think it's best to go entirely out of the view of the child," says Todd. "Being patient and waiting for the screaming to finish, and then returning to what you were doing gives the message that the toddler has not been able to influence you by this behaviour."

To prevent this happening in the first place, remember to cut the toddler some slack – let them do some things for themselves and make their own decisions, where appropriate. Stick to strong boundaries and routines, and ensure they get plenty of exercise. Three- to six-year-olds often display similar behaviours, he says. "But as they've become more verbal, they'll say 'no' a lot, and can start hitting you and others. Often, just ignoring the 'no' is the most effective."

When this age group says "no", they often don't mean it, he explains. "It doesn't necessarily correlate to what they are thinking or feeling, so a minimal response rather than coming down heavily each time can work wonders. As for children being physical, try to catch the limb that is performing the action – the arm or leg – and then try to remain calm, taking them aside and acknowledging what they are feeling (angry/upset/frightened, etc), but then say very firmly that this is not acceptable behaviour, and that talking about what you're feeling is a better way to work things out."

To prevent it happening, remember they're tired after school so don't pressure them about homework. Let them have some down time – they may even be better off doing homework in the morning.

By the time your child reaches seven or eight, their weapon of choice will probably be manipulation. "They can whine a lot, and the behaviour becomes more varied and subsequently harder to deal with," says Todd. "The same principle applies, though – try to get to the bottom of what they are feeling, spotting the link between the behaviour, emotion and needs. Acknowledge that, and listen – really listen, as this is the bit parents often miss – to what is bothering them, and then tell them clearly what behaviour you find unacceptable and how it makes you feel."

At this age, prevention can be achieved by ensuring they don't get too many late nights and aren't overdoing it.

Philippa Kelly, social worker consultant and parenting expert at Park Foster Care, feels consistency and managing the behaviour rather than blaming the child are helpful. She adds: "Having clear house rules and consequences that are logical and make sense also help. Don't get into arguments – if you have said something, that is that."

Above all, she says, reward the behaviour you want to see. "Positive praise is the most effective way of changing behaviour."

The naughty step and time out are currently fashionable, and with good reason. "It's a good way of making a child think about their behaviour and the effect it has on others in a caring way if used correctly," says Alison Quill, founder of BrightMinds. "It's important, though, that they realise the behaviour for which they're being put on the step, and to do it quickly without ranting and raving too much." She also advocates using a timing device, giving the child a clear focus, and stopping the never-ending "How long left?" questions.

Kelly suggests parenting classes, which are available nationwide. "They can be a major support to all parents, whether they are experiencing difficulties or just want the confidence to know what they are doing is positive."



"They can provide peer support for parents who are going through similar experiences, especially as with modern life many parents have limited support from extended family. In addition, parenting classes are a place where parents are supported to enhance or gain skills required to positively parent, develop a positive relationship with their child, encourage and support the child's development and independent skills, as well as techniques that work to manage misbehaviour while encouraging the desired behaviour."

Annabel Karmel, a child nutrition expert and the author of the Family Meal Planner, adds that poor eating habits can greatly impact on a child's behaviour. "In particular, think about breakfast. White bread and strawberry jam, for instance, will make their blood sugar level rise, then dip, and we know what we get like when our blood sugar level dips. Wholegrain bread, fruit and eggs, on the other hand, will keep them going on an even keel. Many children don't eat breakfast at all, and spend huge sums on sweets on the way to school."

Others point to investing in the right toys. It is widely accepted trampolines are fantastic for children with behavioural problems (for a good starter option, consider the Junior Trampoline with mat at Argos: £34.99); while toys that get kids on the move are also an excellent investment (Early Learning Centre's JCB Dump Truck, £50, and Motorbike, £35, are both recommended). Also focus on toys that stimulate and bring alive the imagination (consider Mamas and Papas Littleland Little Entertainer for little ones, £49.99 at Argos, and Dream Town Gasketts Garage for older children, £40 at Debenhams) as well as toys that focus on the elements (Little Tikes Deluxe Sand and Water Table, £69.99 at Toys R Us, is a great option).

Ann Herreboudt, a child psychologist at the Viveka heath practice in London, adds that lack of routines, constantly criticising or telling off and not spending enough time with the child are big no-nos. "I mean proper time like floor time, as in getting down on the floor and really playing with your child," she says.

When it comes to children who have ADHD and other learning difficulties, Herreboudt believes parents tend to be fairly instinctive that something is wrong. Her advice is to get the child checked out by a medical professional, but accept the fact that a diagnosis isn't always easy to get and you may still have to work hard to get support. Focus on specialist parenting manuals, such as Christopher Green and Kit Chee's Understanding ADHD (Vermilion). But, adds Cathy Glass, the author of Happy Kids: The secret to raising well-behaved, contented children (Harper Collins), who has fostered many children with diagnoses ranging from ADHD to oppositional defiant disorder, always deal with the behaviour rather than bowing to the diagnosis. "Regardless of the special needs in question, if challenging behaviour is one of the symptoms, it can be vastly improved, even completely changed, by enforcing clear and consistent boundaries."

Some parents find solutions in the growing number of specialist techniques, such as Dore's exercise programme which is designed to kick-start the cerebellum. Others find the right school is a saviour. "Ben was a model baby, but when he hit 15 months, he had the most enormous amounts of energy, and, by the time he got to school age, it was hard to control him. I used to wake up every morning, thinking: 'What am I going to be faced with today?' He got violent, used horrific language and was completely unpredictable," says Bryony Johnstone from Bristol. "Having finally, after a decade, found a school that seems to know how to be with him is making such a difference not only to his behaviour but to his well-being."

The challenges involved in finding the right school for such children is the reason Felicity Evans set up one of Britain's growing number of small schools focused on turning round children with special needs. She says: "I started NatureKids in Hertfordshire, based on the Scandinavian philosophy that time in nature reduces ADHD. I've found it hugely effective for Asperger [Syndrome] and dyslexia as well as other problems."

She points out even the most challenging children can be delightful when their behaviour is channelled correctly, and their adult lives look set to be anything but dull. "They can be creative, spontaneous and vivacious, and in adulthood they're the kind of people who