

Simple changes to support positive behaviour in children

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I swear, children live on different time. As a parent, just as you're getting a handle on being responsible for another's survival, your tiny baby is a walking, talking, sticking-fingers-in-the-dog-bowl proper human. Treasure it, they say. Enjoy it. Blink and you miss it.

I'm not sure they banked on a pandemic.

Parenting can be tiring and all children have days that are "one of those days". But since lockdown, do things feel more difficult? Do you find yourself wishing your child was older? Does each day feel longer than the last, just because of how your child behaves? What if they throw tantrums that last for hours? Or refuse to do what you ask a lot of the time? Throw things? Back-chat? Kick, bite, snatch roughly from their sibling? Unfortunately, if these sorts of behaviours become severe enough and go unchecked, they can spread into school, friendships, relationships with other adults, and even into later life. And more than a third of teachers believe children's behaviour has got worse in the last couple of years.

Why? Of course, every family has its own mix of reasons, but life events, financial pressures, concern about friends and family can take their toll at the best of times. In the pandemic, these sorts of things were experienced more often by more families. These experiences, plus the juggle of jobs, closed nurseries, home schooling, caring for loved ones put lots of families under new strain. It made being a parent harder for many people, and—directly and indirectly—affected children's behaviour.

Complicating the picture, the behaviours and emotions of parents and children are tightly linked. Children's negative behaviour can affect parent wellbeing, sense of competence, other relationships, and feelings towards their child. At the same time, parents' behaviour, mood, and parenting can influence children...In other words, it's a cycle of influence.

The good news is that as the adult, you have the power to reset the cycle, switching its direction from negative to positive. Because you and your child influence each other, if you kick off a more positive cycle, after a little while, your child will play their part, improving their behaviour (and feeling happier). In turn, this will make it easier for you to continue to be positive in your behaviour (and, yes, feel happier!).

So what can you do? Evidence shows that when you make even small changes, you can reset the cycle. Here are three simple changes to start you off.

Attend to the good stuff! “Why don’t you ever stop shouting?”. “You are always mean to your sister”. “Why do you always swing your bag at my legs?”. If I was to come to your house, my bet is there would be some – even if rare! -- moments where they weren’t doing the things that you find difficult. Quick, swoop in, and give those moments attention! “Thank you for sitting patiently while I find your TV programme”; “Thank you for passing me the baby’s nappy”. When was the last time you noticed something your child did that was positive? Even a tiny thing? We often ignore our child’s small positive behaviours, but these are great opportunities to show them that you appreciate them. Notice them and swoop in!

Find the needle in the haystack. Sometimes positive behaviours are hidden amongst negatives...but only attend to the positive part, and gradually your child will do more of them. So, if you ask your child to pick up their bag and put it on a hook and they huff, puff, and stomp about, but put it on the hook, instead of saying, “Less of your attitude!”, try, “Thank you for putting your bag on the hook”?

Help your child understand how they feel. Before you react to poor behaviours, see if you can guess why they are behaving the way they are. You might be thinking “stop banging that toy on the table” or “stop crying”, but try to hold that in, and think for a moment, why? Tired after school? Hungry? Jealous? Show them that their feelings are important and that you will listen. Rather than saying “STOP IT!”, label their emotion for them, “You seem tired after school, did it feel like a long day today?”; “I’m sorry your car got trodden on, that’s upsetting for you, it was a special one”. Listen to their answer and give them a cuddle. It might take a couple of practices, but try it out!

Before you react next time your child is showing behaviour that you don’t like, double check: is the behaviour harmful to anything, themselves, or anyone else? If the answer is ‘no’, see if you can ignore it, maybe distract your child with something else more fun. And if they show even small positive behaviour (smiling at you, or pausing their shouting), give them positive attention. It works wonders!

Getting the Little Blighter’s to Behave is full of simple ideas for simple changes: tips and tricks for parents that are easy to understand and easy to implement, yet can make a world of difference to family life.