

Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years



It takes time and practice for children to learn to manage their emotions and behaviour, just as it did for them to learn to walk, talk and feed themselves. They won't always get things right as they build the skills to behave in ways that parents expect.

Some people think that punishing children will help them learn to do what is expected. However, positive approaches to guiding behaviour can benefit children's development, keep your relationship strong, and lead to less challenging behaviour in the long run.

What drives children's behaviour?

Children are born with a strong desire to connect with parents and caregivers, to please them and cooperate. This is because their survival depends on it.

They are also born with a strong desire to feel capable and learn to do things for themselves. They begin to use their will and a growing sense of themselves to explore and learn. They are like little scientists who get an idea in their head and learn how the world works by trying things out for themselves. Their behaviour can have a purpose that makes sense in their mind.

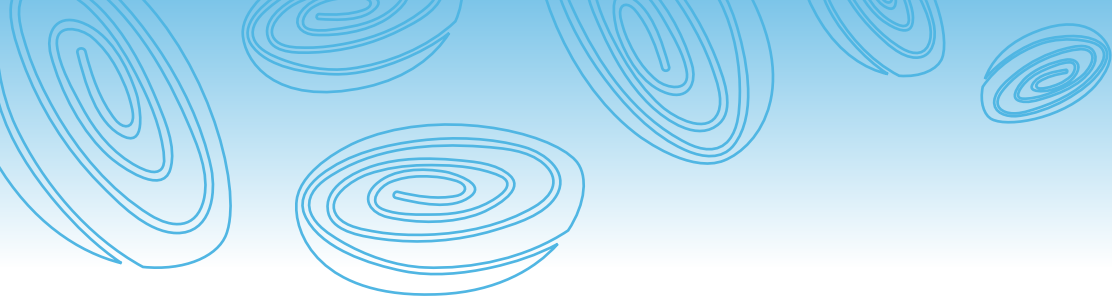
This natural curiosity and drive to become independent continues throughout their development. It often means children push against boundaries and limits which can be a challenge for parents. The child can be seen as 'misbehaving', naughty or defiant if the focus is on the behaviour itself rather than understanding the needs, thoughts, feelings or intentions that are driving it. Often challenging behaviour masks a child's need to feel closer to you. They may not be aware of this or able to tell you.

It is important for parents to have clear expectations and boundaries that keep children safe as they learn. How these are communicated in the family can make a big difference to how children respond (see p2-3).

Studies also tell us that children:

- learn best when they feel safe and secure and have a strong bond with parents and caregivers
- need to feel a sense of worth and being capable
- strive to be in control of themselves and make their own choices
- have a natural desire to please parents and caregivers
- learn best when they are actively involved
- have better coping skills and wellbeing, and are more likely to achieve their goals when they are self-motivated rather than motivated by rewards and punishments
- do better in all areas of life when they have skills to manage their emotions and behaviour.

Using positive approaches doesn't mean there will never be difficult behaviour or stressful situations but it provides a strong foundation for dealing with them.



About positive approaches

Positive approaches to guiding behaviour aim to meet the needs which can drive behaviour rather than just trying to change the behaviour itself. They are not an easy option or a 'quick fix', and are not about being permissive and letting children do whatever they want. It is about communicating expectations and guiding behaviour in ways that involve:

- taking a long-term view and aiming to raise children who are independent, self-motivated, responsible and get on well with others
- having clear family values and expectations and talking with children about the kind of family you want to be
- prioritising spending time with children and building your relationship
- putting in the effort every day to help your family work well
- being patient and consistent as children gain the skills to do what is expected. They will learn better if the other parent and key caregivers take the same approach as you
- responding to challenging behaviour calmly and in ways that:
 - build your connection
 - help children feel understood
 - address their underlying needs
 - involve children in finding solutions that work for both of you.

Positive approaches involve seeing children's 'misbehaviour' as an opportunity to build their skills and strengthen your relationship, rather than a potential for upset or a battle.

Encouraging cooperation in your family

The way you interact with your children every day sets the scene for how you guide their behaviour.

Strengthening your relationship

A strong relationship that encourages cooperation is fostered when you:

- spend time with children to build your connection. Children need your attention because it shows them they really matter to you. It helps to spend time with them without screens or other distractions
- have routines which help children know what to expect
- role model the behaviour you expect of your children.

A strong emotional connection means children feel they can talk with you about their thoughts and feelings without fear of criticism or rejection. They are more willing to cooperate and follow your guidance and to come to you for support or with problems.

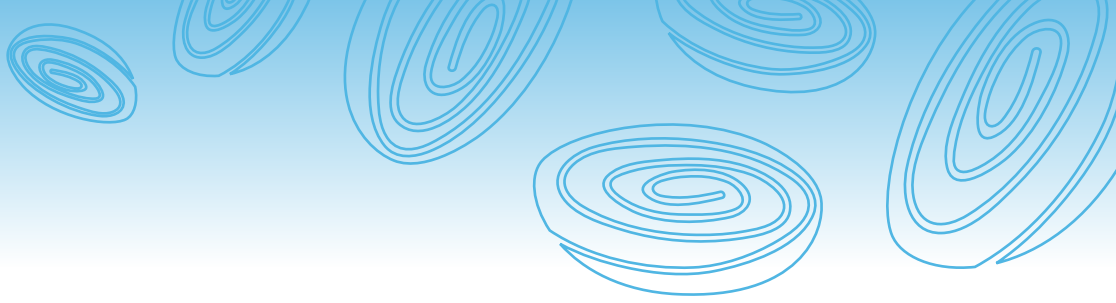
Strengthening the bond with your children taps into their desire to please you and builds trust and acceptance of your guidance.

Values, expectations and boundaries

Children need clear limits and boundaries that keep them safe as they learn.

- It helps to talk with children about the kind of family you want to be and what's important to each of you. Ask for their ideas - even young children can have good ideas. You might have family meetings, pizza nights or whatever works for you.
- Help children understand the reasons for limits and boundaries by linking them to your values, eg 'We are kind to each other in our family so we don't hit', or 'We help each other, that's why we all have jobs to do', or 'Your safety is very important, so I will pick you up from the movies'.





Children are more likely to meet expectations, boundaries and limits, when they understand the reasons for them.

Find ways to say 'Yes'

Children often hear 'No' or 'Don't' many times a day. This invites resistance and children can 'tune out'. Finding ways to say 'Yes' makes 'No' easier to accept. It's not about letting children have whatever they want but stating limits and boundaries in a calm and positive way.

For example, instead of saying: 'No, you can't have a lolly', say 'I know you love lollies and we have them on special occasions. This isn't a special occasion, so let's have something else'.

Help children build life skills

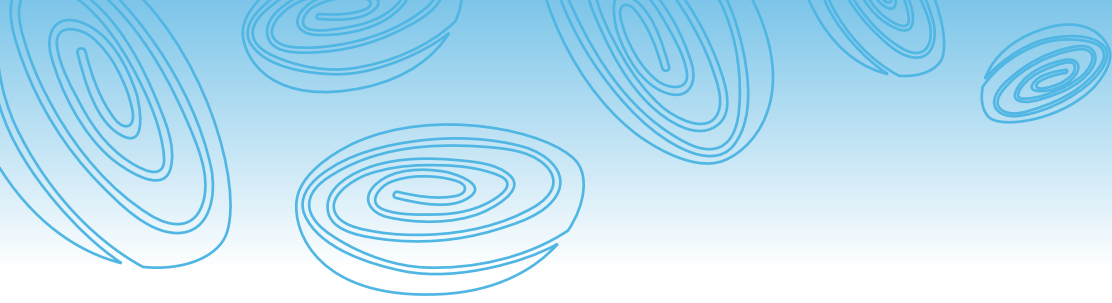
Give children lots of opportunity to learn skills and succeed. This builds their inner sense of worth, personal power and self-motivation. You could:

- give them meaningful jobs to do in line with their age and ability. This helps them feel needed and that they belong in your family
- let them do as much as they can for themselves but be ready to help when they need it. Ask how you can help rather than jumping in and taking over
- involve children in making decisions about everyday matters appropriate for their age and development, eg 'Do you want to wear your red shirt or blue shirt today?' When children feel they have a choice they are more willing to cooperate
- involve children in finding solutions to everyday situations, eg how you can get ready on time in the morning. As children gain more skills, they can make a greater contribution. They are building problem-solving skills for the future

- help them learn to deal with disappointment. Even when they understand reasons, children can still feel disappointed. Acknowledge their feelings and help them learn that all feelings pass
- support children to learn new activities and skills that interest them
- help them become self-motivated by:
 - encouraging their curiosity and efforts to meet a new challenge
 - fostering a sense of pride and satisfaction in their competence
 - acknowledging their efforts
 - helping them have a sense of control over a situation
- use praise effectively by focussing on their efforts rather than the outcomes, eg 'I can see how hard you worked on your project', or 'I really like the detail in your drawing'. General praise such as 'You're so clever' doesn't help them know what they did well.

When you work with children's inner drive for connection and to feel capable, they experience you as being on their side, and trying to help rather than control them.





Responding to challenging behaviour

Even if you focus on building cooperation in your family, there will still be times when children's behaviour is challenging.

At these times it is important to:

- ensure what you expect of children is in line with their age and development. Parents sometimes expect more than young children are capable of, eg the ability to control impulses, emotions and behaviour takes many years to develop
- remember that change takes time and practice. Children will need your patience, support and encouragement as they learn.

The following steps will help you respond to challenging behaviour in ways that benefit children's development and help keep your relationship strong.

1. Pause before you respond

First, pause and calm yourself before you respond. Take a deep breath, step back and create a space between your child's behaviour and your actions. Take some time if you need to. When you react from emotions of the moment you are not able to think about the long-term vision you have for your child, what's driving their behaviour or what you would like them to learn. You could also act in ways you don't want to encourage in your child.

Pausing and becoming calm before you respond to challenging behaviour can make a big difference. It's easier to respond in ways that benefit your child.

2. Connect before you correct

Next, help your child become calm. If they are very upset it means the thinking part of their brain has been overwhelmed by emotion. No learning can happen while emotions are high. It can be frightening for a child to feel

out of control. Staying close and just being with them helps them feel safe. This is not a time for talking or correcting. Soothing sounds and gentle touch can help young children become calm. If your child would rather be alone while they calm down, let them know they can come to you when they are ready.

Show your child you understand how upset or frustrated they feel. When they are calm and feel you really understand them, they will be more open to your guidance.

- You could say in a calm, gentle tone, 'I see you're feeling really angry/frustrated/upset. It's hard when... (name the cause if this is clear)'.
- Even if a young child wants something they can't have, naming their frustration will help them cope.
- If you say something like 'I know you are feeling upset at the moment: I feel upset too sometimes' or 'Sometimes I get grumpy too when that happens', you are letting them know their feelings are normal and that you really understand them.

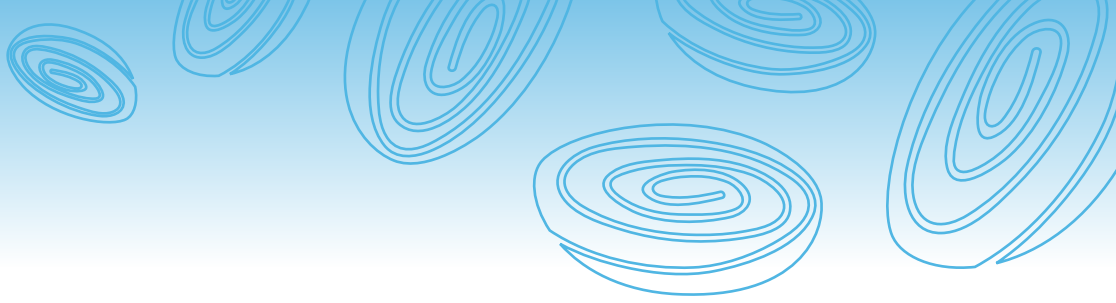
The more you respond this way, the better children will get at calming themselves. Acknowledging, accepting and naming feelings are important steps in learning to manage them. This is an important life skill.

Showing you understand doesn't mean you agree or approve of a child's actions. When children feel you really 'get them' and are willing to see their point of view, they are more open to your guidance.

'Time in'

Staying close and helping children become calm is called 'time in'. This is opposite to 'time out' where children are sent off alone so they can 'think about what they did wrong and how to do better next time'. While it might appear children calm down and control their behaviour in the moment, what really happens is they shut down their feelings. The behaviour is likely to continue as they mostly learn to avoid getting into trouble, rather than learning what is expected.





3. Understand the need or reason

Behind all challenging behaviour is a feeling, need or desire the child is trying to meet in the best way they know how at this stage of their development.

When you are both calm, ask them to explain things from their point of view. If they don't have the words to tell you, just do your best to work it out. Don't react or discount their view. Their needs, beliefs and desires are driving their behaviour, even if you think they are being silly.

A child might be:

- trying to achieve something that makes sense in their mind
- frustrated at not being able to master a skill or have something they want
- tired, hungry or unwell
- feeling sad, angry, upset, disappointed, jealous, hurt, afraid, worried or anxious. It may be clear what is making them feel that way, or something else may be going on that you are not aware of.

Understanding the need does not mean fulfilling your child's every wish. Children have lots of desires, feelings and things they want, just as adults do.

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Ask yourself what the real need or desire might be behind a child's behaviour. How can you respond to it? Often a closer connection with you is their strongest need.

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4. Give reasons based on what is important in your family

Talk about the situation in ways that suit your child's age and development. Say why the behaviour was not OK. Remind them of what is important in your family. For example, if you have a family value about treating each other with respect, and there has been name-calling or other disrespect, you could say 'In our family we care about each other's feelings, so we don't say mean things, even if we feel cross or angry'.

5. Involve children in solving the situation and agree on solutions

An important part of positive approaches is involving children in finding solutions to the situation. They will learn more when it is their problem to solve, rather than being told what to do.

Ask them how they think the situation could be resolved. Even young children can make good suggestions. Some of their ideas may be silly or funny. Have a laugh with them (but not at them) and say briefly why these wouldn't work. Move on to the ideas that are workable and come to an agreement about the best solution. Decide what each of you will do.

This helps children:

- practise responsibility
- develop a sense of personal power which is important for inner self-esteem and coping skills
- learn about problem-solving and cooperation.

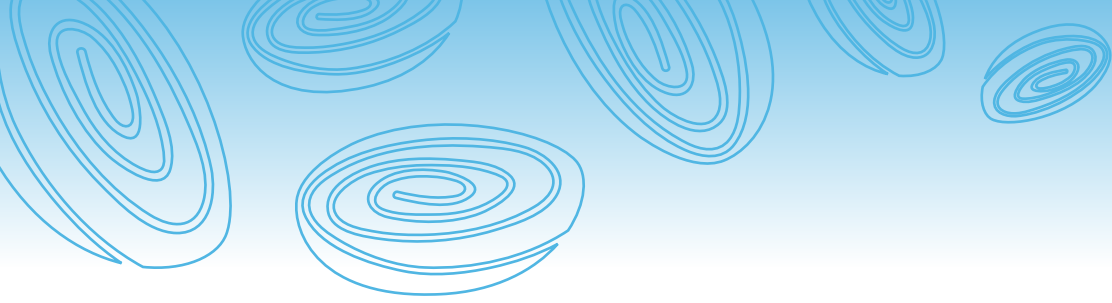
Children learn to control their behaviour in the short term for something that is more important to them in the long term, which is pleasing you and being closer to you. Learning to delay gratification and control a desire lays the foundation for self-discipline.

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When you involve children in finding solutions they are more committed to making these work. They get better at solving situations the more they practise.

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6. Help children to do what was agreed

The agreement you come up with might involve children in:

- controlling or changing a behaviour
- learning or practising a skill
- repairing a relationship.

Help children to be successful. Remember, any change takes time and they will need your patience and encouragement as they learn. Ask how they would like you to help. Show you have faith in them.

It is important to 'close the loop' and acknowledge when your child has changed a behaviour, learned the skills to do what is expected, or done what they agreed to do. If there is still further learning needed, ask 'What else do you think we could do here?'

7. When things don't go as planned

Children don't usually learn new ways to behave in a single event. It can be a process of two steps forward and one step back. Learning from mistakes is as important as the lesson itself.

There will be times when children find it hard to do what was agreed or don't seem willing to cooperate. We all have days like this. It doesn't mean they have got it wrong or are being defiant. It means they are still in the process of learning.

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If things don't go as planned, try not to be disappointed with your child, yourself or the process. Accept that this is normal and expect it to happen. Resist the temptation to tell them off, give a lecture or go back to using punishments.

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Children might:

- be struggling with learning what you expect or changing their behaviour
- be overwhelmed by big feelings and need more support to calm
- want more independence
- have a new or competing need
- need some flexibility or more time.

Without blaming or shaming:

- ask why they think what you agreed on didn't work. Really listen without interrupting
- show you understand, eg 'I can see you feel really frustrated because that didn't work so well'
- help them come up with new ideas
- agree on the best one together
- talk about what will make this new solution a better one. Ask your child how you can support them.

If it seems your child is not willing to take responsibility you may need to be firm but kind as you make it clear their behaviour is not OK. They may need some time and space before being able to discuss a solution you can both agree on.

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Keep working on solutions together when things don't work out as planned. This takes patience and a commitment to resisting your triggers. The more you persist with this approach, the more your child will learn skills and take responsibility.

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8. Repair your relationship

It is important to repair your relationship if there has been anger or harsh words. Don't expect your child to initiate this.

- When you are both calm you could say 'That didn't work so well for either of us, did it? Let's try again'
- If you have acted in ways that don't reflect your values, say 'Sorry' to your children. Explain what you are sorry for. This teaches them it is OK to make mistakes and important to reconnect when there is an upset.

- If a child's actions have affected someone else, help them acknowledge their mistake and work out a solution. It's not about blame or shame or forcing them to say 'Sorry'. It is about supporting them to be involved in finding a solution. Once the matter has been addressed, don't bring it up again.

Benefits of positive approaches

Using positive approaches may seem like a lot of effort but it can benefit children's development and lead to less challenging behaviour in the long run.

- Giving children room to make choices and decisions within safe boundaries, supports their natural desire to feel capable and encourages cooperation. You can both be part of the solution and there is no need for a power struggle.
- Talking about values and expectations helps children develop an inner compass for what is 'good' behaviour. This helps protect them from negative peer pressure.
- When children have the chance to make choices and learn skills it helps them become self-motivated and responsible over time. They are more likely to maximise their potential, have better coping skills and increased wellbeing.
- You can continue using positive approaches as your child becomes a teenager. A strong relationship and supporting skill development provide a strong foundation for dealing with challenges in the teenage years (see Parent Easy Guide 'Living with young people').

Guiding behaviour in positive ways will take time and practice if it is new to you. Each time you use this approach the situation will be different, but you will become more confident the more you do it.

Positive approaches aim to guide and teach and support children's development rather than control what they do. Changing what you do will change what they do.

What about consequences?

Many parents use consequences such as 'time out' or withdrawal of privileges in an effort to teach the behaviour that is expected. Consequences are experienced by children as punishments, and imposing these can cause children to:

- focus on the hurt of the punishment, rather than learning the desired behaviour, eg not allowing them to watch TV because they didn't do their household jobs doesn't help them learn the value of contributing to the family
- withdraw, complain or resist if they don't think the consequence is fair
- focus on avoiding getting caught rather than learning what you expect and why
- see others as responsible for making them behave, rather than taking responsibility for their own behaviour
- feel disconnected from parents, not understood and less willing to cooperate and listen to your guidance.

The exception is 'natural' consequences which are not imposed by parents, but help children see a natural connection between their behaviour and the result. For example, if they don't spend time practising a skill and then don't do well in a competition, they learn from the outcome of their actions.

Some parents react to children's behaviour by yelling, making threats or smacking. These responses can impact the bond and trust between you. They can teach children to 'switch off' or make them afraid. They can role model behaviours you don't want to encourage in your children. Harsh or excessive physical punishment of children is considered child abuse and is against the law (Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017).





Getting help

If you are concerned about behaviour in your family it is important to seek help early before things build up. Your doctor, school, counsellor or other health professionals are good places to start.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting, including information about services that can help families experiencing problems

1800 RESPECT

Phone 1800 737 732 or chat online 24 hours, 7 days a week.

Provides help and support if there is violence in your family

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri for an appointment. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

For more information about positive approaches to guiding behaviour

Find information, videos, books, blogs and online courses supporting positive approaches to guiding behaviour on the following websites (fees may apply to some resources):

- **Happy Families:** Dr Justin Coulson www.happyfamilies.com.au
- **Intuitive Parenting:** Jodie Benveniste <https://jodiebenveniste.com>
- **Parenting ideas:** Michael Grose www.parentingideas.com.au
- **Aha Parenting:** Dr Laura Markham www.ahaparenting.com
- **Connective Parenting:** Bonnie Harris <https://bonnieharris.com>
- **Lives in the balance:** Dr Ross Greene www.livesinthebalance.org
- **A fine parent:** <https://afineparent.com>

Parenting SA

Video: 'Parents talk about positive approaches to guiding children's behaviour'

Find more Parent Easy Guides including 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour', 'Tantrums', 'Living with toddlers', 'Living with young people', 'What is your parenting style?' and 'Families that work well' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

For support with family relationships and children's behaviour

(fees may apply)

- **Relationships Australia**
Phone 1300 364 277
www.rasa.org.au
- **Uniting Communities**
Phone 1800 615 677
www.unitingcommunities.org
- **Centacare**
Phone 8215 6700
www.centacare.org.au
- **Anglicare SA**
Phone 8305 9200
www.anglicare.com.au
- **Mission Australia**
Phone 8218 2800
www.missionaustralia.com.au



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Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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