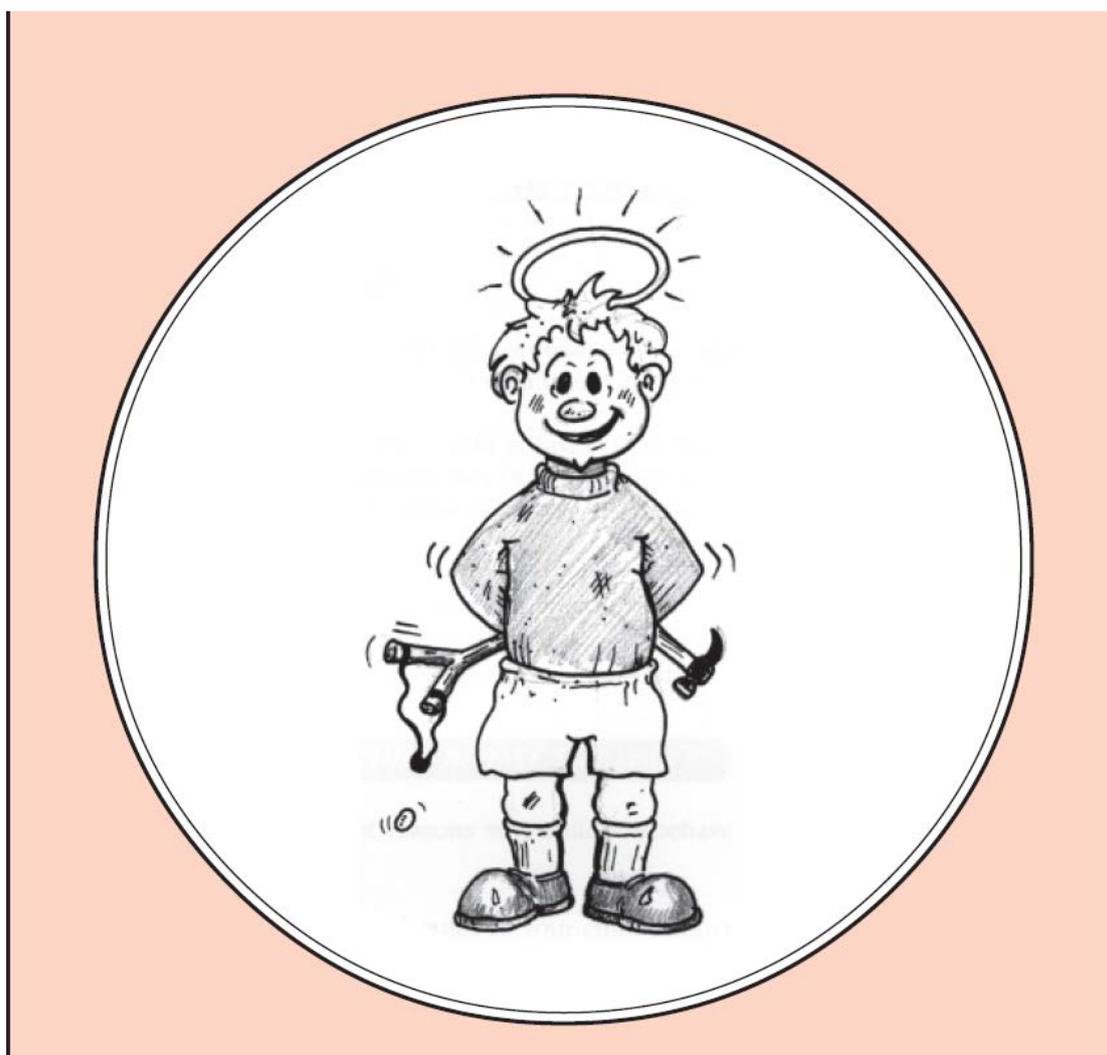


# Encouraging good behaviour in children



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)**

# Encouraging good behaviour

## Introduction

Is your child very difficult? Behaves badly? Doesn't listen to you? Many parents worry about this sort of thing with their children. Some parents worry their child is 'just evil' or think 'it's in his blood'. By this, they seem to be saying that there's nothing they can do to improve things.

This booklet is designed to show that there are things you can do by looking at:

- The reasons for bad behaviour
- Ways of preventing it
- Ways to encourage good behaviour.

## Why does my child behave so badly?

There can be lots of reasons why children behave badly. Here are some of them:

- There are not enough rules so your child doesn't know what he can and can't do
- There are too many rules, so he just ignores some
- You know the rules but haven't made them clear enough
- You keep changing your mind about the rules depending on your mood
- You don't really mean what you say when you're trying to enforce the rules
- Your child's in trouble so much that there's nothing to lose by behaving badly
- Your child doesn't know how to behave well
- Your child isn't encouraged when there is good behaviour, so he doesn't bother to try again
- Your child doesn't get enough praise and reward for good behaviour.

This is just a selection of possible reasons. One of these might apply to you, or there might be other reasons not mentioned here.

## A familiar story?

Before going on to describe what you can do about bad behaviour, here is a story - a 'cautionary tale':

Mother (to son): *'Will you come away from there? Just stop it right now! I've told you time and time again about touching that. I'll put you in a home if you touch it again! **Right**, that's it, you're grounded till Christmas.'*

(To friend): *'Have you ever seen such a little horror? I can't do a thing with him. He just doesn't listen to a thing I say, do you?'*

(To child): *'Oh alright, go on out to play. I'm sick of the sight of you anyway!'*

Does this sound familiar? You hear this sort of thing a lot - on buses, in supermarkets, and it must be going on in lots of homes.

Unfortunately, it doesn't actually help the child behave any better.

Parents who are like this with their children find that although they scold like this more and more, the bad behaviour goes on.

The mother in this story is making several mistakes without realising it. Here are some:

- **Shouting** doesn't help. If you shout a lot, your child will just get used to it and stop noticing. Then you will have to shout louder and louder to get him to pay any attention. Anyway, lots of children enjoy getting their parents wound up and upset.
- **Making threats** is not helpful. Some parents are forever saying 'If you don't stop that I'll..' but actually they hardly ever do what they say. Children just learn to ignore this sort of thing. Save threats for using very rarely when you really mean it and can really carry out your threat. Anyway, controlling children by threats is not a peaceful way for everyone to live, is it?
- **Scaring** the child with talk of putting him in a children's home will only make him more upset and insecure - and therefore even more likely to behave badly.

- **Complaining about your child** in front of friends and neighbours, like the mother in this story, is not a good idea when your child is listening. Parents do it to try to shame children into behaving better, but it usually has the opposite effect. You know the saying - 'Give a dog a bad name' (and he'll live up to it) - well, it applies to children too.
- **Rewarding bad behaviour** by giving in to it is not helpful. In this story, the mother gave in and let her son go out to play.
- **Admitting you can't cope** in front of your child is not a good idea. It can make him feel very insecure. If you can't cope, then discuss it with friends and other helpers in private, and get helpful ideas, but don't let your child know how you're feeling. It might seem like your child enjoys getting the better of you, and at the time perhaps he does, but in the long run it's not a good feeling for him to know that his parent is out of control. Try to pretend that you feel in control, even if you don't really feel that way inside!

**All** these things have one thing in common - they are **negative** ways of controlling children. Threats, shouting, complaining and so on are not generally helpful. Some parents think that they have to shout louder, or make bigger threats if their child still doesn't behave - but even this doesn't work.

## **What can I do to encourage good behaviour?**

Now that we have looked at what **not** to do, we will move on to what you **can** do to help. First of all, here are some general points about:

- Attention
- Rules
- Instructions
- Encouragement.

## **Attention**

All children need food, clothes, warmth and toys, but these are not enough. Here's a story showing this:

After the last world war, there were lots of orphans.

- Some were put in spotless hospitals with constantly changing teams of nurses and lots of expensive food and toys. They didn't have a chance to get close to any adults and no-one paid them much attention.
- Others were looked after by peasants in mountain villages where there was very little food, ragged clothes and poor heating, but these children were brought up as part of the family and were really loved. The adults had lots of time for them.

In the long run, the children brought up with love and attention turned out to be happier adults. So the story shows that although food and warmth and toys are important, the attention of adults is just as important. Most parents, of course, do love their children very much and talk, play and listen to them naturally.

For some parents it may require more effort to spend time with their child, especially if there have been a lot of problems recently. Any effort spent on doing this will be well worth while. What children want from us most of all is not expensive toys but our time and attention.

## **Rules**

Try to have just a few, sensible rules and stick to them. If you can, get all adults in the house to agree on the rules then try not to chop and change too often. It can be very confusing for a child if he's told off for doing something one minute, but 10 minutes later he's allowed to get away with doing the same thing.

Try to stick to the rules whatever mood you're in, if you can, then he will learn them all the sooner.

## **Giving instructions**

Be clear and cheerful when you are telling your child what is required. If you want him to put away his toys, then say: 'John, I want you to put all those toys in the cupboard now.' It will help to make sure you get his attention by going over to him and looking him straight in the eye - don't be half-hearted about it. It's much harder for a child to ignore someone who sounds as if they mean it!

## **Using encouragement**

The best way to encourage children to do as they're told is to praise and reward them when they behave as you want. Some parents try it the other way round – by punishing (shouting, hitting, depriving) when their child is bad. On the whole, punishing doesn't work very well, especially if you do a lot of it.

Children who live with a lot of shouting and hitting eventually get used to it, and sometimes they even do bad things just to get you to notice them. This can happen if they are not getting attention from you when they are good. The rest of this leaflet is all about how to use more positive methods (praise and rewards) effectively.

All humans (and animals too) repeat behaviours which get rewarded. For example, you buy birthday presents because it is rewarding to see pleasure when you give them (and you might get one in return on your birthday!). You do the washing and ironing because it is rewarding to know that everyone has fresh, clean clothes. You go to work because you get paid. You cook tasty meals because it is rewarding to eat well.

## **Types of reward**

Some rewards are things you can see like money, sweets, clothes, toys or privileges. It is also rewarding to get praise from other people. Many rewards that adults give themselves are 'self-rewards' of a pat on your own back, the satisfaction of a job well done, the knowledge that you are doing right, and so on. Children have not learned to give themselves this last type of reward, and rely on you giving them things they can see or praise.

In the rest of this leaflet, we will talk firstly about praise and then about other kinds of rewards.

## Praise

- Try to catch your child being good. This may feel like hard work, and some parents say their child 'never does anything good'. Look for tiny things that you can praise - maybe he plays with his brother quietly for two minutes, or carries a cup into the kitchen, or gets dressed by himself, or manages to do up his trousers properly after going to the toilet. All children do little good things like this all day long - your job is to notice them and **praise**. Pretend that you're wearing rose-tinted spectacles and try to notice all the good moments in the day. There are probably a few awful things he does each day but lots of times when nothing is going wrong. Look for those times.
- If you can praise your child for being good, he will like this and will want to get your good attention by behaving this way again. That way, there will be less time left for bad behaviour!
- Some parents think that children should behave well, so when a child is good, the parents don't say anything nice or encouraging. Others are so relieved when their child is good that they are frightened to disturb the peaceful scene by saying anything. The trouble is, if you ignore children like this when they're good, then they will start to behave badly to get you to pay attention. Even unpleasant attention from an adult is better than none at all to most children. So make sure you pay attention to good behaviour by using lots of praise all day long for little good things that your child does.
- The best way to use **praise** is:
  - give it right away after the good behaviour
  - sound like you really mean it - don't be half-hearted about it
  - say exactly why you are praising
  - Try giving the behaviour a label (helpful, kind, artistic)
  - praise often
  - praise little improvements in behaviour
  - don't expect a miracle all at once
  - vary your praise from time to time.

So you might say:

- 'Well done Jane, I'm glad that you took your mug into the kitchen. That was really helpful.'
- 'Good boy Peter. You put your toys in the box when I asked you. That's what I call tidy!'
- 'That's an excellent drawing. I like all those bright colours. That's very artistic!'

At other times, you might just say 'well done' or 'thanks' or 'good girl.' Vary your praise.

### **Rewards**

Another way to encourage good behaviour is to give a reward as well as praise. If a child is rewarded after behaving a certain way, he'll be more likely to behave that way again.

A reward can be anything which your child likes getting - not something you'd like. Adults often guess wrongly about what children would like for treats - so ask. A reward doesn't have to be anything expensive. It could be:

- a hug
- being read a story
- a few raisins or apple pieces
- a few minutes with a favourite game
- a few sweets
- a walk to the swings
- pencils or crayons
- choosing a favourite pudding
- getting to watch television for a short time
- playing a game with you
- anything else your child likes.

Using rewards is quite like using praise and there are similar rules for the best way to give rewards:

- You might promise a reward and say what he has to do to get it. This way he can 'link' behaviour and reward and realise they go together.
- After the good behaviour, give the reward immediately. It won't work so well if you leave it till later.

- Always praise your child when you reward and say why he's being rewarded.
- Give lots of tiny rewards often, rather than a big one later on. 30 hugs, words of praise and tiny rewards throughout the day are better than promising a big reward at bedtime (or at the end of the week).
- Use different rewards each time so your child doesn't get bored.

You can use praise and rewards to encourage a child to learn something new or to behave in a new way. Break the new skill down into little steps and reward him for managing to do first one step, then two steps, and so on.

Here's an example. Suppose that you want John to put his dirty dishes in the sink after breakfast. You could start by promising a reward (10 minutes TV) if he takes his cup into the kitchen and puts it in the sink. Once he does this every day (let's say for a week) you could make it harder by asking him to take cup and plate before he gets to watch TV. Perhaps you want him to put his brother's dishes away too, and you could build up to this bit by bit.

### **Charts**

Using a chart is another way to combine praise and rewards. It allows you to put marks (ticks, happy faces, etc) on the paper if your child did well at something.

Many parents have tried some kind of star chart in the past, often without much success. This might have been for two reasons: firstly that the reward was not interesting enough for the child, or secondly because the target behaviour was just too hard for him. It is worth trying again, and persevering till you find a system that works because:

- You can give the mark right away with very little effort
- Being awarded marks can be very encouraging to most children
- Giving a mark saves you having to think of lots of rewards
- Marks can be saved up to 'buy' a bigger reward
- You and your child can both see at a glance how he is getting on.

Decide on the behaviour you want to encourage. Suppose we want Jane to hang up her coat and scarf when she gets in from school, and put her shoes away in the cupboard. Here is how to proceed in six steps:

**1.** Decide what the child can do already, then ask her to work a bit harder. At the moment, Jane puts her shoes under the table and drops her coat and scarf on the sofa. To make it just a little bit harder, we could start by asking her to put her shoes in the cupboard and for the moment we'll leave the coat and scarf. This way we are choosing a simple target behaviour to work on.

**2.** Make up a chart with space on it to mark "success" at the task you've set. Many children have a lot of experience of stars at school and may therefore like to use another kind of mark (tick, flower, draw a spaceship, etc). Here is Jane's chart:

	Shoes in Cupboard
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	

**3.** Explain to your child what you expect her to do (e.g. Jane should put shoes in cupboard after school) and what will happen when she does (e.g. she will be allowed to draw a flower on the chart). Allow your child to decide what should be drawn on the chart if she was successful at her task that day. It might be a tick, or star, or any other drawing. Use lots of praise as well.

**4.** If she didn't complete the task, leave that day's space blank. Don't be tempted to put a cross or a sad face or a black mark. Remember, we are trying to focus on encouragement, not on punishment. Encourage her to try again tomorrow.

**5.** Show the chart to friends and relatives so they can admire it. Try to make sure they comment only on the good days, and say nothing about the other ones. (Better to say 'look how well you did on Tuesday' rather than 'why did you do so badly 6 days last week?')

**6.** Marks on a chart can be interesting, but most children will lose interest after a while. Keep them interested by:

- Changing the chart from time to time - use different paper, different colours, stars instead of ticks, etc.
- Think of the marks being like money and allow your child to 'buy' treats, e.g. if Jane gets two ticks in a row she can go to the ice cream van. Make sure she understands how much she has to earn and what reward she can get.

## **What about punishment?**

If you use lots of praise and rewards, you won't need to use punishment very often. Try to save it for times when:

- Your child is doing something dangerous that you must stop right away
- You have tried consistently to use praise and reward.

Some useful small punishments you could try include:

- Turning off the TV for five minutes
- Removing a favourite toy for a few minutes only
- Speaking sternly
- Sending your child out of the room for a few minutes.

Don't use bigger punishments than these. There are three main reasons why:

**1)** If you are too hard on your child he will think you're being unfair and will try to get his own back. Children who are punished a lot tend to get worse, not better.

**2)** If you use a lot of punishment and not much reward, he will learn that the only way to get your attention is to behave badly. That way, you will notice him - even if you are shouting at him. Children who don't get much good attention start to be bad just to get someone to notice.

**3)** Punishing a child doesn't help him to know what he should be doing instead. Using praise and rewards shows him what is expected and encourages him to behave well.

A small punishment given right away will work much better than a big punishment.

For example, if Andrew pushes another child while out playing, it would be a fair punishment to keep him in for, perhaps, 20 minutes. Some parents 'ground' their children for long periods of a week or more - this is a far bigger punishment than the 'crime' deserves. A small punishment after each small misdemeanour will be more effective - especially if you are not using much punishment overall (and you should try not to use much).

## **Some last words**

The ideas in this booklet have been tried and tested by many parents. Hopefully, if you keep at it, they will work for you too. However, all children are different and you might need to be flexible with some of these ideas to suit your family. Ask for help from the person who gave you this booklet if you want.

## **Summary**

Here is a summary of the main points in the booklet:

- Children need food, clothes, warmth, toys and love
- They need lots of attention
- Have a few, sensible rules and stick to them
- Look for good behaviours that you can praise
- Use lots of praise and sometimes rewards too
- Try to use very little punishment. Make punishments small.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

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