**Understanding and managing my child’s behaviour**

If you are finding your child’s behaviour difficult to cope with, there are some things you can do. It helps to understand what might be causing the behaviour in the first place.

Recognise where the behaviour comes from

Behaviour is a form of communication. If your child is behaving in a way that’s difficult to manage, it might mean they are:

* Tired.
* Hungry.
* Nervous.
* Upset.
* Coping with change.
* Trying to understand the world.
* Wanting to spend time with you

We often talk about ‘tantrums’ or ‘meltdowns’. These can make parents feel very anxious, especially when out and about. Different things can provoke tantrums or meltdowns. But they are both ways of your child showing that they are feeling out of control and overwhelmed.

Look out for learning behaviours

Sometimes a child does something again and again because they are learning and exploring. They might throw things, wrap things up, or join and disconnect objects.

In babies and toddlers this is a way to explore the world and find out how things work.

If your child’s repetitive actions are causing a problem, look for ways to redirect the urge. For example, does your child tip toys out again every time you tidy them? Try filling pots with sand, water or dried pasta so your child can tip them into another pot or tray.

For a child who wants to throw things, try finding ways to support this at home in a safe way with a game or something soft.

Help your child process emotions

Your child’s behaviour might change if they are struggling to process emotions. Acknowledge it’s OK for your child to have these feelings.

Try helping them identify their emotions by name. This can help them express what they’re going through, which makes it easier for you to understand where their behaviour may be coming from. This means you can help them with strategies to support their emotions.

Lead by example

Children learn by copying, so show them the type of behaviour you want to see in the way you act. Try to stay calm in difficult situations. If your child sees or hears you shouting when you’re angry, they’ll learn to do the same.

Role playing and [**small world play**](https://www.twinkl.co.uk/teaching-wiki/small-world-play) can also be a good way of reinforcing this. You can also try making a [**family kindness chart.**](https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/stages-development/social-emotional-development/family-kindness-chart/)

Using consequences and explanations

Try to be consistent and fair in your approach. Give your child reasonable, age appropriate rules and explain why they matter.

If your child breaks a rule, try using natural consequences. This can be a learning opportunity and a way to build resilience.

A consequence is something that happens as a result of a behaviour. An example of a natural consequence is that if your child breaks one of their toys, they don’t have it anymore. We all learn by making mistakes.  It’s how we develop our own understanding and strategies.

Aims of natural consequences

Natural consequences should:

* Help your child learn: If they tip the toy box over, they have to pick up the toys and tidy them before their next activity.
* Relate to the thing they’ve done: If they don’t put on their shoes, then they can’t go outside to play.
* Reinforce why we ask them to do things.

Consequences for older children

With teens and older children, you can set consequences that relate to house rules. Involve your child in setting these rules and consequences. This means they understand the rules and why they are in place.

Consequences for older children might mean:

* Cutting their pocket money or allowance.
* Learning how to fix something they have broken.
* Withdrawing screen time, or removing certain apps on their device.  This should be for a reasonable and set period. [**Some children rely on screen time to help them regulate their senses.**](https://www.disabledliving.co.uk/blog/screens-and-autism-when-are-screens-necessary)

 A consequence should be a way for your child to learn, not a punishment.

Positive consequences

You could also try using a reward system that celebrates positive behaviours. Children of all ages generally respond well to praise and reward.

When your child is behaving in a difficult way, use positive language to guide them away from it. This way, you’re still engaging with your child but not focusing on the negative behaviour. When the behaviour stops, recognise this. Praise the actions you want to see.

Think about your language

Instead of saying, “Don’t run across the road” you could say, “Walking across the road is safer.”

Think about how you interact with your child the rest of the time, too. Show them lots of affection and tell them you love them.

It can also help to:

* Play or spend time with your child.
* Give them your full attention – turn off your phone, stop what you’re doing, and make eye contact.
* Involve your child in decision-making to help give them a feeling of control.

Try to avoid being  critical, shouting, threatening, or humiliating your child. Avoid using words that label your child. These can harm their self-esteem and emotional well-being. Remember it is the behaviour that is challenging, and not the child.

Aim for rewards

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You can adapt the level of reward to the situation. Young children often love stickers. These can be an instant reward or part of a reward system (link to using a reward chart).

Having a list, board or jar with some rewards that your child likes can be useful. Think about things your child loves to do. This could be an extra story at bedtime, a trip to the park, or watching a favourite programme or film together. These are also great ways to get time together. As your child gets older, you can change the rewards as their needs and interests change.

Rewards, not bribes

A reward is not the same as a bribe.

* A reward is a recognition of a behaviour we are happy with or proud of.
* A bribe is when we offer something to encourage a child to do something.

For example, if your child gets into their pushchair when you ask, you could reward them – with a sticker or praise. They relate the reward to them getting into their pushchair when asked. This will be a positive association.

If you offer them a sticker or treat to get into the pushchair, this is a bribe. The child may then expect this again the next time and this can create a pattern.

Know it’s OK to make mistakes

It’s not easy being a parent or carer. Every child will behave in a way that challenges you at some point, and you won’t always know what to do. If you feel like you’re going to lose your temper, step away from the situation and calm down before responding.

Recognise what you’re doing well.