

# 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 their skills.**

**Using positive approaches to guiding behaviour benefits children's development, keeps your relationship strong and leads to less challenging behaviour in the long run.**

## What drives children's behaviour?

Children's tricky behaviours are often the result of:

- being hungry or tired, in pain or feeling unwell
- being too young to have learned how to communicate with us (which can be frustrating for everyone)
- still learning to manage their emotions (which begins in small ways around age 3 but isn't strong until age 9)
- not being able to regulate how they behave. This starts to develop in the toddler years and takes many years to reach a high level
- being too young to understand different perspectives (this happens after age 5)
- having additional needs due to conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia or mood disorders
- feeling disconnected from parents/caregivers or just generally feeling unsafe
- not yet having the skills to do what is expected. They are still learning.

All human behaviour is driven by three basic psychological needs. Children are born with:

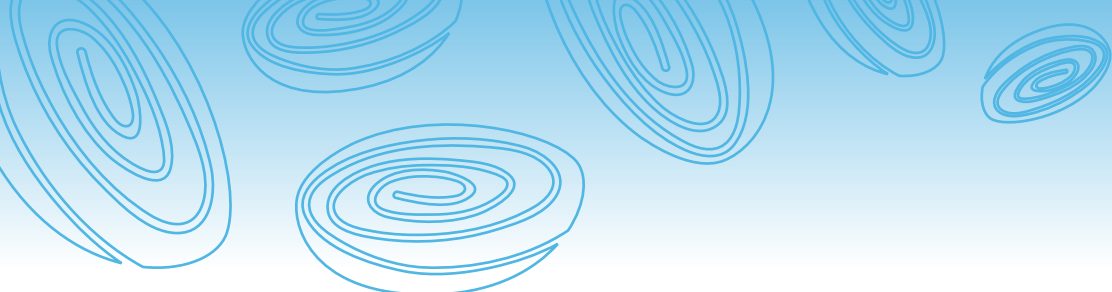
- a strong desire to connect with parents and caregivers, to please them and cooperate
- a need to feel capable and learn to do things for themselves
- a drive to become independent and make their own choices.

Sometimes parents can think their child is 'misbehaving', naughty or defiant because they don't recognise the needs, thoughts, feelings or intentions driving their behaviour. This may be because the behaviour is obvious whereas the needs underlying it are not. Often tricky behaviour masks your child's need to feel closer to you or their frustration because they 'can't' do something, or they are feeling uncomfortable or controlled. They may not be aware of this or able to tell you.

Parents have the task of balancing their children's needs with reasonable expectations and boundaries that keep children safe as they learn. How these are communicated can make a big difference to how children respond.

Studies 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
- do best when they are actively involved in the learning process
- have better coping skills, increased 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 learned the skills to manage their emotions and behaviour.



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**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.**  
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## About positive approaches

Positive parenting approaches 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 letting children do whatever they want. It is about communicating expectations and guiding behaviour in ways that involve:

- a long-term view 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
- being patient and consistent as children gain the skills to do what is expected. They will learn better if parents and key caregivers take the same approach
- responding to challenging behaviour calmly and in ways that:
  - build your connection
  - help children feel understood
  - use positive language
  - address their underlying needs
  - involve children in finding solutions that work for both of you.

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**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.**  
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## Benefits of positive approaches

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

- Giving children room to make choices and decisions within safe boundaries supports their natural desire to feel capable and encourages cooperation.
- Talking about values and expectations helps children develop a clear understanding of 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 their skill development provide a 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.

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**Positive approaches aim to guide, teach and support children's development rather than control their behaviour. Changing what we do will change what they do.**  
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## Everyday parenting

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

### Strengthening your relationship

Building a strong relationship encourages children to cooperate. It helps to:

- spend time together to build your connection. Children need your attention, it shows them they really matter to you
- have routines so they know what to expect
- role model the behaviour you expect.

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

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**Children want to please us.  
Strengthening your bond encourages  
this - it builds trust and helps them  
meet your expectations.**  
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### Values, expectations and boundaries

Children need clear limits and boundaries to keep them safe as they learn. This helps them understand what they need to do to manage their feelings and behaviour.

- 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 use safe hands in this family because we want to be kind to each other and hitting hurts' or 'We all do jobs because we want to help each other' or 'Your safety is very important, so I will pick you up from the movies'.

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**Children are more likely to meet  
expectations, boundaries and limits  
when they understand the reasons for  
them - and even more so when they  
have helped create them.**  
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### Find ways to say 'Yes'

Children often hear 'No' or 'Don't' many times a day. Hearing this over and over may create frustration and even tantrums in younger children. Sometimes we do need to say 'No' but 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.

Parents sometimes say 'No' because it's convenient. Sometimes a 'No' is necessary but it can be framed in another 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. Would you like strawberries and yoghurt or cheese and crackers?'

### Help children build life skills

Give children lots of opportunity to learn skills and succeed. This builds their feeling of competence and capability which encourages an inner sense of worth, personal value and self-motivation. You could:

- give them meaningful responsibilities 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. Be ready to help when they need it. Ask how you can help rather than jumping in and taking over
- involve them in making decisions about everyday matters, eg you could say to a young child '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 them in finding solutions to everyday situations, eg how they 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 are valued and they will pass
- help them become self-motivated by:
  - encouraging them to learn new activities and skills that interest them

- supporting their curiosity and efforts to meet a new challenge
- fostering a sense of pride and satisfaction in what they achieve
- acknowledging their efforts
- helping them have a sense of control over a situation
- using praise effectively. Focus on their efforts rather than the outcomes, eg 'I can see how hard you worked on your project'. General praise such as 'You're so clever' doesn't help them know what they did well.

**When you work with children's natural desire for connection and feeling capable, they see you as being on their side and trying to help rather than control them.**

## Responding to challenging behaviour

Even when you focus on connection and a strong relationship there will be times when you find your children's behaviour 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 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.

Here are some steps to help respond to challenging behaviour in ways that benefit children's development and keep your relationship strong.

### 1. Pause before you respond

If your child expresses a big emotion or behaves in a challenging way, pause and take a deep breath. Try to step back from the situation, notice how you're feeling and why you're feeling it. If adults are finding it difficult to manage big emotions it's hard to teach children how to deal with theirs.

When we react from the heat of the moment children feel we don't love them. They can feel unsafe, not worthy and controlled. This goes against their basic psychological needs to feel connected, capable and independent. Pausing until you feel calm makes it easier to respond in ways that benefit both your child and you.

**Pausing and responding calmly to challenging behaviour can make a big difference. You are showing your child it's possible to manage their big emotions.**

### 2. Connect before you correct

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 together helps them feel safe. This is not a time for talking or correcting. Soothing sounds and gentle touch can help young children to calm. If your older child would rather be alone while they calm down, let them know they can come to you when they are ready.

- 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)'. Then ask them if they want a hug or to have you close, or if they would prefer to have some space.
- 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 sometimes too' or 'Sometimes I get grumpy 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 learn how to calm themselves. Acknowledging, naming and accepting 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 the opposite of 'time out' where children are sent off alone to 'think about what they did and how they can do better next time'. 'Time in' involves staying close to your child when they have big feelings and are having trouble managing their behaviour. It supports their need for connection and helps them gradually learn that strong feelings are OK and they can be managed.

### 3. Focus on understanding

Behind all 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. Focussing on understanding rather than punishing is important.

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. Try not to react or discount their view.

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 or worried.

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. Feeling understood helps restart their thinking brain.

**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.**

### 4. Explain your expectations

Now you know why your child is upset talk about why the behaviour was not OK. Do it in a way that makes sense for their age and stage of development. Remind them what's important, eg you could say 'In our family we care about each other's feelings so we use kind words, even if we feel cross or angry'.

### 5. Work together to problem solve and agree on solutions

Giving children a voice helps motivate them to stick to agreed solutions. They will learn to be more resilient and responsible.

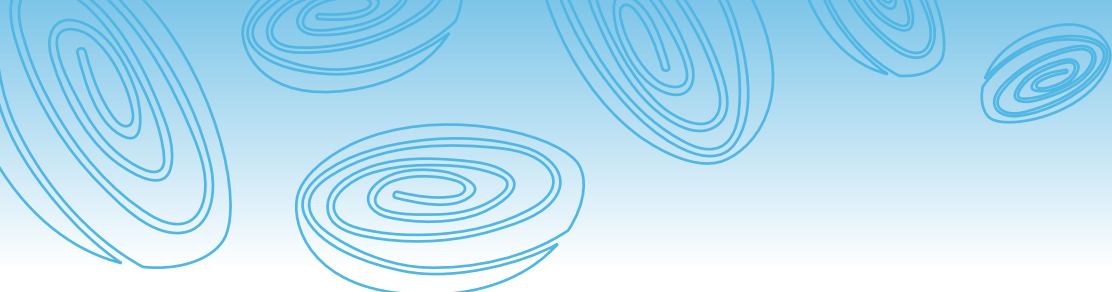
Ask them how they think the situation could be resolved. Even young children can make good suggestions. Some of their ideas may be silly or funny. Have a laugh with them (but not at them) and say briefly why these wouldn't work. Move on to the ideas that are workable and come to an agreement about the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

This helps children:

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







Children learn to manage their behaviour in the short term for something that's more important to them longer term - pleasing you and feeling closer. 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 do what was agreed

The agreement you come up with might involve children:

- trying to manage or change 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.

Acknowledge when your child has changed a behaviour, learned the skills to do what is expected or achieved what they agreed to do. If there is still further learning needed ask 'What else do you think we could do here?' Reflection is a key life skill.

## 7. If things don't go as planned

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

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
- require 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. 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. It's up to you to lead the way and role model how this can work.

- 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 support them to find a solution. Don't blame, shame or force them to say 'Sorry'. Once the matter has been addressed don't bring it up again.



## What about consequences?

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

- focus on the hurt of the punishment rather than the learning required, 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 their behaviour 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 safe '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 fail to develop the skill and cannot perform.

Some parents react to children's behaviour by yelling, making threats or smacking. These responses can impact the connection 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 before things build up. Acting early will support both you and your child. Your doctor, school, a counsellor or other health professional are good places to start.

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.





## Want more information?

### **Families Growing Together, Department of Human Services**

Free workshops for parents including 'My Child and Me' based on information in this Guide  
<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/how-we-help/child-and-family-support-system-cfss/family-supportservices/families-growing-together/familiesgrowing-together-workshops>

### **Community Development Coordinators (CDCs), Department of Human Services**

Local community information and support for families  
<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/how-we-help/child-and-family-support-system-cfss/family-support-services/community-development-coordinators>

### **Parent Helpline**

Phone 1300 364 100

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

### **ASK - Adults Supporting Kids**

Connecting families with South Australian information, free local support services or someone to talk to  
[www.adultssupportingkids.com.au](http://www.adultssupportingkids.com.au)

### **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

### **Mensline Australia**

Phone 1300 789 978, 24 hours

A telephone and online support and information service for men and their families  
[www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

### **Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)**

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment  
Free service for children aged 0-5. Nurses can help with children's health, eating, sleeping and development  
[www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.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](http://www.rasa.org.au)
- **Uniting Communities**  
Phone 1800 615 677  
[www.unitingcommunities.org](http://www.unitingcommunities.org)
- **Centacare**  
Phone 8215 6700  
[www.centacare.org.au](http://www.centacare.org.au)
- **Anglicare SA**  
Phone 8305 9200  
[www.anglicaresa.com.au](http://www.anglicaresa.com.au)

### **Raising Children Network**

Information on raising children, including understanding behaviour and child development  
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

### **Parenting SA**

For videos - Parents talk about positive approaches: 'Finding solutions together', 'Learning from natural consequences', 'Misbehaviour is missed behaviour', 'Moving beyond the battleground' and 'Pause and respond rather than react'

For other 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](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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### **Parenting SA**

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://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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