

A booklet to support parents in managing children's behaviour



# We Can Work it Out

Parenting with confidence



**Save the Children**

# Contents

1	Introduction
2	Confident parenting
3	Through children's eyes
4	Real-life examples
13	Dos and don'ts
16	When children won't listen
17	Ain't misbehaving
19	Further reading
20	Useful addresses

This booklet accompanies the *We Can Work it Out: Parenting with confidence* training pack.

Published by Save the Children  
1 St John's Lane  
London EC1M 4AR  
Registered charity no. 213890  
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[www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)

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## Introduction

**We all want to be good parents. But while it's usual to have lessons to learn to drive a car, somehow we're just expected to know how to bring up children.**

**Being a parent is one of the most demanding jobs we'll ever do. We've probably all had days when we're pushed to breaking point and we do or say things we regret. Or days when we're riddled with doubts about whether we're doing the right thing.**

**Rest assured, there's no such thing as a perfect parent. Nor is there one 'right' way to bring up your children. But there are ways parenting can be easier and less fraught.**

**This booklet provides practical tips on how to take the stress out of parenting. It suggests ways to develop children's co-operation and self-discipline without resorting to smacking.**

# Confident parenting

Nobody wins if parenting is a continual battle, where parents force children to do as they are told. Children grow up feeling resentful or angry, and parents are too stressed to enjoy their children.

Parenting is easiest when it's based on good communication. This works both ways. Children have the right to express themselves, learn and develop. But parents also have the right to set limits about what behaviour is OK and what isn't. This approach is called 'positive discipline'.

Positive discipline involves:

- believing children want to communicate and co-operate
- listening to them
- discussing what you want them to do

- setting clear limits for behaviour
- being firm and consistent
- looking at disagreements as an opportunity to develop problem-solving skills.

If children are listened to, their communication and negotiation skills will develop. They will learn to sort out arguments without threats or violence, because they learn from us how to negotiate.

It doesn't mean, however, that children should get everything they want. Sometimes they need to know that when you ask them to do something, it's not up for debate. If children generally feel that they are listened to and their viewpoints respected, then when you are firm about something, they will respond well.

## Through children's eyes

Save the Children asked 76 children aged between five and eight what they thought about smacking. Here's what they told us:

- Smacking is really hitting. One girl said: "Smacking is what parents do when they hit you, only they call it a smack."
- Smacking doesn't work. Children sometimes don't understand what they've done wrong or feel so overwhelmed by the hurt that they forget what they've done.
- Smacking teaches children that hitting someone smaller and less powerful is OK. This is confusing if children are being smacked for hurting or hitting others.
- Smacking is wrong.

It's all very well talking about the theory of changing children's behaviour, but what about those times when you're at the end of your tether? Let's look at some typical situations that might prompt parents to resort to smacking, and think again.

## Safe from harm

Leigh is nine months old. He has just begun to crawl around his flat, delighting in his new freedom. His mum, Paula, follows him around, making safe routes and moving anything dangerous out of the way. As he reaches the bedroom, Leigh suddenly notices an electric socket and reaches out to touch it. He looks as if he's about to put his fingers in the holes. Paula is scared.



### **Will smacking help?**

No. A young baby is naturally curious and learns by exploring. Suddenly being smacked will not make sense. Leigh will not be able to understand the relationship between smacking and the socket.

### **What would work better?**

First, do all you can to remove danger from the child's immediate environment, or remove the child from danger. It is also important to begin to explain about safety to young children from a very early age. Even though babies will not understand immediately, they do respond to facial expressions and tone of voice. If you gently explain what is safe and what isn't,

babies will start to take in a general sense of warning. They will learn that we are giving them important information, and we are laying the foundations for future communication.

## Hurting others

**Ella, 22 months old, is at the local drop-in centre with her mum. Ella has brought along her most precious toy, a little bear. After playing on the slide, Ella sees that two-year-old Joel has grabbed her bear from her pushchair while her mum is talking. Outraged, Ella pulls at her bear and pushes Joel, who holds on tight to the bear. Their mums don't notice.**

**Ella keeps tugging but Joel doesn't let go. Ella bites Joel and he howls, letting go of the bear. Both mums notice now. Ella's mum feels awful – this isn't the first time Ella has bitten someone at the drop-in centre. No-one knows quite why Ella bit Joel, and both the children are now crying. Ella will not say sorry. Her mum feels increasingly angry with her.**





### **Will smacking help?**

No. Ella is starting to work out that she can get people to do what she wants if she bites them. Hitting Ella will only reinforce the idea that hurting other people is OK if you are cross with them.

### **What would work better?**

It's important not to get into a pattern where children get a lot of attention for doing something that is disruptive or hurts others. Ella needs to learn to use words if she is cross or wants someone to listen to her. At an early stage of the incident with Joel, she needs reassurance that her mum understands how precious the bear is to her and that it is going to be safely

returned. When the dispute with Joel goes unchecked, it escalates. Ella then responds in an unacceptable way. She needs to be told, "No biting" clearly and consistently. However, she still needs the reassurance of seeing her mother trying to find out what has happened. Unless Ella believes that her feelings will be taken seriously, she will not want to change her behaviour.

## “I’m having fun”

Angela tells her four-year-old son, Liam, that it’s time to go home. He’s had a great day playing with his friend, Joe. But now it’s time to go home for tea. “Just one more minute, please,” Liam begs. Angela carries on talking to Joe’s mum. Five minutes later Angela tells Liam it’s time to go again. “No, don’t want to,” Liam complains. “It’s time to go *now*,” Angela insists. “We’ll be late. Put your coat on.” Liam runs off and throws himself on the floor, kicking and screaming as Angela tries to squeeze him into his coat and shoes. Just as she’s fastened one shoe on his foot, he wriggles free, and pulls the shoe off, throwing it at Angela. She loses her temper.



### **Will smacking help?**

No. Angela may feel better for a second and it may cause Liam to stop momentarily. But next time she'd have to hit harder to get his attention.

### **What would work better?**

Liam has had a great day and doesn't want to go home. One strategy is to give children a five- or ten-minute warning before it's time to leave so that they can finish playing. It is also very important to be consistent.

Liam was allowed to continue playing when he begged his mum. He doesn't know that she can't keep on delaying

leaving. If they don't leave, the shops will be closed and they won't get their tea. Give children such information so that they understand. Children may show anger – this is natural. However, it's important not to respond in anger. Remember you are the adult – the responsible one.

## Arguing again

**Yasmin, aged five, and Adam, aged seven, are watching TV. The programme they were watching has finished and now they are arguing about what to watch next. They start fighting over the remote control. Their dad hears the noise and tells them to stop. Yasmin cries that it's not fair – she**

**“never gets to watch anything”, and runs screaming to her bedroom. Adam switches the TV over and starts to watch it, ignoring his crying sister and his dad. Dad switches it off, and Adam storms off, shouting at Yasmin for “spoiling everything like a baby”. They start to fight again.**



### **Will smacking help?**

No. Brothers and sisters do disagree – sometimes a lot! It's part of growing up. Smacking them isn't going to help them learn to agree or to reach compromises. It will teach them that if someone annoys them, then a good response is to hit them.

### **What would work better?**

It's important to focus on fairness and taking turns. Children will respond well if they feel that everyone is treated equally and that being fair matters to parents. If parents' decisions appear to be random, it can feel very unfair and unsafe for children. They may conclude that they have no alternative but to blame and fight each

other. Instead, try to help children learn to negotiate about the things that cause conflict. Get the children to plan together what they want to watch, within boundaries that you set. For example, you might suggest that each day they can both choose a programme they want to watch. Your life as a parent is made easier as children themselves take responsibility for keeping to the rules.

## **Smacking can hurt for a lifetime**

**Finding alternatives to smacking isn't a case of a quick fix. It's about working from the moment your child is born to develop a good relationship.**

**Children thrive if given lots of attention. If their good behaviour is noticed and encouraged, they'll blossom and enjoy co-operating.**

**It's important to remember that smacking doesn't just stop hurting when the pain goes. The hurt can last a lifetime and make your child a less confident person.**

# Dos and don'ts

## Dos

- **Do notice your child's good behaviour**

Praise and reward them if they do things well. Give them love and attention, such as playing a game or reading a favourite story. Let them know the things you like, for example, when they put away one lot of toys before they get more out to play with. This is how children learn self-discipline.

- **Do listen to children**

Take seriously what children have to say. If they think you won't listen to them, children will do what they can, however negative, until they've got your attention and you are forced to listen to them.

- **Do give children the opportunity to express their feelings**

Telling a child that they can't watch TV because it's time to go to bed might make them angry

and upset. It is quite normal for children to show this. Give them space and show them that you notice how they feel, but that it's still time to go to bed. Children will learn to accept that you mean what you say, but that you understand how they feel.

- **Do make your message clear**

Make simple direct requests that are short and to the point. Make one request at a time. Speak in a calm and firm voice. Be consistent. Try not to nag.

- **Do give reasons for your decision**

For example: "You have five minutes to finish your game and get ready. If we don't leave in five minutes, tea will be late." This explains the consequences if the child doesn't co-operate.

- **Do be realistic in your expectations**

It's important to have a general sense of what is possible to expect from children at different ages. For example, it's no use punishing a baby for dropping food on the floor or a two-year-old for crying because she is tired.

- **Do practise what you preach**

Set a good example to your children by showing them, rather than just telling them, how to behave. For example, if it isn't acceptable for a child to swear, try not to swear yourself.

- **Do encourage children to devise their own solutions to problems**

Children often have excellent ideas for solving a problem in a fair way. Ask them – for example, “OK, you don't want to wear your new shoes, you want to wear your old trainers instead. I'm not too happy about this. How can we sort this out?”

- **Do remember that your child is a person too**

He or she has their own unique personality from birth. Babies will thrive when you notice their likes and dislikes, their character and what they do well.

- **Do say sorry if you've said or done something you regret**

It helps children learn to say sorry too. Also explain how their actions make you feel. For example, “If you keep jumping on the sofa, it makes me angry. I'm worried it isn't strong enough and it'll break – and we don't have enough money for a new one.”

- **Do put yourselves in your children's shoes sometimes**

It must be odd to them that when they spilt the cornflakes yesterday you didn't mind, but today you were really angry.



## Don't

- **Don't give lots of attention to behaviour you don't like**

But don't ignore it either. Be brief and firm and calm. Describe what you don't like and ask children to put it right, if that's possible. Make sure children are aware of the limits; then they are more likely to keep within them.

- **Don't rely on bribes**

Children don't learn to be self-disciplined if you bribe them to stop behaving badly. Bribes will spoil a child and encourage bad behaviour.

- **Don't use threats or shout**

It is better if children do as we ask because they understand the reasons why, rather than because they are scared.

- **Don't ridicule children**

Don't tell children how bad, stupid, lazy or clumsy they are, or that you don't love or like them. Criticising children or withdrawing love can be very damaging and can undermine their confidence.

- **Don't compare your child with others**

Children are individuals who experience the world completely differently from each other, just as parents are also different in their own right.

- **Don't discipline children without explaining**

Tell them what they have done wrong and how they could do it differently in the future. But try to do this when you and the child are calm. For example, "You know when I got really cross with you earlier? Well, if you run across the road without holding my hand or looking, it could be very dangerous. You must wait and hold my hand and then look before you cross."

- **Don't be afraid to negotiate, compromise and even reconsider your views.**

Why is it so important that Darren wears his new shoes even if he's more comfortable in his trainers? Does it really matter on this occasion? Can you let him have a choice this time?

## When children won't listen

- **Kneel or sit so that you are at your child's level.**
- **Hold your child gently by the shoulders or hands while you make the request.**
- **Look right into your child's eyes.**
- **Talk in a firm, clear, calm voice.**
- **Look serious while you speak.**
- **Make it clear that you expect to be listened to – as you would listen to them.**
- **Listen to your child's response and carefully consider his or her views.**
- **Give children options wherever possible.**
- **Try negotiation.**
- **Give ample opportunity for them to complete the task.**
- **Praise co-operation or explain the consequences (without resorting to threats) of non co-operation.**
- **Give warnings and helpful reminders.**
- **Encourage children's problem-solving skills.**

## Ain't misbehaving

Sometimes children will misbehave. It's part of testing the limits and learning what's acceptable. At times it's best to ignore minor misbehaviour and choose more important instances to react to.

Often it is enough to tell children what they've done wrong, what they should have done and what to do next time.

If you decide to use sanctions for bad behaviour, do so sparingly. Attention, encouragement and rewards for good

behaviour are much more effective than continual punishment for bad. Punishment doesn't teach children how to behave differently in future, and it doesn't motivate them. Continual punishment can build up resentment.

If a child persistently misbehaves, we need to look at deeper causes. What does misbehaviour mean? Is a 'naughty' child just someone trying to tell you how they feel?

If you believe that your child repeatedly behaves in unacceptable ways, try to keep a diary of trigger points that seem to upset or provoke him or her. Does he or she always get angry when you're on the phone in the evening, or when you don't listen or when a younger child gets a cuddle? Try to notice both your child's reaction and your response.

If all else fails and you find you have raised your hand to smack:

- divert it to hit a table or your own knee

- place your child in a safe place and leave him or her for a few minutes while you calm down
- clap your hands instead of smacking – it's a better way to get attention.

Finally, remember you're not alone.

Try to find out about local parenting groups (your library should have information) if you'd like to know more about positive parenting.

## Further reading

*An Eye for an Eye Leaves Everyone Blind: Teaching young children to settle conflicts without violence* – training pack and parents' guide – Sue Finch, Save the Children, 2003, ISBN 1841870765.

*It Hurts you Inside: Children talking about smacking*, Carolyne Willow and Tina Hyder, Save the Children and National Children's Bureau, 2004, ISBN 1841870919.

*Let's Work Together* – a training pack for early years workers to identify children's challenging behaviour and offer appropriate ways of dealing with it – Kate Harper, Save the Children, 1996, ISBN 1899120459.

*We Can Work it Out: Parenting with confidence* – a training pack for facilitators of parents' groups – an extended version of this booklet with training exercises – Kate Harper, Save the Children, 1999, ISBN 189912098X.

### **Children's books**

*A Boy and a Bear: The Children's Relaxation Book* by Lori Lite and M Hartigan, published by Speciality Press, 1996, ISBN 18996941076.

*Feelings* by Alikei, published by Harper Trophy, 1986, ISBN 068806518X.

*Feeling Angry* by Althea Braithwaite, published by A & C Black, 2001.

*Your Emotions: I Feel Angry* by Brian Moses, published by Wayland, 1994, ISBN 0750214031.

## Useful addresses

### **B.M. Cry-sis**

London WC1N 3XX  
Send s.a.e. for information  
08451 228669 (helpline)

### **British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering**

(BAAF),  
Skyline House  
200 Union Street  
London SE1 OLX  
020 7593 2000

### **Childline**

45 Folgate Street  
London E1 6GL  
0800 1111 (helpline)

### **Childline in Scotland**

18 Albion Street  
Glasgow G1 1LH  
0800 1111 (helpline)

### **Children are Unbeatable!**

94 White Lion Street  
London N1 9PF  
020 7713 0569

### **End Physical Punishment of Children (EPOCH)**

77 Holloway Road  
London N7 8JZ  
020 7700 0627

### **Gingerbread**

7 Sovereign Close  
Sovereign Court  
London E1W 3HW  
0800 018 4318 (advice line)

### **National Council for One Parent Families**

255 Kentish Town Road  
London NW5 2LX  
0800 018 5026 (helpline)

### **The Fostering Network**

87 Blackfriar Road  
London SE1 8HA  
020 7620 6400

### **National Newpin**

(New Parent Information  
Network)  
Sutherland House  
35 Sutherland Square  
Walworth  
London SE17 3EE  
020 7358 5900

### **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)**

National Centre  
42 Curtain Road  
London EC2A 3NH  
020 7825 2500

### **Parentline Plus**

520 Highgate Studios  
53-79 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL  
0808 800 2222 (helpline)

### **Stepfamily Scotland**

5 Coates Place  
Edinburgh  
EH3 7AA  
0845 122 8655 (helpline)

**Save the Children fights for children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. We work with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.**

**Save the Children is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 27 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.**

**Save the Children is one of over 300 organisations that have formed the 'Children are Unbeatable!' alliance. The alliance is seeking legal reform to give children the same protection under the law on assault as adults, and promotes positive, non-violent discipline. For information, write to Children are Unbeatable! (see Useful addresses).**



AAA!

UNDERSTANDING

PRAISE

APPROVAL

PEACE  
+  
QUIET  
EXTRA LARGE

TOLERANCE