

Encouraging better behaviour



A practical guide to
positive parenting

NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.™

"I was smacked as a child and promised never to smack my kids. Smacking never stopped me or my brothers being naughty, but I did resent my mum afterwards."

**Christine, mum of Natalie, 3,
and Louise, 3 months**



"I don't believe in smacking as a method of punishment for a child who has done something wrong. I don't think it works."

**Lorraine Kelly, TV
presenter and mum
of one**

Most parents say their children are the most important part of their lives. They bring joy and laughter and give you a stake in the future.

But sometimes being a parent isn't easy. It can be challenging and exhausting. At such times, parents who are normally loving and caring can find themselves "losing it" and hitting their children.



Most parents don't think hitting children is right, yet in times of stress, anger or frustration find themselves lashing out. But many feel guilty afterwards and want to find better ways of handling difficult behaviour.

We've collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you understand positive parenting and positive discipline, and that using physical punishment is never a good idea for children of any age.



Which type of parent are you?

Read the following three descriptions and decide which one you think is closest to you:

“Raising children is a constant battle.”

You often:

- have lots of strict rules
- use demands and threats to keep your child under control
- punish harshly and smack often.

“I just want a quiet life.”

You:

- forget about your own needs and ignore all naughty behaviour, even when it is far from minor
- always give in to whining
- don't encourage independence, instead doing everything for your child.

“I love my children, but understand they can't have and do everything they want.”

You try to:

- have clear, simple rules and expect them to be met
- give your child some control and choices appropriate to their age and stage of development
- use mainly positive methods and praise to encourage good behaviour, showing disapproval but never using harsh punishments.



The truth is that you are probably a bit of each type of parent depending on the circumstances. You may recognise that the ideal sort of parenting – keeping both children and parents happiest and having the best chance of children behaving well – is the last example in the list. This example is sometimes called **positive parenting**, but it can be hard to keep it up all the time.

Which is closest to your child?

Read the following three descriptions and decide which one you think is closest to your child:

- Placid, easy-going, quickly does what you tell them – hardly ever gets into a battle with you.
- Can sometimes cooperate and behave well, but has moments when they seem determined to ignore your wishes.
- Almost never does what you ask without a battle – seems set on having their own way.

No two children are the same. Right from the start we can see how every baby is different. One child may be easy to comfort and settle to sleep, while another may suffer with colic and fight sleep and you.

Research has shown that there are children who are more “difficult” – that is, more active, less keen to do as they are told and more likely to play up. Having a child like this can make it extra hard work for parents who are trying to be positive.



What is positive parenting and positive discipline?

Positive parenting and positive discipline are techniques that work well with every child, regardless of their age, temperament, background, culture or tradition.

These techniques build on your child's wish to please you, guaranteeing a better-behaved, happy child and less-stressed parents.

They work by allowing you to:

- create a good relationship with your child by showing love and affection
- emphasise all the things that please you about your child
- be a good example – your children will take their lead from what you do
- praise the behaviour you want to see in your children
- listen to your child's views and negotiate solutions to problems together
- avoid harsh punishments like smacking or shouting excessively
- have clear limits that are fair and age appropriate, expressing your wishes in a way that shows you mean what you say.



Different approaches will work for different children in your family, and the rules will change as your children grow.

Understanding why children misbehave

All children test the limits you set and try to cross boundaries some of the time.

This is an inevitable part of growing up, learning and becoming an independent person. Younger children particularly may test constantly. This is not them being naughty or disobedient – it is the only way they can learn when you mean what you say and what the limits to their behaviour are.

Attention seeking

Children will do just about anything to get the attention they crave from their parents.

Revenge

Trying to get back at someone they feel has treated them badly – a sibling, parent or friend. Children may not understand your reasons for insisting on a rule or limit – it helps to recognise their feelings of anger.

Feeling powerless

If a child feels upset at not having control, they may often hit out or get mad at an older sibling or friend.



Feeling sad

A child of any age may show that they are feeling sad or anxious by behaving badly and may need more sympathy and affection. Punishing them will only make matters worse.

Stage of development

Some children are simply not able to do what their parents want because of their age or stage of development.

Babies

It is important to remember that babies behave as they do in order to get their needs met. Their crying or not sleeping, for example, is not naughty or done to upset you.

At the beginning it is your important job to sort out your baby's needs. Older babies may show a negative or stubborn streak – spitting out food they don't like or wriggling away from a nappy change. All they are doing is trying to communicate likes and dislikes in the only way they can. They are not doing it to annoy you.



Positive discipline tips:

- Be loving and comforting with your baby from the start.
- Gradually introduce routines.
- Use distraction with older babies on the move – point out something happening out of the window when they head for the TV remote, or swap a toy for your keys.
- “Baby-proof” your home so your baby can enjoy challenges without battles.
- Show that sometimes you have to set limits – but gently. Prevent a poke in the eye by holding their hand; strap them into their car seat, saying “I know it makes you cross, but we have to do it”.
- Never smack your baby or shout at them.

“When our daughter was born she looked so pale and fragile, like a doll. We thought, ‘we can never hurt her’ – and we never did.”

Jo and Chris, parents of Bella, 6

Find out more

Cry-sis

Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.

www.cry-sis.org.uk

08451 228 669

Toddlers

Most behaviour in toddlers that adults call naughty is actually part of normal development.

All toddlers test limits, try to be independent, get into everything, get mad and have tantrums. Check with other parents of toddlers to realise they just can't help themselves and that you are not alone.

Positive discipline tips:

- Avoid using orders and ultimatums with your toddler.
- Have clear, simple rules and routines to cut down the need for battles.
- Keep your use of “no” to a minimum – use “later” or “soon” if you can.
- Acknowledge feelings – “I know you are angry”.
- Praise every little bit of good behaviour you want to encourage and turn a blind eye to minor misbehaviour whenever possible.
- Try to ignore behaviour you don't like, as this means it is less likely to be repeated.
- Remain calm and reasonable yourself, even when your toddler is in a rage, by taking a deep breath and waiting before you respond.
- Remember that smacking always makes toddler behaviour and tantrums worse and can make your child afraid of you.



“Lauren used to have a lot of tantrums and I used to completely ignore them. Eventually, she gave up and now she's the most even-tempered child I know.”

Sophie, mum of Lauren, 7

Find out more

Professional Association for
Childcare and Early Years
(PACEY)

www.pacey.org.uk
0845 880 0044

Northern Ireland Childminding
Association (NICMA)

www.nicma.org
0871 200 2063

Scottish Childcare

www.scottishchildcare.gov.uk

School-age children

It is important to remember that what you might see as cheeky or disobedient could actually be a natural desire in your child to assert independence and show they have a mind of their own, with their own thoughts and needs. These qualities may seem irritating, but they are vital for adult life. Even though your children may seem very independent, they still need lots of love and reassurance from you.

Find out more

Parenting Across Scotland
www.parentingacrossscotland.org
0800 028 2233

Parents Advice Centre
(Northern Ireland)
www.parentingni.org
0808 8010 722

Family Lives
www.familylives.org.uk
0808 800 2222



Positive discipline tips:

- Describe exactly what you want your child to do. Give reasons and make sure that you listen to their views.
- Try not to give too many orders. Constantly saying “do this” and “don’t do that” can overwhelm a child.
- Listen carefully to your child talking about their friends and about their day, be alert to any worries that may make behaviour worse and talk about areas of conflict.
- Use specific praise, describing what it is for and letting minor misbehaviour go.
- Keep criticisms to a minimum – and only criticise behaviour, not your child.
- Don’t be trapped into pointless arguments.
- Calmly repeat what you expect your child to do.
- If your disappointment or mild disapproval doesn’t work to change your child’s behaviour, try consequences.

Teenagers

From pre-adolescence on, it is normal for young people to challenge you more – their friends exert a greater influence and they just can't go along with everything parents want.

Positive discipline tips:

- Don't take bad behaviour personally. Try to understand how hard it is to gain independence and a sense of identity and think back to how you felt at that age.
- Keep communicating – your teenager still needs your love and respect.
- Try to be non-judgmental about their behaviour.
- Keep criticism to a minimum and trust them to make the right decisions, as sometimes they need to learn from their mistakes.
- Accept that some conflict may be inevitable.
- Have clear rules and limits with reasonable consequences.
- Try not to use threats or orders.
- Talk and negotiate solutions when there is a disagreement.
- Never hit a young person. Physical punishment only makes defiant, teenage behaviour much worse and can damage self-esteem.



- Use appropriate sanctions as punishment, such as the withdrawal of a privilege, the cutting of pocket money or “grounding” – refusing to allow them out with their friends for a specified time.
- Think of your job as guiding your teenager towards adult life.

“I used to smack my son. When he was 14, I went to hit him. He grabbed my hand and said, ‘No you don’t’. I never raised a hand to him after that.”

Jack, dad of Paul, 17

Find out more

GotATeenager
www.gotateenager.org.uk
(Provided by Family Lives)

Why smacking is

Some parents find it hard to imagine how they could cope without smacking. They accept that positive discipline methods are valuable, but believe there are situations where only a smack will do.

Defiance

“I didn’t smack my two sons, but I did smack my daughter because she was so wilful. One day, when I smacked her, she said, ‘That didn’t hurt!’ – I knew then that I mustn’t smack her again, because I was afraid of what might happen, and I never did.”

Lucy, mum of Tom, 10, Jess, 8, and Joe, 5

If you feel your child is particularly stubborn and strong-willed or shows a lot of defiance, you may be convinced that you have to smack to make an impression.

It can be very tempting to think this. Unfortunately strict punishments and smacking always make matters worse

with a naturally strong-willed child. They are likely to display more defiance and answer you back, saying things like, “You can’t make me”. They could even hit back and may fear but not respect you. Things can very quickly spiral out of control.

Risks

“I smacked my little boy when he was about three. We were in the kitchen and he slipped and banged his head on a cupboard. There was such a bang – my heart stopped. I would never have forgiven myself... I’ve never forgotten it.”

Margo, mum of Angus, 6

Sometimes parents find they need to smack harder and harder in order to get a result.

Dangers

“You have to smack them if they try to do something really dangerous, like running into the road.”

For many parents in these situations, a smack is a natural reaction. You may be overwhelmed by emotion, shock, horror and panic, and show this by the smack.

But from your child’s point of view, a firm hug, quickly being lifted out of danger, and the tone of your voice demonstrate the lesson clearly enough. The hurt or



never a good idea

sting of a smack just adds confusion to an already confusing situation.

Unacceptable behaviour

“He bit his sister, so I had to smack him.”

Sometimes parents feel a particular behaviour is so outrageous that they want to demonstrate to their child that it is totally unacceptable. Unfortunately, smacking or biting back gives a very confusing message – that it is OK to use force or to hit physically when you are angry or to make a point. This does not teach your child why their behaviour is unacceptable.

Pushing your buttons

“Sometimes they just wind you up to a point where you can’t take it.”

It can feel very hard when a small child seems to know exactly which buttons to press to make you feel annoyed and irritated.

It is important to understand what is going on. Small children very rarely behave as they do just to annoy adults. They are trying to get your attention, or trying to get some need of their own met.

Releasing your own tension

“When I am feeling really wound up, I just can’t help myself smacking. It helps release my tension, and I feel able to be more rational afterwards.”

There are times when we all feel stressed. The washing machine may



have just packed up and you can’t find the PE kit your child needs for school. Whatever the reason, being on a short fuse means you are much more likely to over-react by smacking. It may feel as if you have made yourself feel better but this doesn’t usually last for more than a minute or so. Most parents say that they feel guilty soon afterwards.

Immediate results

“Smacking works faster.”

Smacking may look like it has the desired effect – it stops the behaviour in its tracks, and maybe your child cries or seems apologetic. It may even release tension for you as a parent.

But it can have a downside, and some undesirable long-term consequences.

The myths

“It never did me any harm.”

“A good smack...”

“Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

“You’re making a rod for your own back.”

“You have to show them who’s the boss.”

It is odd how many phrases have sprung up to justify smacking children. It almost seems to suggest that smacking is an essential part of a parent’s toolkit – that without smacks, children will be uncontrollable and go off the rails – when in fact the opposite is true.



These types of phrases also make it sound like being a parent is a battleground, with children and parents permanently on different sides.

But it doesn’t have to be like that. Many parents find that once they get into the positive parenting habit, they hardly need to think about discipline at all.

“But I was smacked as a child – did my parents get it wrong?”

Ideas on bringing up children have changed. We know a great deal more now about why children behave as they do and about the effects of smacking.

Our parents did the best they could with the information available at the time. Many modern parents choose positive discipline, and realise that smacking is rapidly becoming outdated. It is now banned in many countries, as well as in our schools and childcare settings.

“It’s always been a part of our culture to smack.”

Hitting children should never be seen as excusable for some groups of parents or children. Positive parenting and discipline work best for everyone.

The downside to smacking

- Even though they may not show it at the time, children feel emotionally hurt, resentful and angry. Over long periods this spoils family relationships.
- Children who are often smacked learn that is how to behave. It may cause them to hit or bully other children.
- Children learn how to avoid the unpleasant outcome of smacking as they grow up, but the behaviours they use to do it may not be those parents want to encourage – like lying, or hiding how they feel.
- Some children are likely to become more defiant and challenging, so discipline is increasingly hard as they grow older.
- Others may become withdrawn and not develop independence.
- When you give out love, you get it back. When you give out harsh punishments like screaming, yelling or hitting, this means you are eventually likely to get anger and resentment back.

Remember that positive parenting takes time and effort

Working at positive discipline takes a lot of energy and no parent can do it perfectly all the time. There will be days

when you are too tired or busy and feel that you can't be reasonable or put in the effort required.

All parents behave in ways they regret some of the time – shouting or smacking, for example. But saying sorry and making up again teaches children a very valuable lesson in understanding that parents are human and make mistakes too.

It may even seem as if behaviour gets worse for a while – but keep at it!

Eventually you should find your children will behave better and you will find you are less stressed and your whole family's life is happier.



Top 10 ways to be a great parent without smacking

1

Show your child love and warmth as much as possible – the more they get used to this, the more they want to keep it that way.

2

Have clear, simple rules and limits. Be consistent in expecting them to be met.

3

Demonstrate by your own example, giving reasons, talking and listening to teach your child how to behave.

4

Praise good behaviour. Give your children attention when they are being good and it will increase.

5

Ignore behaviour you don't want repeated as much as possible.

6

Criticise behaviours you don't like, not your child; use mild disapproval and reprimands when a rule is broken.

7

Give rewards for good behaviour, like lots of hugs and kisses.

8

Distract younger children instead of nagging or punishing and use humour to lighten up difficult situations.

9

Allow children some control – making choices and encouraging joint decisions.

10

If punishments are necessary, let your child experience natural consequences. Imposing a consequence like a removal of privileges or, as a last resort, a "time out" works better than smacking.

Find out more

Children are Unbeatable Alliance

An alliance of more than 400 organisations campaigning for children to have the same legal protection against being hit as adults.

www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk

Cutting stress

There are much better and fairer ways to reduce your stress than by smacking your child. Try some of the following:

Talk and listen

Communication is the key to all good relationships. Unless you ask for what you need, you probably won't get it. Unless you say what you think, you'll end up feeling frustrated.

Get organised

Make lists of things to remember.

Plan ahead

Work out the possible stress points in your day and think about what you can do about them.

Take time off

Make sure you have some time to yourself – each day if possible.

Try to relax

Find ways to help yourself relax. Exercise, peaceful music, a quiet cup of tea alone, some gardening, visualising a beautiful and peaceful scene – whatever works to help calm you down.

Plan a treat for yourself

When things really get you down, choose something that makes you feel good – a hot bath, a visit to the shops, a night out with your partner or friends.



Congratulate yourself

If you have coped with something difficult, you have a right to feel proud of it.

Look on the bright side

Concentrate on what you like most about being a parent and the good times in your life.

Remember that stress is catching

If your children see you getting upset and angry when things don't go right, they will probably react in a similar way in their own lives.

Managing

Some parents may have become so stressed that anger is never far from the surface. Others may never have learned acceptable ways of handling the anger they feel – this may go right back to when they were children themselves and feeling that their own needs were never met. Whatever the reason, it is essential you take steps to deal with serious anger and get help if you can't do it by yourself.

Try some of the following:

- Breathe slowly and deeply and count to 10.
- Go outside for a breath of fresh air.
- Leave the room and scream if you feel like it. It's better to shout at the walls than at your children.
- Go into another room on your own for a minute and think about why you are angry. Is it really because of your child or is something else upsetting you?
- Make it a priority to remain in control. Tell yourself, "I am not going to lose it, I will calm down", and take the time to let this happen before dealing with your child's behaviour.



Getting help
is a positive
step – not a sign
of weakness.

g anger



Get help

This is a positive, useful step to take – not a sign of weakness. Remember that you are not the only parent who feels that outside help would be useful. Ring your partner or someone you can talk to. The problem may not

seem so bad once you've shared it with another adult. Also, don't assume that just because you are a parent that you are the only one capable of meeting your child's needs – ask for help from your partner, family or close friends when you feel you need it.

Find out more

Anger management classes

Your GP should be able to tell you about anger management classes in your area, or might refer you to a counsellor or self-help group.

Mental Health Foundation

Provides information, carries out research and campaigns on

mental health problems.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind

Provides information, support and services across England and Wales on mental health problems.

www.mind.org.uk

0300 123 3393

More advice from the NSPCC

When you're worried about a child or just need some advice, talk to us.

Whatever your concern, the NSPCC is here to offer help, advice and support. We're here 24 hours a day and you don't have to say who you are.

Call 0808 800 5000, email help@nspcc.org.uk or text 88858.

If you are hard of hearing, you can contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm by:

- textphone 0808 056 0566
- British Sign Language interpreters on videophone 020 8463 1148
- British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam – nspcc.signvideo.tv



“Don't just keep worries to yourself. Talk to us”

Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, listening to children and when's the right time to leave your child home alone.

To request a pack, please email help@nspcc.org.uk or call 0808 800 5000, mentioning the parenting pack or download copies from www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting

