

**YOUR YOUNG  
CHILD'S  
BEHAVIOUR**

How You Can Help



Barnardos

## **INTRODUCTION**

This booklet is for parents of young children up to the age of six although some of the information can apply to children of all ages. It aims to give you a better understanding of your child's behaviour and what it is that your child is trying to communicate through their behaviour. It also offers some ideas that you might find helpful in guiding you to support appropriate behaviour.

Being a parent is one of the most important jobs we can do, but it can also be one of the most difficult and we have all had times when we are frustrated, confused and stressed by our child's behaviour.

All young children misbehave at times, not because they are deliberately being naughty or bold, but because they don't know any other way to express themselves or they don't yet know what is expected of them in certain situations.

With your support and encouragement, your child will learn the skills they need to manage their own emotions and behaviour.

## WHAT IS BEHAVIOUR?

Behaviours are our actions and responses to feelings, emotions and needs. All behaviour has meaning and is closely connected to how we feel and what we think. If you are feeling happy, you may smile; if you are feeling hungry you may become irritable. Feelings themselves are neither 'right' or 'wrong', it is how we express these feelings that is important.

When children are seen as having nice manners, are able to share with others and do as they are told, we think of them as being 'well behaved'. When children have temper tantrums, shout and stamp their feet, hit out at others or throw things, we think of them as 'bold' or 'badly behaved'. There is no such thing as a 'bad' child but there are behaviours that are not good. As with adults, a child's behaviour is an outward expression of the emotion they are feeling at the time and their behaviour, therefore, has meaning.



## **WHAT BEHAVIOUR YOU MAY EXPECT FROM YOUR CHILD**

Every child is unique and will develop different skills and display different behaviour at different ages. You know your child best and what they are capable of.

Children are naturally curious and want to learn about people and explore their surroundings and different sensations. It is important to remember that certain behaviour is a natural and important part of a child developing and learning about the world. Sometimes your child's behaviour may be very frustrating and require a lot of patience on your part, but when you are aware of the reasons behind the behaviour, it can make it easier for you to respond to it.

The table opposite shows some examples of behaviours typically displayed at different ages and some of the reasons behind the behaviour. Remember that these behaviours are a very normal part of development and are also just given as a guide – children develop at different stages.

It is important that your expectations of your child matches what they are capable of at their age.

If a two-year-old girl gets upset when asked to share her toys, she is not deliberately being unkind, she is just too young to have developed the skills to be able to share yet.

AGE	WHAT TO EXPECT
	<b>Children...</b>
<b>6-9 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Will begin to show fear.</li> <li>■ Become very attached to you and get upset if you go away.</li> </ul>
<b>9-12 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Seek your attention and will cry to get it.</li> <li>■ Can show feelings of happiness by laughing, anger by screaming and hurt by crying.</li> <li>■ Are able to recognise these feelings in others, for example through facial expressions or hearing another child cry.</li> </ul>
<b>12-15 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Look for your approval but don't always do what you say.</li> <li>■ React to changes in their daily routine.</li> <li>■ Are able to soothe and comfort themselves when upset but will also seek comfort from you.</li> </ul>
<b>18-24 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Like to have their own way and will test limits, having temper tantrums if they do not get their own way.</li> <li>■ Do not like it if you are cross with them and may cry.</li> <li>■ Have a sense of themselves and can recognise their own face in a mirror.</li> </ul>
<b>2-3 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Show a wide range of emotions and will try to deal with their own emotions, showing an awareness of their feelings and those of others.</li> <li>■ Are assertive and may say NO a lot and will defend their own possessions.</li> <li>■ Watch other children play and join in briefly and can wait their turn in playing with other children.</li> </ul>
<b>4 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Begin to find solutions to problems and conflict.</li> <li>■ Seek information asking 'why' and 'how' questions a lot.</li> <li>■ Become more independent and want to do more things for themselves.</li> <li>■ Can share their toys with other children and can play with something for 5-15 minutes without getting distracted.</li> </ul>
<b>5 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Are sometimes very demanding towards you and at other times very cooperative.</li> <li>■ Choose their own friends.</li> <li>■ Are more likely to understand and agree to rules.</li> <li>■ Want to please their friends and comfort those who are upset.</li> <li>■ Show more independence in what they do for themselves.</li> </ul>

## THE EFFECTS OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON YOUR CHILD

Every child is different and will respond to situations differently. For a lot of children too much noise, too many people or strong smells can cause them to become upset, stressed, overwhelmed or agitated. Equally too much sugar or not enough sleep or exercise can also cause them to become easily upset.

As their parent you will know your child best and you are probably already very aware that there are certain things or situations that your child does not like and how they usually behave in these situations. As you become aware of them these can be avoided, minimised or prepared for. This could be even something as practical as having healthy snacks in your bag if you know that your child gets irritable when they are hungry.

Consider a time that your child became stressed or agitated.

- What in their behaviour told you they were feeling this way?
- What do you think was happening that caused them to feel like this?
- Is there anything you could do to prevent or reduce this in the future?

## WHAT IS MY CHILD TRYING TO TELL ME?

Children need to communicate their feelings and needs to those around them. However, often children do not understand themselves what it is that they are feeling, especially if it is a complex emotion such as jealousy or frustration. Even if they do, they may not have the words to say how they are feeling so they communicate through their behaviour.

As children develop they begin to assert themselves and want to become more independent and have choice in what they do and where they go. Sometimes your child's behaviour will be their way of testing your limits and asserting their independence.

It is your role as a parent to support and guide your child to learn the skills they need to understand their feelings and express them in ways that are appropriate and acceptable.

If your child is misbehaving it is important that you are able to look beyond the behaviour and try to understand what it is they are trying to tell you and what emotion they are experiencing that is causing them to behave in this way.

When you can understand the emotion, you can respond to both the feeling *and* the behaviour. You will then be able to support your child to develop more appropriate ways to manage and communicate their feelings.

For example, if you are in the supermarket and your two-year-old son is throwing things out of the trolley and crying, you should think about the reasons why your son is upset and what is causing him to behave in this way. Maybe he is bored? You can then respond to his feeling (boredom) by giving him something to play with and respond to the behaviour (throwing things) by teaching him it is not okay to throw things.

Think about specific times when your child has misbehaved in the past – refusing to go to bed or hitting their older brother or sister. Ask yourself, what was my child trying to tell me with this behaviour?





**STOP AND TRY TO  
CONSIDER WHAT IT IS  
YOUR CHILD IS TRYING  
TO TELL YOU BEFORE  
YOU RESPOND TO  
THEIR BEHAVIOUR.**

## **YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

We can all remember a time when we have acted out of anger or frustration and did or said something that we regret. This is an example of when emotions were not managed and, as a result, our behaviour was unacceptable. When we can manage our emotions it is much easier to behave appropriately. This is easier said than done sometimes and even adults can struggle with this.

How well a child can deal with negative emotions or stress, and recover from them, is called 'self-regulation'. If a child has good self-regulation skills, it means that they can understand their emotions and manage their behaviour.

Children are not always aware of which emotions are affecting their behaviours.

### **Recognising emotions**

In infancy, the touches your baby receives through your stroking or holding are highly calming. Your tone of voice, smiling face and gently rocking or bouncing your baby when upset can lay the foundation for their self-regulation and emotional development.

As they become toddlers, children start to learn how to name the emotions they are feeling. You can help your child to do this by naming the emotion for them and stating what you think the reason might be (if you know), 'I can see you are upset because you don't want to sit in your high chair',

or 'You look very excited' if they are clapping their hands and laughing.

As your child gets older and is starting to recognise emotions, you can help them to understand which emotion it is that they are feeling. Start off by giving them the names of two feelings to choose from, for example, 'Are you feeling happy or sad now?' As they get older you can begin to include more complex emotions such as anxiety, shame, jealousy etc.

Encourage your child to name their feelings instead of acting them, for example, saying 'Use your words' guides children to say that they are angry instead of hitting out.

If children do not have the support and opportunity to learn how to recognise, name and express their emotions appropriately, they can find themselves unable to communicate their feelings effectively and this can lead to tears, anger, withdrawal etc.

Children also begin to read the facial expressions of others, such as smiles and frowns, and understand what another person may be feeling. You can support your child with this when looking at pictures together, 'That boy has a big smile, he must be happy.' Encourage your child to recognise the emotions of others by naming the emotions that you or others around might be feeling, 'I am excited because...', 'Dylan is crying, he must be sad.'

## Managing their own emotions

Children need support to manage their own strong emotions and there are some things you can do to help them.

### For younger children (12–36 months)

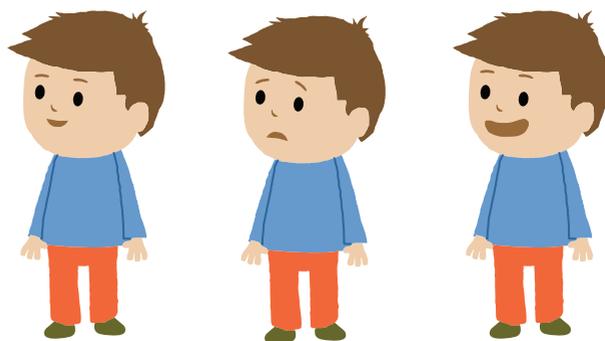
- You will need to name or identify the feeling for your child, ‘I know you are frustrated that Sarah is playing with the red car and you want to play with it.’ This will also help your child to feel understood.
- You will have to generate possible solutions. ‘Why don’t you play with the blue car until Sarah has finished playing with the red one?’
- Get your child to help you decide what should be done. ‘Or would you rather play with a different toy?’

### For older children (3–6 years)

- Ask your child to stop and take a breath. Stay calm yourself and stay close to the child.
- Ask your child to say the problem and how they feel.
- Acknowledge your child’s feelings and the problem as you see it. ‘You feel angry/upset because the table has to be cleared for dinner and you haven’t finished your jigsaw.’
- Ask your child to think of what they can do to solve the problem. ‘What will we do?’
- Make a plan with them and discuss whether it would work. ‘Will we move the jigsaw somewhere else and you can finish it tomorrow? Where can we move it to? Do you think there is enough room on the small table?’
- Support them in trying out their best idea and help them to reflect on how it worked. ‘The jigsaw fits on the small table. We can use that table again to keep things safe.’

This technique teaches your child to pause, take a deep breath and think before they act. By acknowledging how your child is feeling you may be able to calm the situation. It is important that you ask your child for their ideas rather than just offering your own solutions.

By asking your child to come up with their own solutions, you are supporting their ability to problem solve by themselves.



## YOUR CHILD'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Our behaviour influences how we are seen by others and how they interact with us. In order for your child to develop socially and get along with those around them, it is important that they can interact positively with others. A child who can share will have more children wanting to play with them than a child who hits and shouts at other children who want to play with their toys. Supporting your child to manage their feelings and, in turn, their behaviour will have a positive influence on how they develop socially.

Look for opportunities for your child to play with others in pairs or in small groups and praise them when they play nicely together. Some children will be shyer than others and may need your support with this.

Children who understand their own emotions and those of others are able to form positive relationships.



## SHOULD I PUNISH BAD BEHAVIOUR?

Older children will sometimes know how you expect them to behave but will do the exact opposite of what you are telling them. This can be their way of asserting independence and testing the limits. It can also be a way of getting your attention or avoiding something that they don't want to do.

Traditional ways of dealing with a child who misbehaved included the use of punishment such as shouting at them or even slapping or hitting, which we now know is very harmful to the child. Punishments such as the removal of a toy or treat or the use of a 'naughty step' are currently popular methods of managing children's behaviour.

These methods may stop the behaviour in the short term as the child stops what they are doing to avoid the punishment, but this does not teach the child how they should behave instead and why. It also does not address the strong feelings behind the behaviour.

Consider the punishments that you experienced as a child for misbehaving:

- Did the punishment teach you anything?
- Were you always sure what you were being punished for?
- More importantly, did you know what to do differently in the future?

Children come into the world ready to learn and they look to you to teach them. As a parent, taking a long-term view on children learning what to do and how to express their needs and feelings is important. Punishing them when they make a mistake is not supporting them to learn. Remember, young children are only learning these things and they need your support and guidance.

### Consequences

Your child should learn that sometimes there are natural consequences as a result of their behaviour. It is a good idea to remind your child of the consequence prior to it happening and in a way that will appeal to them. This allows them an opportunity to choose to continue with the behaviour or not.

‘I’m afraid if we don’t get finished we will not have time to play our game.’

Your child may still become upset and need a cuddle when there is no time to play the game, but if the consequence is named for them in a caring way it will help them to make the choice to behave in different way in the future.

‘Oh dear, that’s a pity, now we cannot play our game. Next time we will need to finish on time.’

### Distraction or re-direction

If your child is doing something that you do not want them to do, it can be useful to distract them with more appropriate behaviour. For example, if your child is pouring water out of the bath onto the floor, you might distract

them away from that by showing them one of the toys in the bath, 'Look at the duck swimming', or you can redirect the child to pouring water in a more appropriate manner, 'Pour the water into the windmill, that is a lot of fun.'

When your child is engaging in a type of play that you want to encourage, use it as a chance to teach them. 'That's lovely the way you are playing with the water in the bath. The water needs to stay inside the bath not go on the floor.'

### **Give your child some control**

It can be very helpful to offer children different ways of asserting their independence such as giving them choices and letting them do some things for themselves. This will allow them to feel that they have some control and should reduce their need to assert themselves through their behaviour. The choices they are offered will depend on their age.





**THE BEST WAY TO  
TEACH YOUR CHILD IS  
BY ENCOURAGING  
AND SUPPORTING  
POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR.**

## **YOUR BEHAVIOUR AND HOW IT IMPACTS ON YOUR CHILD**

Children's behaviour will be impacted by those around them. How you behave will be a big influence on how your child behaves.

### **Practice what you preach**

A child who experiences the people around them interacting well, remaining calm under stress and managing their emotions will try to do the same. On the other hand, a child who is surrounded by people who act aggressively or shout when they are angry will learn that this is what people do and will do the same.

Consider a time that you find it difficult to manage your child's behaviour such as bedtime. Think about the following:

- What did your child do?
- How were you feeling at the time?
- What did you do in response to your child's behaviour?
- What did you say and how did you say it?
- What happened next?
- Is there anything you would do differently if this were to happen again?

Consider a time that your child was being really well behaved and ask yourself the same questions.

## Stay calm

We are all human and at times we might react to a situation in a way we wished we hadn't. The important thing to help you respond to your child's behaviour is to try to stay calm. Take a deep breath and stop and think about what is going on (what my child is trying to tell me?) before you respond. This will help to ensure that you don't react in a way that is based on your own frustrations but in a way that will guide and support your child in their behaviour.

It can be helpful to consider and plan how you will respond to certain behaviours in advance to avoid reacting impulsively or in a way that you regret.

## Communicate

How you communicate with your child can have an impact on how they react and are able to listen to what is being said. It will also affect how they learn to communicate with others.

It is always a good idea to make sure that you have your child's attention before trying to tell them something. Get down to your child's level, and speak in a calm voice with a respectful manner and a gentle touch as these will all help to reassure a child. Use simple language that your child can understand.

## Be consistent

It is important that the messages you are telling your child about their behaviour are consistent. If you allow your son to jump on the furniture today but tomorrow you tell him to get down, he will not know if jumping on the

furniture is acceptable behaviour or not. However, if he is consistently told on every occasion that he is not to jump on the furniture, this message is very clear and he will quickly learn not to do it. If you are inconsistent your child will be confused and will not know how he is supposed to behave.

Where there are two or more adults involved in caring for a child it can be even more difficult to be consistent. If, for example, Mam does not allow children to jump on the furniture but Dad does, this will lead to the confusion for the child as they don't understand how to deal with the two different messages.

Although parents may differ in their methods, it is important for the child that the message is always the same as this clearly teaches the child what is expected of them.



## WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD MANAGE THEIR BEHAVIOUR

### Develop rules and routines

An effective way of ensuring your child understands what is expected of them is to have clear boundaries and expectations and a predictable routine in place. In order for these to work they need to be consistent.

### Limits and boundaries

Setting clear limits and boundaries lets your child know what is expected of them. Any rules that you have should focus on keeping your child safe. For example, when in the playground, you and your daughter need to be able to see each other at all times. It may be useful to remind your daughter of this rule as you arrive at the playground, explaining that if she does not follow this, it will not be safe to stay at the playground and you will have to go home.



It is important to explain why certain behaviour is not okay. Children respond better to being told what they *can* do rather than what they *can't*. For example, 'If you want to play with a new toy you will need to tidy up these ones first. If you leave these all over the floor someone might hurt themselves.'

Younger children may need to be reminded of these on each occasion as they have a short concentration span.

### **Routines**

A routine establishes for the child what is happening now and what will happen next. These should be predictable and consistent. For example, if going to bed follows the same order of events every time, your child will quickly learn that at bedtime they put on their pyjamas, brush their teeth, read a story and go to sleep.

### **Acknowledge positive behaviour and ignore negative behaviour**

A lot of parents feel like they spend most of their day giving out. A child will often accept negative attention rather than no attention at all and may misbehave just to get attention. It is not necessary to respond to all behaviour. Sometimes it is better to ignore negative behaviour unless your child or someone else is likely to be harmed. This means you do not give the behaviour any attention, not even looking at it. It is very important to remember that *you are ignoring the behaviour not the child*.

For example, your son knows that he is not allowed to use swear words but continues to do so to get a reaction from you. If you continue to chat normally with him while ignoring his bad language he will soon realise that he is not

getting the reaction he is looking for and will hopefully stop this behaviour.

The use of praise for ‘good’ behaviour will make the behaviour more likely to happen again in the future. This gives your child positive attention for positive behaviour. It will take a conscious effort on your part to actively notice when your child is behaving well. Encourage the behaviour as it is happening, for example, ‘I really like the way you are sharing your paints with your brother.’

If the praise is meaningful, names the particular behaviour that you want to encourage and is coupled with a smile or a hug, it will be more effective in supporting your child in learning that this is a desired behaviour.

Make sure that you set time aside each day to play with your child and to have fun together. This will make your child feel more secure and should mean that they are less likely to seek your attention through their negative behaviour.

### **Preparation is half the battle**

As we all know life does not always follow our plans. It is important to have some ideas in place if things don’t run as smoothly as hoped.

One night, you realise that it is very late and you tell your daughter to turn off the TV and get ready for bed. Your daughter is in the middle of watching a cartoon and says that she wants to watch the rest of it. You reply that there isn’t time and tell her to turn it off. Your daughter throws the remote control down and starts shouting at you.

### **How could you have prepared for this?**

1. Start by giving your daughter some cues or prompts that TV time is coming to an end, allowing her to finish what she is watching and letting her know what will happen next. 'It will be time to turn off the TV in five minutes, and then it will be time for bed.' Follow this with 'You have two more minutes.' The final cue will come, 'The TV has to be turned off now as it is bedtime.'
2. Offer an opportunity to negotiate. Negotiation is a key skill that we all must learn, so if your daughter wants to finish the cartoon you might suggest that you will record the rest of it so she can watch it tomorrow.
3. The situation may also offer your daughter the opportunity to exercise choice and be part of the decision-making process. Give her the option to watch the rest of the cartoon but explain that there will be no time then for a story. This allows her to make the choice for herself and experience the consequences of this decision.

Consider other situations when and how you might use these ideas to respond to your child's behaviour.

## **REMOVE YOUR CHILD FROM THE SITUATION**

There may be times when your child is struggling with a situation. They may be too upset or their behaviour has become too disruptive for them to be able to listen or respond to what you are saying.

If you can see your child is becoming overwhelmed and very upset, suggest 'Let's take a break for a minute. Come and sit over here with me.' Sitting quietly together is useful as it allows your child some space and time to calm down. It is important that you stay with them until they are calm.

Once they have relaxed a bit, you can then explore their feelings and ways to resolve the problem. You and your child should decide together when they can return, reminding the child that they are going back to the same situation.

This could be a useful technique when your child is displaying a temper tantrum.

## WORK WITH YOUR CHILD TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Some amount of conflict is a normal part of life; children may argue and fight over toys, for example. These situations can become learning opportunities if you can support your child to respond appropriately. The steps for managing emotions in general can be used here, asking all of the children involved in the conflict to describe the situation as they see it and to come up with solutions together. This appeals to children's sense of fairness and shows that you are not taking sides.

For example, if your daughter knocks over your son's sandcastle and it looks like a fight might break out, ask both children to take a breath and in turn tell you what happened, 'Karen knocked over my sandcastle' 'It was an accident!'. Then ask both children how they can resolve this 'What can we do? Should we all build it back up together or do you have any other ideas?'



## SOME TIPS TO REMEMBER

- **Intervene early.** When a child is having difficulty with some emotion or situation, it is important to respond early to prevent the behaviour and emotions from getting worse.
- **Use your words.** Teach children to say how they are feeling rather than acting it out.
- **State your hopes and positive expectations.** ‘I am really looking forward to us all enjoying the story together.’
- **Let your child know why you are concerned** about certain behaviours and what aspects you would like them to change.
- **Use ‘I’ statements.** ‘That looks like fun but “I” am worried about you running inside because someone might get hurt.’
- **Give choices.** Wherever possible, give your child realistic choices and ensure that these are followed through. ‘We can play football or chasing, which would you like to do?’ This gives your child some control over what is happening and will make them less likely to try to assert their independence by testing the limits.
- **Use when/then statements.** These can be used when something your child wants is dependant on something else happening first. The statement usually begins with the word ‘when’ as this implies that the child will cooperate.
  - *When your puzzle is put away, then you may have another toy to play with.*

- *When you are finished screaming, then you may come back inside.*
- *When your shoes are on, then you'll be ready to go outside.*
- *When your dinner is finished, then you can have ice-cream.*

Using these statements lets your child know what you expect them to do for them to get what they want.

- **Natural consequences.** Children will learn from their experiences. Remind your child of the natural consequences to their behaviour in a way that will appeal to them and allows them to choose to continue with the behaviour or not. 'If you pour all of the bubble mixture on the ground, there won't be any left to make more bubbles.'
- **Create a positive environment** where emotions can be spoken freely. Be caring, child focused, calm and able to resolve conflict.
- **Spend time with your child** doing activities that they have chosen themselves, even if it is only for a few minutes every day. This can have a very positive effect on their behaviour.
- **Every child needs and deserves attention** as they are rapidly developing social skills and relationships with the world around them.

How children respond to the above techniques will depend on their age and level of understanding. It is important that the approaches you use with your child are varied and you do not overuse one.

## REMEMBER...

A lot of parenting is trial and error and the most important thing is that you have a close and loving relationship with your child. By having fun together and giving your child lots of positive attention they will feel secure and happy.

Supporting your child to manage their emotions and behave well will take work on your part as well as theirs but will ultimately benefit the whole family.





**BY HAVING FUN  
TOGETHER AND GIVING  
YOUR CHILD LOTS OF  
POSITIVE ATTENTION  
THEY WILL FEEL SECURE  
AND HAPPY.**

## **Barnardos**

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

T: 01 4549699

F: 01 4530300

E: [training@barnardos.ie](mailto:training@barnardos.ie) or [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie)

[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)



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