



Strategies to use with challenging behaviour

There is no magic wand for challenging behaviour, instead you need to be a detective and try to work out why your child is behaving this way – all behaviour is communication.

Bedtime routines

Children who are tired are more irritable, can display difficult behaviour, and find it harder to learn. Keep bedtime routine consistent, e.g. bath, pyjamas, clean teeth, toilet, bedtime story, kiss goodnight. Check how much sleep time a child their age should have and work backwards to set a sensible bedtime. Ensure they have no screen time or TV an hour before bed. Keep bedroom comfortable (not too hot/cold). Some children prefer a dark room, however other children can find the dark scary so may need a nightlight. Try to avoid being part of their falling asleep routine – the aim is for them to fall asleep without you. So tuck down and leave the room avoiding stimulating activities just before bed.

Fussy eaters

Check that your child does not have any issues regarding their oral health, e.g. tooth cavity, muscles in mouth find it hard to chew, or any pain or discomfort when eating. Try to work out if it is the texture, small or taste that is being rejected. Check portion size – is it too much for their age? Avoid power struggles at the table (or anywhere) instead encourage healthy choices and create a family rule – that we taste everything on our plate. –Encourage your child to make decisions about their own eating habits, “How many more mouthfuls do you think you should have?” Ensure that you eat the same food together as a family and keep presenting unwanted foods over a period of time, without pressure to eat it all.

Tantrum

Stay calm yourself. Distinguish between true ‘tantrum’ and attention seeking episode. True tantrum = freeze, fight or flight mode – they need to calm down. Make sure child is safe, only move child if they can hurt themselves, then wait. Singing songs, rhymes and doing actions or marching using a rhythm can help them to calm down. Once they are calm, hug/comfort and acknowledge they felt really strongly about the issue. If this is attention seeking behaviour, the child will probably look up to check if you are still watching and when they have your attention begin to scream again. This is not a true tantrum and you need to find ways of offering this child plenty of attention on your terms when they are calm. Ignoring the screaming and playing with something they love nearby can entice them out of the cycle. Show them there is space beside you for them to play. Acknowledge their feelings saying, ‘I can see that you are upset and it’s OK to feel upset. It’s not OK to scream when you are upset.’ Then spend some time with them on their favourite activity. Over time they learn that they receive the attention when they are calm, not when they scream. Learn to read the signals of your child, pre-empt triggers avoid them. Use a STAR chart analysis. STAR stands for Setting, Trigger, Action and Response and unpicks why tantrum happens, e.g. due to their limited language skills or frustration at not being understood. Then address this, e.g. by using sign language and lots of pictures alongside words to help develop their communication, be patient and allow them time to get message across. Work out how best to calm your child, e.g. run around or cuddle.

Biting and other hurtful behaviour

Sensory activities, teething rings, fruit freely available, sign language, picture cues, stories about children behaving in hurtful ways, consistent approach, teach about empathy and feelings. Use labelled praise when children use words instead of hurtful behaviour, e.g. “I’m so pleased you used your words today when you felt really cross with your brother...”

Defiance or disrespectful behaviour

Try to work out why they said no or were disrespectful. Offering time warnings prior to transitions, helps child to know they will have to stop playing or tidy. If disrespectful – could need positive attention. Role model respectful actions and words, labelled praise when child complies or is respectful. Tell them how you feel – “I felt very sad when you stuck your tongue out at me, how can you help me to feel happy?” Sometimes allowing natural consequences can make the point, e.g. if you don’t come to the table now, your food will be cold. If they prefer warm food, they will learn they need to come when called.

Strategies to use with challenging behaviour

Screaming/whining

Reply in whispers, have a rule about inside voices, lots of outdoor play available where children can shout and scream if want to, sign language to alleviate frustration, teach alternatives to screaming such as jumping on the spot, running around outside or 'silent-screaming' when feeling like screaming. Role model quiet voice and gentle tone. Ignore whining to show your child that whining will not make you change your mind. Remain calm and give positive attention when they stop whining. Empathise if they are unable to do something, e.g. "I'm sad that we can't stay too..."

Inappropriate Language and lying

Do not laugh, if one-off ignore, repeat back sentence replacing inappropriate word with appropriate one, if repeated – explain to child that we don't use those words or that is not a kind thing to say – provide an alternative positive thing to say instead, ensure that you role-model appropriate language at all times. Young children do not fully understand that lying is wrong and sometimes they truly believe what they are saying, so do not worry if your child tells lies. Ask them, "Is that really what happened or do you wish that happened?" Explain that telling the truth is important and use labelled praise when you notice them telling the truth. Sometimes children say things that are untrue for attention or to avoid being told off, so your response is important.

Finding sharing difficult

Sharing is an abstract concept - adjust your expectations, young children will not share - deal with it! Instead teach the skills associated with sharing and use language that they will understand like 'take it in turns' or 'my go, your go' and encourage them to use problem solving and emotion coaching techniques to resolve conflicts. Sharing means different things in different contexts, so acknowledge this and support children to be good friends, explaining how we can do this, e.g. taking turns, waiting, playing with something together. Use sand timers if waiting and read stories about sharing.

Destructive behaviour

Sometimes children might tear up books, knock down towers or draw on the walls. These behaviours are common and they may not be mis-behaviour. Children might be wanting to explore how something feels, like the sound of tearing or the action of knocking down towers. Your response needs to depend on the age and stage of development of the child. If they are very young I suggest that the first thing to do is say to the child, 'wait' or 'Stop' with a clear gesture then try to work out what they are trying to do, e.g. if they want to draw, offer them a crayon and paper and say 'draw here'. This must be a consistent response by all adults. Explain clearly why you do not like what they are doing and always offer an alternative that you would like them to do that taps into a similar action or type of play.

General strategies

- Have clear expectations and share them with your child and respond according to age/stage of development
- Be consistent in your approach (and consistent with other adults/carers)
- Give lots of reassurance, love and build up children's self-esteem
- Ensure your child knows there are things they do that you like or dislike and you love them regardless
- Use positive labelled praise and try to 'catch' them being good
- Children will imitate behaviour – so give them something positive to copy!
- Look out for schemas, when a child repeatedly acts to find out about how the world works – they are not misbehaviour, e.g. throwing cup from highchair, or unravelling the toilet paper.
- Always get down on child's level or lower and keep your voice calm and quiet
- Teach about feelings, emotions and how to calm down, have a calm down box or sensory bag available
- Offer a time warning before you want your child to stop or go out. Allow plenty of time for physical play and limit waiting times or times when your child has to sit still and be sedentary.