

Triple P - Positive Parenting Program



TELLING KIDS WHAT TO DO

As children grow up they need to learn to follow instructions and requests. After all, one of the most basic human communication skills that we learn through childhood is to respond to instructions and rules appropriately. As adults this ability helps us learn new skills, keep out of dangerous situations, abide by the laws of our community, and carry out tasks on behalf of others.

The instructions we give to children can be used to stop particular behavior, such as "Stop pulling the dog's tail" or used to initiate some action, such as "Pet the dog gently instead, like this."

So why is it that I sometimes see parents who describe their children as 'stubborn,' 'headstrong,' or 'determined' and for whom every bath, mealtime, family outing, shopping trip or car ride is a stressful battle of wills with raised voices and frayed tempers?

When children refuse to cooperate with parental requests, the reason can be related to how those instructions have been given. Over time, a certain pattern of instruction giving and responding may develop that will virtually ensure a child will refuse to follow instructions most of the time.

If this happens, you may need to seek professional help. To prevent it happening, parents should be

careful not to fall into several common traps when giving instructions

- **Too many.** The more instructions you give, the more opportunities to disobey. Apart from making the child feel picked on, giving too many instructions is also exhausting for parents.

- **Too few.** Children may sometimes seem disobedient because no one has taken the time to give them clear information on what is expected.

- **Too hard.** Don't expect a 3-year-old to tidy up a very messy room on their own — they just aren't old enough.

- **Too vague.** Shouting your child's name, then pausing and frowning at them because they are jumping on the couch might not be of much help if they have also just teased their sister and hit their brother. Your child will be unclear as to what behavior you actually consider a problem. It is also not a good idea to phrase an instruction as a question. If you ask "Would you like to go to bed now?" when you really aren't giving your child a choice, be prepared for them to say "No."

- **Poorly timed.** Asking your child to do something while they are busy watching their favorite television show will probably result in them ignoring the instruction.

- **Shouting from a distance.** Instructions shouted from one room to another are often ignored simply because parents are not there to back up the instruction.

- **Emotionally laden.** Children are greatly affected by the emotional tone of what parents say to them. Calling children "stupid" or an "idiot" shows disapproval of the child rather than the child's behavior. Although at times it can be difficult, parents should work to control expressions of anger when giving children instructions.

So what's the alternative?

Try approaching the whole issue of instructions by first thinking about what you actually want your child to do in a given situation. Make sure you distinguish between situations where children have a choice and when they do not. Choose words that are clear and direct and make sure you have your child's attention before you begin. With younger children, bend down to their eye level within an arm's length away.

Say exactly what you want your child to do. If you want them to stop doing something, be sure to tell them what to do instead as well as the consequences of disobeying. Give your child time to cooperate and praise them when they do so, or carry out the consequence if they refuse.

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BABY BLUES

For first-time parents, the arrival of a healthy bouncing baby into the household doesn't always herald endless unbridled joy. Childbirth is physically demanding, babies require lots of attention, and household routines are radically altered.

Even experienced mothers are not immune to mixed feelings about their new baby. As many as two-thirds of all mothers feel emotionally fragile or numb in the first 10 days after childbirth.

The so-called "baby blues" usually appears around the third day after childbirth and is typified by tearful and easily upset mothers.

At this time, both mothers and fathers should be aware of the adjustments that need to be made and pay attention to their own feelings and behavior as well as those of their partner.

The exact cause of baby blues most probably stems from a combination of tiredness, the stress of childbirth and hormonal changes. The feelings are mild, pass quickly and do not require any treatment.

The extent to which a mother may feel sad or down may however be affected by such issues as:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of a new baby at home, as well as family demands and household chores;

- Finding parenthood is not what was expected;
- Lack of contact with other adults;
- Loss of your old lifestyle; and
- Unhappiness over how you look.

It is important therefore not to forget in those first few days back at home, that one of the best ways to help your baby and yourself feel comfortable is to make sure you look after yourself. Try to be realistic about just how many extra household tasks can be achieved in a day when the demands of your baby will keep you busy enough. Put off difficult jobs for a while, and take time to develop new routines.

When your baby is asleep, try to rest as well. Even half an hour a day relaxing doing something you enjoy, such as reading a magazine or taking a bath can make the world of difference. If you have a partner, ask them to look after the baby for half an hour or so to help give you a break, and remember to also arrange time alone with your partner — your relationship is important to all the family. If you have older children, they too will need some special time just with mom and dad.

For most parents who experience the baby blues, the feelings pass quickly, and with care and support, no long-term effects occur. In some cases however, a more lasting

depression develops that is severe enough to interfere with daily activities and runs for more than two weeks. This is called postnatal depression and affects up to one in five mothers.

Depression drains you of energy, confidence and enjoyment. Mothers suffering postnatal depression may find themselves unable to gain any pleasure from tending to their baby's physical needs and feel resentment toward them. Depressed mothers often feel ashamed — that somehow they are the only ones who cannot cope with being a parent.

Many mothers and their family and friends don't recognize postnatal depression when it occurs. Even if you are not sure if you have postnatal depression, it is best to talk with a professional, such as your doctor, as soon as you begin to feel overwhelmed. Early treatment and support will help you get over any depression and get on to enjoying family life.

Parenting Tip

Sometimes mothers have had bad experiences with health professionals when trying to talk about their emotions. Try not to let this put you off when seeking help for feelings of depression or disturbing thoughts. Keep looking for a health professional who will listen to your feelings, acknowledge them and provide the help you want.

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BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

Change can be a scary thing.

In today's world many people are questioning where we are headed. Some are even wondering if the pressures of a modern working life leaves too little time for their family. And what happens if parents are unable to balance work with home? What values and beliefs will the next generation of children grow up with?

The perceived breakdown in the 'traditional' family unit as a result of issues such as changing work practices, increased career opportunities for women, and rising divorce rates, have left many wondering whether we should return to past 'values.'

However, since change is inevitable, we simply can't go back. Much of that change has been for the better, but embracing change doesn't mean giving up on the family or the ideal of gender equality. Rather it requires attention and effort to achieve an equal balance between today's worlds of work and family.

The first step toward achieving such a balance is to understand the importance these two worlds occupy in our lives and the way they impact on each other. You can't simply say one is more important than the other, nor can you arbitrarily denote them as masculine or feminine roles.

Although work most obviously functions to provide income, it also provides us with activity, challenge, companionship, social support and self-esteem. Likewise, our family life allows us to experience the important human need for intimacy, as well as the chance to relax, have fun, pursue non-work interests and feel in control of getting things done.

Our emotional well-being can be threatened when pressures from either of these two worlds become

too strong. Strained marital relationships, conflict with children, financial worries, or performance difficulties at work can all impact on our day to day functioning.

Research has shown us that family conflict reflects itself in the workplace through increased work stress, low productivity, increased absenteeism, and industrial accidents. On the home front, work stress affects patterns of communication in the family with reduced role sharing, and an increase in disagreements. One partner's work stress has the power to increase the other partner's stress levels and can lead to increases in health risk behaviors such as smoking and drinking. Studies report about 40 percent of men in fulltime employment find that work negatively affects their home life.

Of course, with other research showing that 42 percent of marriages ending in divorce, 15 percent of parents describing the experience of parenting as depressing, 12 percent of families reporting high levels of discord, and 10 percent of couples with children describing their relationship as fair or poor, life at home may not seem much better than work. The effects of relationship conflict produce negative psychological reactions in both men and women. Women may suffer depression, men risk alcohol abuse and both sexes can experience sexual dysfunction and health problems.

Behavior problems in children are also a common result of relationship conflict and difficulties, with the lack of a consistent adequate financial income providing further stresses.

From all this we can see that the worlds of work and family have the power to seriously affect our basic quality of life and the quality of life of

those around us. It becomes obvious that choosing a partner, deciding to have children, getting a job, and coping with work require due attention to their importance to our wellbeing and an ongoing effort to maintain a healthy balance.

So how do we go about achieving a balance between work and family?

Try rethinking priorities. Decide what is important and give priority to your children so that their own emotional development is not placed at risk. Help your partner to cope with the inevitable stresses of life. Talk with them about their problems and have a realistic expectation but be assertive and not allow their stress to add significantly to your own.

Develop effective wind down and relaxation activities that don't increase the stress of others. Regular exercise and healthy eating really does help you cope better. Try dealing with work stress through better work practices, such as more efficient management of time. This helps you get back a sense of control. Challenge unhelpful self-thoughts that can increase your stress.

A greater flexibility in working arrangements may be possible, depending on the nature of your work. If not, remember to negotiate with your partner for a sharing of family tasks that may ease the burden.

In the end, the challenge to balance work and family will be more than an individual effort. Beyond the family itself, if we as a society wish to embrace the positive aspects of change we need to rethink the importance of our families and their place within our working lives. It will require policies and strategies that pay more than lip service to the importance of the family unit, principles of gender equality, and greater flexibility in working arrangements for women.

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CHALLENGING BELIEFS

We all know parenting isn't an easy task. For most of us, we begin our careers as parents without a lot of training or preparation. And because children don't come with their own instruction manual complete with a cross referenced easy-to-look-up trouble shooting guide to fix things that go suddenly wrong or unexpectedly appear, we have to learn by trial and error.

Of course, we don't start out with a completely blank slate — every adult is able to express a view about child rearing whether they have children or not. Having been children ourselves, our adult beliefs about raising children are strongly influenced by the kind of role models we felt our parents were. These beliefs are further affected by later experiences with children, the opinions of marriage and relationship partners, and the media.

Over the many years I have been working with families I have seen three commonly held beliefs about raising children that actually result in making parenting more difficult.

"It's just a phase"

Explaining away your 2-year-old child's tantrum as just a normal part of that often feared and much mentioned "terrible twos" is missing the point. Yes, many 2-year-olds throw tantrums, but not all do. And children

who do throw tantrums don't always grow out of it. Many behavior problems are not an inevitable and necessary part of normal development and parents need to account for enormous differences between children of different ages and personalities.

I can recall one mother who insisted that her 3-year-old's constant aggressive behavior towards other children at a local playgroup was just a phase and consequently nothing to worry about. That assurance did little to convince other parents whose children were victims of the aggression as well as the kindergarten director who asked her to remove her son from the group. It was another two years before the mother realized her son's misbehavior was not going to suddenly go away and she had to seek professional help. Dealing with the misbehavior earlier would have made life much easier for both parent and child.

"It's all my fault"

Some parents deal with misbehavior by blaming themselves. I have talked with many guilt-ridden and worried parents over the years. These parents blame themselves for almost everything the child does and in some cases may become severely depressed. The truth is, some children are simply harder to raise than others. Those who have feeding

problems, cry excessively as babies and have sleeping difficulties are hard for almost all parents to deal with.

And as our children grow, while we play a large role in shaping their character, some things are out of our influence. We can't control what happens in a classroom or a playground, the friends our child will choose, the influence of the media, the family interactions of our spouse, or the unique personality of our child.

Self-blame is destructive and won't help a parent to make the necessary adjustments to daily routines that are sometimes required to deal with difficult behavior.

"He's doing it deliberately just to annoy me"

Few children with behavior problems are actually able to explain the reasons for their actions. Most simply do not know why they do certain things and all would have difficulty putting their reasons into words. The subtle complexities involved in everyday communications within families, both verbal and nonverbal, are more likely to contribute to a problem than some inbuilt personality flaw or mean streak within a child. Blaming constant misbehavior on the personality of a child can often result in a parent ignoring important actions of their own that may be able to be altered to help bring about a resolution to the problem.

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BEATING BULLIES

If your child is the victim of a school bully, you are far from alone. One in six children are bullied at least once a week, and recent research suggests about a third of victims rarely consider school a safe haven.

It's no wonder, when you consider the potentially traumatic nature and effects of bullying.

Teasing, threats, verbal abuse, harassment, exclusion from play, pushing, pinching, tripping and extortion can all lead to a significant loss of self-esteem. Children may become anxious and shy around other children, feel sick, suffer stomach pains, nightmares and sleep problems, or refuse to go to school.

As parents we naturally want our child protected from such an experience and it is our responsibility to do something about it. Bullying should never be ignored or left to be sorted out by the young victims themselves.

However it is often difficult to know exactly what to do when you discover your child is being bullied. Do you contact the bully's parents when your child fears that this tactic will only result in more bullying for being a "tattletale"?

This issue is a very real difficulty for children as well — one in five

children don't tell anyone they are being bullied.

If you suspect your child is being bullied, or if they tell you outright, try to remain calm and not overreact. It is important that children feel they can talk to their parents about the problem without mom or dad immediately threatening to march up to the school demanding answers, "or else...".

And make sure you don't also immediately assume that it is all the bully's fault. Your child may have teased or provoked the bully.

It's best to start by listening to your child's description of how the bullying occurs, asking them specific questions so that you can clearly understand what happens — what the bully does, what your child does, how they feel about it, what they have tried to do about it so far. Any strategy you adopt to tackle the bully will be more effective if you enlist your child's aid when working it out.

If the bullying is occurring at school you should also talk with your child's teacher. Many schools now have anti-bullying programs in place. These programs ensure all children understand bullying is not acceptable and help them learn coping strategies such as assertiveness, problem solving and basic social communication.

To help your own child deal effectively with a bully, encourage them to figure out reasons as to why it might be happening. Children will be more likely to try a new way of handling a problem if they understand why that problem is still occurring. For example, you might tell your child: "It sounds as if when they tease you they are getting attention from the other kids, so maybe they do this to show everyone else how tough they are."

You and your child can then decide on a number of strategies for dealing with the bully such as: ignoring and walking away as soon as it occurs; making friends with other children and playing with them during lunch breaks; or being assertive. If necessary, practice these strategies with your child by acting out the roles so that they become confident with their behavior.

PARENTING TIP

Teaching your child to fight back when they are being physically bullied isn't helpful as it can lead to more bullying. Children who are being bullied may not be as physically strong as their tormentor so their fear of losing a fight can be quite real. That doesn't mean however that you don't encourage your child to be assertive and self-confident in the face of teasing.

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CHARTING REWARDS

If you have young children, or know people who do, you've more than likely at some stage experienced a colored piece of cardboard with squares drawn on it and rows of little smiley faces or stars stuck on a fridge door.

Welcome to a very effective way of encouraging positive behavior in children from two-and-a-half years old up to nine and ten.

It might seem a little weird or over the top at first, but the use of a "happy faces chart" or "star chart" is based on the long held tenant that good behavior deserves encouragement.

For example, a mother I recently worked with helped her son, Sam, learn to go to bed without a fuss by the use of a star chart over a few weeks. At bedtime, Sam would be rewarded with praise from his mother and a red star on his chart each time he went to bed without protesting. Three stars in a row and he earned a reward of his favorite dessert with dinner the next night.

As in Sam's case, behavior charts are particularly useful for daily home routines such as set chores like drying dishes or keeping a bedroom tidy, as well as for homework. They take the heat out of possible stressful conflicts and reduce the possibility of a parent nagging their child to do something — a good thing to avoid

since it encourages children to only cooperate when nagged.

To get the best use out of a chart, choose a reward that is earned in exchange for a set number of stars or smiley faces. Some of the best (and cheapest) rewards involve activities rather than things — staying up a bit later to watch a favorite television show, having a friend over for the night, or playing a board game with mom or dad after dinner.

Of course, the question that is sometimes asked about all these rewards is, "Aren't I just bribing my kids to do something they are supposed to do?"

The simple answer is that many children won't comply without rewards and that providing an incentive to try a bit harder at correcting a problem allows parents to offer support and recognition to their children in tangible ways.

Children who benefit most from the use of rewards and behavior charts are frequently not motivated to change and do not enjoy the tasks they need to perform. They may never have experienced the satisfaction of completing a task. Rewards help children to experience success.

So will your child become dependent on rewards?

Not if you follow a few simple rules.

First, always make sure you praise and pay your child attention at the same time that you give them the star or smiley face so that the reward can be phased out. After a child has mastered the skill make the rewards less predictable, more like occasional surprises.

Second, use rewards that are activities rather than things you have to buy. Third, always give the reward when your child has earned it, not when they asked for it. And fourth, use the chart sparingly for only about two to three weeks at a time for a specific new behavior.

Once a new behavior is learned, weaning your child off the specific rewards will allow you to keep the improved behavior going along with just a little bit of positive attention and recognition.

PARENTING TIP

Some parents are concerned that if one child is using a behavior chart with rewards, other children may feel resentful and perhaps misbehave themselves. In my experience this is rare, however siblings will usually respond to a simple explanation as to why their brother or sister needs special help and everyone benefits if a difficult youngster's behavior improves. Remember to not neglect other children if one is following a behavior chart.

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HELPING OUT AROUND THE HOUSE

Only last century child labor laws were introduced to stop the previously common practice of sending children out to be part of Britain's mining workforce.

By contrast, today, children in some countries are able to sue their parents for mistreatment, and certain societies do not expect children to contribute much to the ordinary activities of the home.

Somewhere in the middle of all this falls busy everyday moms and dads with healthy active children; children who by elementary school age are capable of such household chores as washing dishes, tidying their bedrooms, clearing the dinner table, or working in the yard.

So should children help out around the house or not?

It depends, of course, on each parent's particular view of family roles, however the responsibility of regular chores helps children learn self-discipline and how to apply themselves to a job, as well as new skills to carry with them into their own adult family life. Chores encourage children's understanding that being part of a family involves contributing to the smooth running of the home.

As an added bonus, if you give your child chores, you will find you have more time to spend with them on other activities as well as more time for yourself.

Everybody wins — so long as a common sense approach is taken.

I once had a case where an 8-year-old girl was required to prepare breakfast for a family of five, wake her mother for work with breakfast in bed at 8:30 a.m., make school lunches, and wash all the dishes on her own — clearly not beneficial for a child.

The key to helping your children learn to undertake appropriate chores cheerfully and competently is to move slowly.

Whatever age you choose to introduce your children to chores, it is a good idea to start all children at the same time, even though they may be of differing ages. Children will accept the new responsibilities more readily if they feel they are not being singled out.

Always be aware of the physical limitations of your child and make sure you first take some time to work out with your partner exactly what tasks you think they are capable of.

The use of a written job roster stuck up on the fridge will help avoid future arguments and remind each child of what is required. Ask your child to suggest jobs they might like to do for the roster. If they say they don't want to do anything tell them you will decide their jobs if they do not choose themselves.

You might like to initially offer some form of reward for completing chores properly such as a special activity or pocket money, but remember you should gradually reduce rewards over time as your child learns the roster. You will also have to spell out the consequences of not doing chores, such as going to bed early or not watching certain television shows.

Your child should learn to do chores as a general family responsibility, not solely as a way of getting rewards or avoiding punishment.

If your child does not complete a chore satisfactorily do not get into a debate with them about it. Ignore their protests or complaints and immediately carry out the previously agreed consequence. Be consistent and patient, and review each week's performance in relation to the job roster. Give praise where it is earned, and encourage improvement. You and your child will eventually both reap the rewards.

Parenting Tip

Children can be manipulative when they don't particularly want to do something. Try not to get trapped into allowing your child to keep doing something else instead of their chores under the promise that they will do the chores as soon as they have finished. Children won't always keep to the bargain.

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PRESENTS OF LOVE

"Christmas is for kids" it is often said. I guess that idea comes from the enjoyment most parents feel watching the huge smiles and delighted squeals of young children as they open their presents on Christmas morning. It touches our hearts and stirs the memories of our own childhood.

Giving our children presents is ultimately about love and caring. The enormous responsibilities of parenthood, which can sometimes almost overwhelm us in times of stress, can bring many rewards. Nurtured with love within the stable and protective fold of a caring family (no matter what the particular makeup of the family) children grow as individuals and bring to that family a new and unique personality.

So while many parents cannot afford to buy their children the very latest "must have" Christmas toy, they can give their children presents of love that will encourage a positive relationship between child and parent. Developing a positive relationship with your child can help ease many of the stresses of parenting and in the process reduce the potential for misbehavior.

So how exactly do you come by these particular 'presents'?

Developing a caring family relationship takes many forms, but

most often begins with simple everyday actions. Spending frequent small amounts of time with your child, even if it is only as little as one or two minutes can be more beneficial than less frequent longer times.

So-called 'quality time' with children is more likely to occur naturally rather than be planned for. Next time your child comes up to you to tell you something, ask a question, or involve you in their activity, if you are not occupied with something important stop and make yourself available. The efforts you take to be involved with your child, however brief, are special to them.

The more we respond to these requests when children are pleasant and civil, the fewer hassles we have with children demanding attention. Children also need to learn to receive attention and have it taken away. The key is to keep your attention brief and frequent.

Spending time with your child acknowledges their individuality and self-worth and allows opportunities for learning. And when you take time to talk with your child this not only helps them learn the art of conversation and the usefulness of words to help express themselves, it also gives you the chance to share your own ideas and information. It shows that you are interested in what your child has to say.

Remember too, there are many opportunities to give your children attention and encourage behavior you like without taking up much time. A smile, a wink, a pat on the back or simply just watching as your child plays, are all forms of attention that children enjoy. Noticing your child behaving well and praising them for it increases the chance of that good behavior occurring again.

Another way of showing you care is to give your child plenty of physical affection. Holding, touching, cuddling, tickling and hugging, help children grow up feeling loved and cared for as well encouraging them to be comfortable with giving and receiving affection. Affection in the first few years of a child's life helps them form secure bonds with their parents, bonds much more powerful than that which biology provides.

Of course, those Christmas toys aren't without their own benefits. Providing children with interesting and engaging activities encourages independent play — a skill essential for a healthy upbringing. The toys don't have to be expensive, just fun for your child to play with.

Christmas is a time for kids, as well as parents, and families. I wish you all a Merry Christmas and the best of luck with raising the next generation — it's a tough job sometimes, but well worth the effort.

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CRYING

The sound of a crying baby, while often distressful to the parents, tugs at the emotions of most humans within earshot.

All infants cry. This is their way of communicating. Babies may cry when they are tired, hungry, thirsty, too full, uncomfortable, hot, cold, wet, soiled, or in pain. They may cry for long periods or stop as quickly as they started.

When a baby cries they can appear uncomfortable, squirming and drawing up their legs. They may whimper or scream out loudly. There may be lots of tears or none at all.

As parents, we naturally want to soothe our crying baby and it is important for your baby's future that they develop a basic sense of trust in you. This means you should respond to your baby's first cries as quickly as you can.

But how do parents know what a crying baby wants?

If your baby has been awake for some time, they may simply be tired. If you have recently fed your baby they may be thirsty, rather than hungry. Signals such as straining and pushing with their arms and legs can be signs your baby is tense or over-stimulated. Check your baby's diaper, feel their body to see if they are too hot or cold, and make sure that they aren't lying

in an awkward or uncomfortable position.

The truth is, sometimes it may not be possible to work out why your baby is crying. When this occurs it is best to try not to feel too anxious about it and remember that they are not crying just to upset you. Research has shown that babies aged between one and three months will generally cry for about two hours each day. After three months of age, this should decrease as they learn other ways to communicate.

When your baby does cry you may have to spend at least 10 to 15 minutes trying to settle them. Make sure they are comfortable, help them relax by holding them close, singing or talking to them, or rocking them gently in a bassinet or carriage. If your baby cries excessively you should consult your doctor to check that there isn't any medical problem

Sometimes it isn't possible to soothe a crying baby, and it is these times that can be most stressful, particularly for new parents. So long as your baby is in a safe place there may be nothing more you can do than let them settle by themselves. While it may be distressing for you to listen to your baby's cries, remember that babies generally don't suffer any physical or emotional injury simply by crying themselves to sleep.

A good preventative measure against excessive crying is to encourage contentment in your baby by interacting with them when they are awake and alert. Give your baby new things to look at or do and change their position often. An interesting mobile or rattle placed nearby in front of them will allow your baby to look and touch. Carrying your young baby in a sling when they are quiet and alert can not only help prevent crying, it's also a good way for busy parents to get things done.

Remember too that as your baby becomes capable of making more complex gestures — making sounds, pulling faces, laughing and smiling — these new ways of communicating need to be responded to as well. Babies who receive more attention when they cry than when they are calm may learn to gain attention in the future through more crying.

PARENTING TIP

If your baby is still crying after you have done your best to settle them, it is important that you remain calm yourself. Try and get some relief by sitting quietly and taking a few gentle deep breaths. Have a cup of tea or coffee, take a shower, telephone a friend, or listen to some of your favorite music. Remember, your baby will eventually stop crying.

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DADS CRACK UNDER PRESSURE

Not so long ago I saw a television advertisement where two young boys were comparing notes about their fathers. One child told another that while he didn't know exactly what sort of job his dad had, it was definitely a really 'cool' and important one because his dad was always busy and away a lot of the time. His friend looked on in obvious awe. It was clear to him that his own dad was pretty much a 'loser' — he came home from work at a reasonable time and spent weekends off work.

What's really worrying about the above scenario is while no doubt the copy writer's essential message had nothing to do with parenting (but instead was trying to sell me some everyday household produce that immediately slipped my mind the moment the advertisement ended), it is nonetheless a sad comment on today's working family life.

More than forty percent of men report that work stress affects their home life. Long hours, increased use of contract employment, greater job insecurity, and the challenge of adjusting to changing work practices, can strongly affect a person's ability to evenly balance home and work. And when that home includes children, the question needs to be asked: just what are the spillover effects of all this extra work stress on children?

The advertisement referred to above is an example of one possible result — sons who learn that this is the way a man's working life should be, growing up as yet another disengaged non-involved dad who defines his very self-existence solely on his ability to provide for his family.

The cycle starts again. Fathers place extra work burdens on themselves and increase the family burdens on mothers.

This cycle is a very real factor in many people's lives, young and old. It's not something you can easily fix either. You can't blame men for learning from their parents, and you can't blame fathers for wanting to look after their family financially. What is required is a substantial shift of attitude for males toward a more complete definition of what their masculinity represents.

I'm not talking here of some weekend bush retreat to 'get in touch with the inner-man' by sitting around a fire howling, but rather practical considerations about the importance both to children and to men of the role fathers play in parenting. Rather than judging their self-worth only in terms of their ability to cope with their work life and leave most parenting to their partners, men need to feel confident in their own parenting skills and aware of the importance of these skills.

With this changed attitude will come the inevitable desire to be both a better parent and the commitment to seriously explore ways to reduce stress that may be interfering with family life.

That's not to say we can remove stress or never be affected by it. Being a parent and a worker is a busy and demanding life and it is normal for both mothers and fathers to feel stressed at times. However, if parents often have high levels of stress, it can be hard for them to deal with their

children's behavior calmly, and they may be less likely to spend time with their children.

Parents under stress may have explosive outbursts over little things their children do that normally would not worry them. If they get angry, they may be more likely to criticize their child and the risk is that they may lose control and harm them.

We know from history and research that children are likely to grow up happy and learn what is expected of them when their parents are calm and consistently use positive parenting strategies with them. Although it is not possible to be perfectly calm and consistent all of the time, stress is something that can be handled in a number of ways, some more helpful than others.

For busy, career-oriented fathers an important point to remember is that the stress they feel that motivates them to push a little bit harder and succeed at work also has the capacity to unknowingly build into constant pressure that will eventually overload them bringing feelings such as anger, frustration, irritability, anxiety, tiredness, hopelessness and depression.

The challenge for stressed fathers is notice tension in themselves that is symptomatic of stress and do something about it such as using relaxation techniques, encouraging self-talk ("I can do this if I remain calm."), seeking help, and making necessary lifestyle and/or work changes if possible. Just how easy or hard that is to do depends on a lot of factors.

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DISCIPLINE DEBATE MISSES POINT

There is nothing to be gained from yet another impassioned debate about methods of discipline and whether to apply them or not.

Children need discipline, just like adults need discipline.

The challenge for our society is to focus our attention on parents and families and use the existing knowledge base about why humans do the things they do to bring about effective change.

Parents need to be empowered to make informed decisions about raising their kids. They need confidence in their own judgment about deciding what form of discipline will be effective and the values and beliefs they wish their children to grow up with.

Children need to be given much more positive attention for the things they do right and taught the skills to handle potentially difficult situations in socially appropriate ways. Too much argument on the best way to stop children doing things ignores ample opportunities to encourage "pro-social" behavior.

So how does this translate into action? What should

parents do when faced with willful disobedience?

As a clinical psychologist specializing in family concerns and a parent to my two children one piece of simple advice I can offer is to always try and remain calm in the line of fire. It is important to break the cycle of escalation that often occurs when a single disobedient act builds into a battle of wills between child and parent.

Discipline for children must involve clear, fair, age-appropriate rules and consequences that are carried out in a predictable family environment. It is no good changing tactics one day because you don't feel up to the challenge.

When your child breaks a house rule that they know about, make sure you have an effective consequence for that transgression. Removing a favorite toy, banning the use of a bike, or turning off the television are all viable consequences of misbehavior.

Being "pro social" with your children involves changing the ratio of negative and positive attention to shift the balance

toward more positives. For example, if your children are fighting over a toy, you might tell them to stop fighting and then teach them about the importance of sharing and then show them how to go about sharing.

If your child is being loud and interruptive, they should learn the importance of politeness and how to gain mom or dad's attention in a more acceptable fashion.

Of course, the way you discipline your child always depends on their age and personality. While teenagers deserve a reasonable discussion about certain rules and behaviors, it is useless to sit down in front of your three-year-old and try and negotiate an appropriate bedtime.

This sort of parenting advice and support doesn't require draconian legislation or governmental intervention to take away the rights of parents. Rather it is about ensuring all parents have access to practical, proven skills that lead to happier stable families, giving both parents and children the best chance to fulfill their own potential in life.

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DISCIPLINE IS NOT A DIRTY WORD

For many people the word "discipline" is associated with authoritarianism —the stern parent glaring down at you, admonishing and threatening, ready to hand out a fitting punishment for your "crime."

It was this type of Dickensian thinking that led many parents in the 1960s and 70s to reject entirely any notion about saying "no" to their children, as they felt it would in some way harm their child's development.

Yet "no" is one of the first words children learn, and if they don't learn the meaning of it they can often be at risk for developing behavior difficulties.

Many parents today remain confused about disciplining their children. They understand that smacking can cause problems if used in anger and that ultimately it models aggression. But when a single alternative such as 'time out' is tried instead, this sometimes doesn't appear to do any good either.

One particular couple I know of handled the parenting of their four-year-old son without incident but ran into trouble when their second son reached the age of two and started throwing repeated tantrums. Their mother had read numerous popular child-rearing books and even studied childhood development as part of her professional training.

She tried calmly talking and reasoning with the child, and when

that didn't help resorted to a firm smack on his bottom. Eventually she found herself hitting her child a number of times and having angry shouting matches with both her two-year-old and four-year-old as the household fell into a state of near anarchy.

So what was she to do? Was she disciplining her children too much, or not enough?

The answer is neither of these alternatives.

Discipline isn't about whether you smack or not. It is about helping children learn that there are consistent consequences for their actions that will be enforced within a predictable, nurturing, and loving environment. No form of discipline is going to work unless that essential family relationship is first in place. And while the use of time out was popularized through the 1980s as a panacea, it is only one of a number of possible ways of dealing with behavior that you wish to discourage.

Discipline is however an essential part of raising children, as indeed it is an essential part of adult life. Discipline within one's self gives us the ability to achieve personal goals, plan for the future, work toward longer term rewards and to sense security in an ever-changing world.

Likewise, children do best when they know the limits, boundaries and ground rules of their family

environment and when these limits are fair and open and, as they get older, negotiable. The way you discipline your children will necessarily vary with the age and personality of that child. For instance you can't negotiate bedtime with a three-year-old, you can with a 14-year-old.

Discipline for disobedience should always teach two things. Firstly, that "no" means to stop the behavior that is not allowed and secondly, what appropriate behaviour should be seen instead.

The trap that many parents fall into when dealing with misbehavior is to unwittingly feed negative behavior by nagging and criticizing, often inconsistently, and by failing to praise and encourage children when they behave well.

A positive parenting course eventually helped the couple mentioned above by allowing them to see what things they were doing that were right, and what things needed to be done differently. Over a number of weeks, by changing the parents' behavior and through learning more about how to look at their own actions, their two-year-old's behavior also changed. The household calmed down, and everyone was much happier.

It isn't magic that brings about these results, just effort, and an understanding that we all need a little help sometimes.

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FEARFUL FEELINGS

Remember how scary a lot of things looked when you were a child? Losing sight of your parents in a crowded shopping center, the blackness of night, dogs that were big enough to look you in the eye, or those monsters that lived under the bed.

Even a happy, safe and secure childhood includes a very normal amount of fear. When psychologists talk about fear we often use the term *anxiety* to describe those physical feelings of increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating and shaking that make up a subjective sense of fear.

Fear is a natural and essential part of our human make up. It helps keep us safe. Our fears lead us to naturally avoid many things that have the ability to cause us physical harm such as fire, electricity, turbulent water or vicious dogs.

Most children's fears are mild and come and go at different times. However, with some children their fear becomes so strong they may develop phobias or suffer from what is called generalized anxiety. In fact research shows more than one-third of children between 2 and 14 years of age experience some form of anxiety intense enough to interfere with their daily lives.

The list of things that children can be afraid of varies depending on age and the individual personality of the child. Common fears include war, being hit by a car, not being able to

breathe, fire, falling from high places, a burglar breaking into the house, and snakes and spiders. As children get older, social fears, such as fear of criticism, embarrassment or rejection become more common.

Anxiety and phobias can develop either through learning, watching others or through being rewarded for showing fear.

Learning a fear occurs when, for example, a child walking home from school sees a dog that comes close and starts barking loudly. The sudden loud noise distresses the child and can lead to them being afraid of other large dogs, or in fact of any dog, no matter how small or non-threatening.

Children may also develop a fear by watching another child or adult displaying their own fear. Many children grow up fearing the same things their parents do.

The accidental reinforcement of a fear can occur through a parent's natural desire to calm their child. Take the case of a child showing fear of the dark when their bedroom light is turned out. If you give them lots of attention and reassurance, or spend time soothing, stroking or calming them while leaving the light on, they are in fact being directly rewarded for their fear. All that positive attention is likely to result in your child continuing to be afraid of the dark.

Of course, the answer isn't to just cast them out at the mercy of a great big scary world.

Try to be understanding and encourage your child to talk about their fears, no matter how silly they may sound to you. Stay calm, and talk to them about situations where you yourself felt anxious about something.

Remember to keep your own fears under control, and teach your child some basic coping strategies for handling a fearful situation:

- *Breathing.* Take some slow, deep breaths, as if you are blowing up a balloon.
- *Relaxation.* Let your body go floppy like a rag doll so that all your muscles are relaxed and loose.
- *Imagination.* Distract yourself from the scary thoughts by thinking of a happy memory or an exciting upcoming event, or perhaps a quite peaceful scene where you felt relaxed, such as during a holiday.
- *Self-talk.* Think of positive things to say to yourself, such as: "It's just a grasshopper, it can't hurt me," or "I am boss of my body, so chill out and be cool!"

Part of learning to cope with fears also involves facing them slowly and getting closer and closer to the feared thing. It can take time for children to overcome their fears, but with time, practice, and lots of praise, children will learn the confidence necessary to face adulthood.

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GETTING OUT THE DOOR ON TIME

As another new school year begins, many parents may be looking forward to the return of a bit of order around the family home. While holidays can be fun, it is usually the case that by the time school rolls around many parents will have just about exhausted their repertoire of activities designed to keep children amused.

Of course, the return of school also means the return of the morning ritual of an entire household simultaneously going about its business waking up, getting cleaned and dressed, eating and racing out the door on time.

This morning rush hour can sometimes be complicated by the tendency of some children to be persistently slow, demanding, or just plain forgetful right when you need them to be most cooperative and on the ball.

Younger children may choose this time to run away, hide, refuse to get dressed, or simply sit down and whine. Older children may just seem disorganized, requiring reminders every step of the way, several times — "Have you brushed your teeth? Have you been to the toilet? Do you have your school bag? Did you put your homework in your bag?"

The combination of this behavior and the time pressures you may already feel, especially if you slept in a little, can quickly result in a bout of shouting, resentment, and a mini pitched battle between you and your child.

So just how do you cope with a child who is difficult to get organized when you are going out?

The key to overcoming this

dawdling behavior is organization — and the place to start is your own organization first. You need to setup an effective routine. For example, if you need to leave by 8:15 am at the latest, don't try getting out of bed at 7:30 am when you know it takes an hour to get ready.

I have known some parents who are habitually late in bringing children to organized activities such as preschool, parties or to play at other children's homes. Not only does this make a prime breeding ground for time pressures on both child and parent, it also shortens the time a child has to enjoy outings like these. It also doesn't present a very good role model to your children, particularly since they will watch what you do as well as listen to what you say.

So the rule is to get yourself ready first, before your child. To avoid last minute rushing prepare some things the night before and go to bed at a reasonable hour so you will wake up early. Any time you can spare by being ready early gives you more time to deal with any disruptions from your children.

I would also recommend against having the television on first thing in the morning when preparing to go out. This can be very disruptive. Better to make sure the children are dressed before breakfast and make any television watching dependent on being fully ready to leave.

Make sure you let your child know ahead of time that you will be going out and that they know exactly what the day's activities will be and their time requirements. This preparation should avoid the situation where a rushed call to a child glued in front of a television set or video game console

is met with absolute indifference or a dismissive "in a minute."

Younger children can help learn the importance of organization by becoming involved in the process of getting ready rather than simply having everything done for them. Children who have learned how to get dressed by themselves not only have a chance to practice such independent skills, but help Mom or Dad save time by doing it themselves.

Even with all this organization and forethought, some children will need a little more time and effort to learn how to get ready on time. In these cases I would suggest using the "beat the clock" game. This involves setting your child a goal of being ready before the alarm clock sounds off at a set time. If your child wins, he earns a small treat or reward for his efforts, such as a favorite snack in his lunch box.

Use a kitchen timer or something similar and tell your child exactly what tasks they must do to be ready to leave and that if they can do all of these before the alarm rings they will get a reward. Make sure you set the timer for a reasonable amount of time and avoid giving repeated instructions or nagging your child to hurry up.

Often it will only take a two-week period of beating the clock before first the rewards and then the clock itself are phased out. Remember to always offer praise for your child's achievements in attempting to learn better organization.

While you never want to become too time conscious, good organization, particularly in the mornings, certainly helps. Everything runs a touch smoother if all family members know how to pull their weight.

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HOMEWORK HABITS

As a new school year rapidly approaches, many parents will feel a certain sense of relief that the challenging role of keeping active children busy and amused throughout the long hot summer days is nearing its end.

But the return of schooldays also brings with it the added parenting role of homework monitor.

Children are usually expected to spend time outside of school hours doing homework and it is important that parents help their children develop good study habits and routines. The amount of time required will vary depending on the age of the child and the expectations of the school and teachers. Children in late primary school for example can expect anywhere between 10 and 60 minutes of homework each night.

While this is often seen by school children as a boring task and an unfair imposition on their "free time," it is important for children to complete set school work so they can make satisfactory progress in their education. The study skills and self-discipline children learn during the early years of schooling will not only help them cope with the later demands of high school senior, these skills will also stay with them for the entire length of their working life and beyond into retirement.

As adults we draw on our early education to know that it takes effort and attention to achieve goals, and that sometimes when things don't come easily to us we have to spend time working through problems and obstacles.

But homework shouldn't become a family battlefield filled with stress and pressure. It is an opportunity to provide encouragement and help if needed. When parents believe their child does not have a good attitude towards study or thinks they are just lazy, it can make the situation worse.

One father I know used to require his 10-year-old son to do at least one hour of math study a day. He would quiz the boy on his multiplication table and hit him with a ruler when he got an answer wrong. This Dickensian approach did nothing but make the boy so uptight about schoolwork that his grades became worse and worse.

The key to good homework habits lies in preparation. Your child should have a set time for homework that fits in around your schedule and your child's other commitments such as sports, club activities or music lessons. Homework should be given high priority and come sometime between when your child has had a chance to relax after arriving home from school or after-school care and

before they are allowed to play or watch television.

Relaxing immediately after school is as important for children as the after-work wind-down period we adults usually find so necessary. Remember, children should not turn on the television immediately after walking in the door from school. Instead, an afternoon snack is a pleasant relaxing way to talk with your children about their day and to find out what their homework tasks are, whether they need any special materials for projects, and when it needs to be ready.

While it is not essential for children to have absolute quiet when working, they should have a well arranged homework area that has clear table space, is well lit, and is free from obvious distractions.

Parenting Tip

If your child seeks an opinion on how good their homework is don't feel that you have to make sure the work is perfect before they hand it in. If your child has worked hard on writing a story for example they may feel discouraged if you point out all the spelling and punctuation mistakes. Instead say something positive about the work and if you must make corrections just choose one or two mistakes.

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DEALING WITH INDEPENDENCE

Early adolescence can be a scary time for both children and parents.

Children may be confronted by dilemmas over issues such as sex and drugs before they feel ready for such things. And the physical changes brought on by puberty often coincide with an increasing level of conflict between children and parents as the need for independence grows ever stronger.

Children may wish to have more privacy, spend time with friends instead of family, listen to music perhaps not quite to an older generation's taste, and begin to express their opinions in a more forceful manner. Suddenly, their appearance is important to them and arguments over hairstyles and clothing can become bitter battlegrounds.

The truth of the matter is of course, that the desire for independence is a very normal and necessary part of growing up. We can't, as parents, stop it happening, and if we think back to our own youth will remember just how vital and useful such changes are to us in our adult lives.

So why do some parents experience major traumas with teenagers?

Often it is because they have not prepared themselves or their children adequately for the task of taking on increased responsibility.

The challenge for parents is to gradually encourage children to become responsibly independent — able to express their opinions appropriately, make informed decisions, see things from a perspective wider than themselves, and participate in adult conversation.

And the time to start is during the later primary school years.

This is because there is no magic age at which children can suddenly be expected to be given new freedoms. Children of the same age can differ quite considerably in their maturity and capabilities. Too much reign too soon can be just as damaging as not allowing a child any choice at all.

Gradually allowing your child freedom to make decisions in certain areas over a number of years provides time for practice and experience in learning trust as well as the skills to make responsible choices.

There are of course many decisions that parents will quite rightly wish to influence and others they will need to keep a firm control on. Children still need rules to be enforced consistently and until children reach adolescence, matters such as when they should be indoors, where they go after school, who they are with, what time they go to bed and what television and video shows they watch are very much within a parent's domain.

The best way to know when your child is ready for increased responsibility is to look for signs that they are interested. For example, they might ask to help you with a particular task you are doing or ask about how it is done.

An important aspect of helping children learn independence involves them appropriately expressing their own ideas and opinions about matters that interest them. As adults, we know that effective interpersonal communication in either a social or work situation relies on the ability to express our opinions in a constructive manner.

It is important as parents that we ask our children their opinions about school or current events, listen to them, and take those opinions into account when deciding important family matters. We don't have to agree with everything our child says, but our encouragement will help our children develop better ways to express their views, clearly, logically and concisely.

PARENTING TIP

When encouraging your child to make responsible decisions on their own, stick to simple choices first. Issues such as how to spend their pocket money, who to invite to a birthday party, choosing a birthday gift, what home chores to complete in a particular order, or which homework tasks to tackle first, provide ample opportunities for learning.

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DEALING WITH INTERRUPTIONS

"Not now, I'm on the phone!"

As parents we all know that young children need lots of time and attention. But what about when parents need time to talk on the phone without interruption?

Most preschoolers should be able to occupy themselves for about 10 to 30 minutes. That means you're not being unreasonable in expecting some time to yourself to have a quick phone chat with a friend or to attend to some business or private matter. Of course if your call goes on for an hour or so, or if it's the tenth straight phone call of the morning, you're starting to ask a lot from someone who isn't yet able to pass the time browsing through the daily newspaper.

Without this ability to easily amuse themselves for long periods, it's not surprising then that preschoolers do spend a fair amount of time interrupting adults. While it might sometimes be annoying to parents it is more than likely your child isn't really trying to annoy you, nor are they simply demanding your attention. Children like to know things. They may ask adults for information or to help them with something they are doing. They may also want you to share in the fun of their activities.

Like adults, when children speak they feel that what they have to say is important. Children need to learn polite ways of interrupting rather than speaking to you right away without waiting for acknowledgement. For some children this sense of urgency is further driven by the belief that they

will forget what they want to say if they wait too long to say it. In any case, for many preschoolers sometimes it's just plain hard to share Mom or Dad with others.

So, for the sanity of yourself and your child you should try and set things up in a way that will allow you time on the phone without interruptions, while also allowing your child to gain your attention in an acceptable way. If you spend too long on the phone and you ignore your child's attempts to interrupt politely, they will probably learn to interrupt loudly and rudely — anything to get your attention.

It is a good idea to monitor your time on the phone while your child is with you. Try to keep your calls under 15 minutes or wait until your child is asleep before you make a longer call. If you know you are going to be on the phone for a while explain ahead of time to your child that you will be busy doing something important and you cannot be interrupted. Of course, no matter what is happening on the phone, if your child is hurt or in an unsafe situation you will want to respond to them immediately.

Setting simple rules will help your child learn about the need not to interrupt at certain times. Avoid a long list of rules — just two or three that are simply explained, such as: *Play with your quiet toys until Mom or Dad is finished on the phone.* Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Positive instructions are more likely to be

learned and followed than negative ones.

If you are having persistent problems with interruptions during phone calls it may be worthwhile practicing with your child just what to do when you are on the phone. Call your own number, or arrange for a friend to call and have a brief conversation (about 2 to 3 minutes). If your child continues to play, praise them for letting you speak on the phone. *Max, I'm really pleased that you played quietly while I was on the phone.* If they do not follow the rules tell them what to stop doing and what to do instead. You might like to encourage your child with something more tangible than praise by giving them a reward. In this case, tell your child what they can earn if they follow the rules — perhaps a favorite snack or a special activity when you are free.

Eventually, as your child learns to occupy themselves you will not need to remind them of the rules, rewards and consequences each time you are on the phone. Make sure though that the consequences of breaking the rules are consistent and make rewards less predictable by not always giving them out. Praising your child for occupying themselves when you are on the phone should be continued — they've earned it.

PARENTING TIP: If you're having trouble with interruptions during phone calls, try keeping a couple of quiet toys or activities stored near the phone to dig out quickly if your child begins to look for your attention. If the toys are only used when you are on the phone they will remain interesting.

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LEARNING TO SPEAK

During the first twelve months of a baby's life, most infants will only manage to acquire a slender vocabulary of about ten words. However, in the next two years, that vocabulary will rapidly grow to around 800 or 900 by the age of three when a toddler will be able to understand most adults' sentences they hear.

In fact, toddlers are so good at learning how to speak, they have no trouble learning two languages well at the same time and are capable of knowing which language goes with which adult.

This tremendous surge in language use and ability is closely related to a child's general intellectual development and their understanding of the world around them. And while there are marked differences between individual children in how quickly or slowly they learn to speak, the size of a child's vocabulary is influenced in part by the interactions they have with their parents and other family members.

Parents therefore play an important role in the language development of their child. If you are worried that your child's language development seems to be much slower than children of the same age, it is worth seeking professional help to have your child assessed for any potential problems.

The task of encouraging your child to develop their language use and vocabulary is a very worthwhile one that will help them gain self-confidence and increase their chances of learning how to get along with other children in a friendly and productive way.

The first step is to be accessible to your child and to be prepared to listen

to what they are trying to say. This doesn't mean a marathon English lesson whenever they speak, but rather lots of brief interactions that present opportunities for you to encourage your child to say more. For example, if your child shows you one of their toys, instead of simply saying "That's a truck," you might invite them to tell you more about the toy, such as, "That's a great truck, Bill. What sort of truck is it?"

This natural teaching process is called incidental teaching and encourages children to use words in a positive home environment.

Remember too that it is not uncommon for two- and three-year-olds to stammer and struggle while getting their words out. Try not to be tempted to interrupt and finish your child's sentences.

A child's interest in speaking is also driven by being spoken to themselves. While this doesn't mean you have to spend all day chatting to your one-year-old, it is a good idea to point out and name things your child looks at through the day. If they find something of particular interest, get close to them, bend down to their eye level and tell your child the name of the object they are looking at.

Correcting a word that is pronounced incorrectly should also be encouraged, but in a positive way without pressuring the child. Repeat the word and encourage them to try again. If your child makes any attempt at the word, praise them. If not, don't worry about it and try again another time.

Of course, because of the strong influence of a parent's own behavior it is always a good idea to make sure

you yourself are a good language role model. This is where baby talk is no longer helpful and proper pronunciation and grammatically correct sentences need to replace it. Avoid using very long sentences with many words when communicating with your toddler, but don't be afraid to introduce new words that will increase their vocabulary.

Young children often enjoy watching their parents going about the house with their daily routines and enjoy it even more if they can help or join in. It is not surprising then that taking the time to describe to your child the things you are doing such as gardening, cooking, taking care of the baby, or repairing something, may stimulate their interest and prompt them to talk further and ask questions.

Similarly, sharing your day's feelings and experiences helps your child be more involved with the exciting world of words. Talk to them about your day. Tell them something that made you laugh, the people you spoke to, something you saw on the way home from work — even adults sometimes find it difficult to speak about such things and can benefit from the practice.

Finally, no matter what your own interest in books may be, toddlers love to have stories read to them and to look through picture books with an interested adult. Both infants and toddlers should be read to from an early age at least once a day. Make sure you have a good supply of books on hand. This doesn't take money — libraries are always accessible. However, remember too not to force your child to listen to a story if they are not interested, rather choose another time or topic.

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LYING

Lying — its something politicians are often accused of doing, something most adults do at sometime or another in the form of a 'little white lie,' and something we don't want children to do.

Why? Not because we have double standards — deliberately misleading someone by saying something that is not true is unacceptable both in children and adults — but because lying undermines trust. Children need to learn that no matter what they have done, they must tell the truth — even though the subtleties of society's attitudes toward lying can sometimes appear to children as contradictory.

Believing our children and trusting them not to tell lies as they grow to adulthood will help them build self-esteem and confidence in their dealings with those around them. But we also need to understand that young preschool children will often tell stories without intending to tell lies. Preschoolers sometimes mix up reality and fantasy. Language is new to them, and a desire to express their thoughts helps them learn the communication skills so vital in our society.

By primary school age however, we expect that children will know the difference between truth and fantasy. If they tell a lie they know it and have a reason for it.

So why would your child lie? The consequences of telling the truth might have something to do with it. If a child tells the truth and believes they will be severely or unfairly punished, they may learn to avoid punishment in the future by lying. It is important to separate the consequences of lying

from the consequences of what happened.

Children can also learn how to lie simply by watching other children and adults. If children see others getting away with lying, they may be tempted to try it themselves. In other cases lying serves to gain attention and approval. Your child may tell stories to other children to be seen as 'cool' by their friends. Children who tell such boastful lies may also be lonely, bored, or have low self-esteem.

That said, it's obvious we need to know when children are lying so we can intervene to teach them not to. That's often the hard part though — when are you sure your child is not telling the truth? Younger children can sometimes give the game away themselves. They may tell a story that just doesn't sound right, or the child may break into a smile as their hastily concocted plot unravels.

A few simple questions can help reveal a lie, although a rigorous interrogation is likely to be interpreted as a threat of punishment and will not help the situation. For example, querying how your child came to have \$10 in their pocket might include some calm, clear questions about when, where, who was with them, or the order of events.

To discourage lying in children parents need to discuss the problem with their children. It is important your child knows that lying is unacceptable, but it is equally important for your child to understand some of the effects of lying. You might like to briefly and calmly tell your child how lying affects you and why you think it is a problem. For example:

"Tania, I feel angry and disappointed when you lie. It makes it hard to believe anything you say. If you keep telling lies you will find that nobody will trust you."

You can also give your child opportunities to be honest and reward and praise them for telling the truth. This gives your child a positive response to their behavior and they are more likely to repeat their honesty in future. Try telling them that you will give them opportunities to be honest and try it out occasionally. For example, if you know that they haven't yet cleaned their room, ask them. You will know immediately whether they are being honest or not.

If your child is finding it hard to learn not to tell lies, you might need to set up a written contract signed by both yourself and your child. This contract should state what you expect your child to do and the rewards and consequences that will follow. Put the contract up on the refrigerator to help avoid getting into a debate with your child. If they have lied, the consequences for that behavior are clearly listed in the contract for all to see.

As your child learns to not lie, you will no longer need a written contract as you and your child will have established a more permanent contract of trust.

PARENTING TIP: If your child owns up to doing something they know you would not have allowed them to do make sure you praise them for their honesty, before you deal with the misbehavior. No matter what else has happened they should be rewarded for telling the truth.

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MAKING FRIENDS

Most of us can look back at our schooldays and remember fondly the hours spent playing and talking with our friends. Sometimes these school friendships don't survive the transition to adulthood and the emerging of an independent personality. Other times, an early friendship may develop into a lifelong friendship.

But no matter how brief or lasting, childhood friendships play an important role in the way we develop as adults.

In psychological terms, interacting with friends helps children to develop such important attributes as physical skill, language ability, how to solve problems, and showing consideration to others. Without friends children can lose confidence in themselves, suffer low self-esteem and feel sad and stressed.

Children who have friends are likely to feel happy and enjoy their time at school. Those who form strong positive friendships in primary school are also less likely to develop behavioral and emotional problems later in their teenage years. Their friends can provide support and encouragement when dealing with difficult issues and an informal forum to share the confusion and worries of adolescence.

For some children, already existing behavioral problems will make it difficult for them to make friends. Aggressive and negative children are often rejected by their peers, who simply don't want to play with a child who bullies, bosses or hurts other children.

A lack of basic social skills, coupled with rejection by peers is likely to see a child gravitate toward other disruptive and aggressive children. Rather than forming positive friendships, they may find the membership of a group or gang that encourages antisocial behavior such as

stealing or skipping school a more preferable alternative.

As parents it is therefore important that we encourage our children to make friends during their school years. However it is the right of every parent to judge the positive and negative influences of certain friendships on their child. It is a good idea to encourage your child to invite their friends over to play at home so that you know how your child acts among their peers.

Making friends in childhood, as in adult life, differs depending on personality. Some people just seem born to have a wide circle of friends. They may be popular through their outgoing nature, verbal skills and genuine interest in people and relationships. That doesn't mean however that the quieter, shyer personalities amongst us should suffer.

If you think your child is having problems making friends there are steps you can take to help them gain confidence and skills without attempting to change their basic nature.

It is important to discuss with your child any problems you think they might have making friends. You might not always be right about your concerns. Some children just don't talk very much to adults about their friends or activities at school, or may be more outgoing away from the family environment.

If your child is finding it hard to form friendships, discussing with them things such as who they talk to at school, what they have tried in the past and what they think might work in the future can often help your child feel more positive about their own ability to make friends. Talking with your child's teacher or other adults who know your child can provide useful feedback on how your child behaves around other children.

So what are some practical suggestions to help your child make friends?

First, it is good to remember that one major way children learn how to interact with other people is by watching how their parents deal with others. If you talk to people in a polite and friendly way, your child will see this and be more likely to model such behavior themselves.

To reinforce this incidental type of learning, you could draw up a list of behaviors that help encourage friendships, such as using a friendly voice, sharing toys, asking for things politely, smiling, and taking turns when playing.

You can also help your child learn these skills by practicing them in the form of a fun role-playing game. Ask your child to practice using all the skills on your list, with you pretending to be one of their school friends. Be sure to answer any questions your child has about the process of making friends.

Remember too to give your child lots of positive feedback for their efforts in making friends. If you praise your child when they try new skills it will increase their chances of success through encouraging them to keep trying.

Apart from individual skills, there are of course certain activities other than at school that can provide ample opportunities for friendships. If your child shows any interest in sport or other pursuits like music, craft or scouts, then encourage them to join a group. These will present ideal situations for your child to meet other children and make friends.

Of course, if your child's personality is not attuned toward certain activities, don't try to force them to join a group they will not be interested in.

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AVOIDING MEALTIME MADNESS

I sometimes see U.S. television sitcom episodes about getting the family together for the annual Thanksgiving dinner that is so much a part of the American psyche. It's seen as a very important family event — everyone in the one place sharing happy conversation over a table brimming with food.

While we don't have such a tradition here in Australia, the reality is that the nightly family gathering around the dinner table remains an important part of our social fabric. It is an opportunity for family members to share their day's experiences, enjoy each other's company and join in the planning of family activities.

No doubt for some families this will all sound a bit corny and out of touch, especially in light of today's time-pressured existence, replete with televisions, videos, computers, personal stereos and mobile phones. Perhaps a vision of family get-togethers full of disruptions, verbal battles, and endless attempts to actually get everyone to the table would be more appropriate.

The truth is though that quality time spent together remains an essential element of any family, no matter what its makeup or from what generation it stems.

There are many things we can do as parents to encourage our children early on to learn to sit at a table and eat. Taking the time to do this will not only allow mealtimes to be used to strengthen family bonds, it will also help our children develop good eating habits. And good eating habits mean children are much more comfortable eating out with the family or visitors and more likely to develop healthy eating habits as adults.

Of course it is important to have realistic expectations about a family meal. When preschoolers first begin to eat at a table there are likely to be spills and messes. This isn't misbehavior, just a simple learning curve. Try to stay calm and look for opportunities to praise your child.

Because young children are also easily distracted and find it hard to sit in one place for a long time, 20 to 30 minutes is a good time limit for a main meal. And because mealtimes need to be interesting, it is unreasonable to impose a Dickensian "no talking at the dinner table" approach. Of course, it is important conversation occurs between mouthfuls of food — some children will happily chat away over dinner and eat nothing.

It is not essential that your child learn to like every dish they are presented with. If your child is encouraged to eat a variety of

foods, they will develop preferences for some foods over others, just as adults do, and there's no point in insisting they eat a specific vegetable if they will happily eat something else just as nutritious.

Some of the best ways parents can help avoid mealtimes being stressful actually occur away from the dinner table.

Try and establish a set time and routine for meals so children know when to stop playing and get ready, or when to turn off the television set. Avoid your child snacking within an hour of a scheduled mealtime. And keep a watch on fluid intake as well. A big glass of milk or juice just before dinner can certainly dampen an appetite.

PARENTING TIP

Some mealtime problems are directly related to the way a parent and child interact at a dinner table. Children may use the refusal to eat as a way of gaining attention. It can become a problem if you are repeatedly manipulated into allowing your child to eat the most meager portions of their dinner through bargaining and negotiating. It is better to set appropriate consequences for such behavior, stick to those consequences, and praise your child when they eat an acceptable portion of everything on their plate.

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LEARNING HOW TO MISBEHAVE AT HOME

Just as children show some of the physical characteristics inherited from their own family tree, certain behavioral and emotional characteristics will also be passed on. And like all of us, our children will add to their unique genetic makeup through learning. Both through formal schooling as well as the experiences of life, we add much to our understanding of the world around us and how we deal with it.

One of the most important areas of learning for children is the family home. It is here where we can teach and encourage our children to behave in ways that will make life easier and happier for both children and parents. But we also need to be aware that children can learn unintentional lessons at home.

Of obvious concern to parents are the things children learn from watching the behavior of others. At home, parents, sisters and brothers need to monitor their own behavior to ensure that younger children do not learn, for example, to yell at people from watching mum or big brother do the same. If you as a parent frequently show anger and frustration in front of your child, they might eventually learn to behave in a similar way. Children who shout and throw temper tantrums when frustrated with a game they are playing may have unintentionally been "taught" to do this.

Sometimes we may not be aware that we are rewarding certain behaviors in our children that we would not want to encourage. These "accidental" rewards can stem from

something as simple as a smile. For example, if you react with a laugh the first time your child says a swear word in front of you it may encourage your child to try out the word again. Alternatively, if you spend too much time reasoning with your young child in attempting to explain your disapproval of swearing you are providing them with a lot of rewarding attention.

Smiles, laughs, and attention are all powerful social rewards. And like adults, children are strongly affected by such rewards. They quickly learn that their behavior has an effect on others, and if they see a positive effect from their actions they are likely to keep up that behavior.

Similarly, both you and your child can also learn undesirable behavior through what is called an "escalation trap." This can occur when a child asks for something, such as a biscuit just before dinner, is told *no* but keeps on asking in a louder voice. If the child continues to ask for the biscuit, getting louder and more demanding, the harassed parent may eventually give in to gain some peace.

In this case, the child has been rewarded for being demanding and the parent has been rewarded for giving in — at least in the short term. The rewards mean the behavior is likely to occur again.

The reverse case also applies. When you ask your child to do something and they resist, you will need to give that instruction again. If you find yourself having to keep

repeating the instruction, your frustration may raise the level of your voice until you eventually angrily demand that your child do as you ask by the count of three, *or else!* Your child will probably finally get the message. Unfortunately, the message that they may have learned is that you are only serious when you yell. The result — next time your child is told to do something they might wait until you yell before reacting. And you may make an angry demand because you have learnt that that is how you can get your child's attention.

Just being aware of how you and your child can affect each other's behavior is a good starting point toward reducing learned misbehavior at home. Think about the types of behavior you would like to see in yourself and your child and try and make sure you put those behaviors into practice.

Ultimately, we cannot as parents totally control the many behavioral influences that our children will come across during their growing years, but we can work hard to ensure the things they learn at home are those that we would wish them to learn.

Parenting Tip

Children may learn to misbehave if they feel they have been ignored when they behave. The attention they receive when they are naughty is seen as better than an absence of attention no matter what their behavior. It is therefore important to sometimes reward children with praise and attention when they are not misbehaving.

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MODERN PARENTING

An elderly gentleman came up to me the other day and declared: "Kids today, just don't have enough discipline. Back when I was a kid, if you misbehaved, you got a swift clip around the ear and you knew not to do it again."

From talking further with him I discovered that he held no stock with what he saw as "modern" approaches to parenting. It appeared to him that nowadays parents ignored the use of punishment as a deterrent to unacceptable behavior.

So are we turning our backs on good old-fashioned values and substituting them with slick social science terminology and warm fuzzy feeling philosophies?

Not from where I stand we aren't.

Teaching children self-control, how to follow rules, behave acceptably, and respect others isn't something that has ceased to be fundamental to effective parenting just because we are about to approach the new millennium.

So why do we see so many children misbehaving?

While the world of today may be very different to that of our grandparents, one thing that hasn't changed is that being a parent is a demanding and responsible role most often learned through trial and error. There is no "right" way to bring up children. Instead, as parents we decide what values, skills and behaviors we wish

to encourage in our children and then go about trying to achieve those goals to the best of our ability.

Today, with many parents both working fulltime, an extended family often not available for guidance and advice on parenting, increasing numbers of single-parent families, and the added social influences of television, movies, videos, computer games and the internet, it's not surprising that many parents sometimes find it difficult to deal effectively with misbehavior.

Fortunately though, time has also allowed us to learn a lot more about why children behave the way they do. Many years of research by psychologists has helped us develop positive practical approaches for everyday mums and dads dealing with difficult behavior in children.

These approaches don't involve harsh punishments such as hitting, smacking or yelling, but instead concentrate on promoting children's development through a loving, caring home while at the same time managing difficult behavior in a constructive and non-hurtful way.

They have proven to be effective through research, testing and practice and they don't make parents feel guilty or inadequate, or children feel angry and resentful.

Positive parenting also emphasizes helping children learn the skills they need to get on well with others, to

communicate their ideas, feelings and opinions, and to manage their emotions — aspects critical to promoting self-esteem.

Effective parenting is not about letting children do what they want, whenever they want. This will only lead to self-centered children who have problems managing their emotions. The better alternative is the consistent and predictable use of assertive discipline within a safe environment and plenty of time for parents and children to be together.

Assertive discipline doesn't mean punishment.

Rather, parents should deal with misbehavior quickly, decisively and consistently and apply appropriate logical consequences such as the removal of an activity or toy that is at the centre of the problem. Clearly expressed family rules that tell the child what to do such as "Use a pleasant voice if you want some help," rather than "Don't whine," should be backed up with a consequence that's relevant to the situation.

In this way, children learn to accept responsibility for their own behavior and to become aware of the needs of others. They learn what behavior is acceptable, what is not, and what will happen if they misbehave. They will also develop a positive view of both themselves and their parents and are much less likely to develop behavior problems in later years.

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FAMILY ADDITIONS

The arrival of a new baby heralds a significant change in any family household. For parents who already have children it is a time to help foster a new family relationship.

Children can be very excited about a new baby brother or sister, lovingly looking after them and rushing to tell you when the baby cries, or helping with diaper changing and bath time. However sometimes children can be jealous and aggressive toward a new baby.

Children may react to the arrival of a baby with babyish behavior themselves, disobedience, tantrums, moodiness, clinginess, or problems with bedtime, going to the toilet or meals. To avoid problems, it is best to prepare your children for a new baby at least three to four months in advance.

A good place to start is to talk about what to expect when baby comes home. Describe to your child what they were like as a baby and show them pictures.

Remember though not to tell your child you are adding to your family so that they will have a friend to play with. Your child will be very disappointed with a playmate who sleeps most of the time and can't even hold their own toys!

Of course if your children are older, be prepared for lots of questions about where exactly the baby is going to come from. A prior visit to a good book store for appropriate age information on sexuality and childbirth can be well worth it.

Where changes to household routines are necessary, such as moving your child from a cot to a bed or into another bedroom, these should be done well in advance. Avoid giving your child the impression they are being displaced by the baby by saying things such as, "You're a big girl now so it's time for you to sleep in a big girl's bed."

No matter what steps you take before the birth of a new baby, don't be too concerned if your child is unwilling to hug or cuddle you when you are first reunited at home — they will mix with you and baby when they are ready. Just be available to hug and kiss your child and give them some undivided attention.

It also helps to use your baby's name when encouraging young sisters or brothers to help or interact with you and baby. This will help your children realize that the baby is a person just like them, rather than a 'thing' that has been brought home.

When problems do occur, it is likely due to your child feeling left out. While

some quality time may help adjust the balance it is important not to accidentally reward undesirable behavior by giving too much attention to babyish behaviors such as thumb sucking or wanting to wear a nappy. Don't punish your child if they slip back a little from developmental achievements. Instead give lots of praise and encouragement when they behave well.

Of course if any serious misbehavior occurs such as hurting the baby, parents must act quickly to let children know that such behavior is unacceptable.

Remember too, no matter how well behaved your child is toward their new baby brother or sister it is a good idea to make sure they have a place to play uninterrupted away from the baby each day.

Parenting Tip

To avoid your child feeling guilty about any negative feelings they might have for their new baby brother or sister, make sure you acknowledge those feelings in a constructive way. If your child says they do not like the baby, you might agree that it is not always fun to have a baby in the house. You could talk about how you love the baby but also find some things hard, such as getting up in the middle of the night.

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TERRORS OF THE NIGHT

Remember, as a young child, hiding under the bed covers to avoid being eaten by monsters that you were sure invaded your room every night as soon as the light went off?

Well, the fact is nighttime can be scary for young children. As infants, many children are rocked or fed until they fall asleep. They feel comforted and safe. But when it is time for them to sleep by themselves their imaginations and fears may lead to nightmares and bad dreams. Bedroom monsters seem to feature strongly in the minds of young children.

Over a third of all preschoolers will have a nightmare at least once every two weeks. It is most common in children aged between 3 and 5 years, usually occurring toward morning.

When a child wakes after a nightmare they may feel scared and upset. Therefore, it is good to know a little about how to deal with your child's nightmares so neither of you worry too much about it.

The cause of nightmares is not always known, but they can occur because of unsettling events during the day or some disruption to your child's normal sleeping routine. Scary stories or television shows, or loud, active play just before bedtime aren't helpful.

When comforting your child after a nightmare, be supportive, hold them close, and confidently reassure them that nothing bad will happen. Explain to them that what happens in a dream cannot really hurt them. Remember though that your child's dream will have seemed very real to them so it isn't helpful to insist it was not real — rather, listen calmly to what your child tells you and do not look worried.

Of course, it might be tempting to follow your child's lead and assure them that the monster they are declaring really was under the bed has been chased away by you. The problem here is that if you pretend the monster is real your child may worry that it will come back as soon as you leave the room!

Getting your child back to sleep after a nightmare involves encouraging them to calm down. Show them how taking some deep breaths and letting their body go floppy like a rag doll will help relax them. If you leave a night light on your child can quickly work out that they are safe in bed in their own room if they awake from another nightmare.

A far less common occurrence than childhood nightmares is what is known as 'night terrors.' Usually found in older toddlers and preschoolers, night terrors may occur after a child has suffered a high fever or after a particularly busy or stressful day. They

usually happen during the first few hours after falling asleep and can be quite distressing for parents, rather than the child.

Night terrors cause children to act as if they are suffering a terrifying nightmare, and may last up to 20 minutes. The child may speak or call out, their eyes may be open with a glassy stare, and they may struggle or push away anyone trying to hold them. Despite these often alarming behaviors, the child is not in fact suffering any distress, nor are they dreaming. Children don't even remember night terrors when they wake in the morning.

If you do find your child experiencing night terrors there is not much you can do until it is over. Wait with your child for the night terrors to end, making sure they are not in any position to injure themselves. If your child has more than one episode of night terrors in a 4-month period, seek professional help.

PARENTING TIP

If your child has the same nightmare over and over it is important to talk with them during the daytime to see if anything is worrying them. Recurring nightmares can be a sign of distress or emotional upset. If you find your child is having a problem that you cannot work through, seek professional help.

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PARENTING - THEORY & PRACTICE 101

There are always people around who will tell you they know the "right" way to raise children. Yet for most of us we rely on our own common sense and judgment, as well as selected advice from friends and family, books and sheer trial and error.

However, the pace of modern life, the diversification of family structure into more single parent and step-parent families, and a reduction in the extended family support network is enough to stretch the coping resources of many a competent parent.

There has thus arisen a relatively recent source of assistance for parents — the parenting course. Advertisements and stories about these courses appear regularly in local newspapers and on shop bulletin boards. A recent call was even made to offer parents financial incentives to attend such courses.

While I certainly think it is a good idea to offer parents information and support about the challenges of raising children, to paraphrase that motor mechanic on the television: "Parenting courses ain't parenting courses."

In fact the whole concept of a parenting course is something entirely new to most parents and understandably many may wonder about its usefulness or be wary of its content and philosophy. Is attendance at a parenting course an admission of failure, a sinister infiltration of political correctness, or something only relevant for parents of children who run around at age six lighting fires and swearing at the teacher?

Of course the answer is none of the above.

But parents do need to be aware of what to look for when thinking about whether a parenting course is right for them. Perhaps the following mini consumer guide may be of help.

Who is conducting the course?

Simply being a parent is not enough to equip you to advise others on how to deal with a wide range of issues. Appropriately credentialed and qualified trainers are able to draw on a comprehensive knowledge base about child and adult behavior and help you develop strategies for dealing with complex problems.

Has it been shown to work with children the same age and background as yours?

A good parenting course will have been especially evaluated to determine just how effective it is at helping everyday moms and dads cope with parenthood.

Does it focus on more than just

"problem" behavior? We as parents have a responsibility to nurture and care for our children in a way that promotes their physical, intellectual and emotional development. A course about parenting must therefore include advice on teaching children positive skills.

Does the course provide specific practical advice? Parents can only make informed decisions about raising their own children if the advice they receive is user-friendly, concrete and clearly applicable to their own situation.

Does it allow parents to practice the skills being taught? Research shows that practicing new skills is an important contributor to effective learning. All talk and no action won't help you get out there and effect the changes you wish to make. Things such as homework tasks and take-home forms carry the content of a parenting course into the family situation and allow you the opportunity to put skills into action.

Do I feel confident discussing private family events? To gain the best from a parenting course it may be necessary to discuss exactly how you and your family deal with specific behavioral issues. For some parents this can be uncomfortable. It is up to you.

What follow-up is provided? While it's not exactly like buying a car, after sales service in the form of further assistance and support should you require it, is something that is part of a good parenting course. Some parents may complete a course and still face difficulties. The option of further assistance should always be available.

Does it meet my individual needs? Remember that there may be other avenues to gain answers to your parenting questions that are more appropriate than a parenting course. If for example you have a specific problem with bedwetting, you might seek individual assistance from a health professional or buy a book.

And one final question that can make all the difference to a busy family — **does it provide child care assistance so I can actually find time to attend the course?**

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PARENT TRAPS

Do you frequently feel exasperated, ashamed, or embarrassed by your child's behavior? Do you find that your child often irritates you? Do you have to threaten and shout to get your child to cooperate? Do you frequently argue with your partner about how to handle your child's behavior?

If the answer to some of these questions is yes, then you might have become caught in what I call a parent trap.

Parent traps are consistent ways of interacting with your children, your partner, or your own inner thoughts that actually make the difficult job of raising children even harder. They add to the everyday burden of stress that many parents experience and weaken the effectiveness of dealing with your child's problem behavior.

A lot of work in our parenting program is done with parents to help them out of these traps and into a strategy of guiding children's behavior without resorting to constant yelling, stressful conflict and frustration. This involves learning how to motivate children positively through encouragement when they are behaving well and working as a team with your partner on parenting issues.

The result of such a positive approach is to ease parents' burden and put more fun and satisfaction back into family life.

So what are some parent traps that you might recognize in your own family?

The **"criticism trap"** involves becoming locked into frequent and unnecessary power struggles with your child typically resulting in the parent reacting to misbehavior with escalating criticism ("Robert, leave your brother alone"), threats ("If you do that one more time you're in big trouble"), yelling and finally hitting. This type of discipline often backfires, with the parent's rapidly building anger serving to lead to resentment and further hostility between parent and child. If these kinds of battles take place frequently, it's time to try a new way of handling the situation.

The **"leave them alone trap"** occurs in combination with the criticism trap and involves the parent simply ignoring their child when they are behaving well or playing quietly. If good behavior is taken for granted and not actively encouraged it will occur less often in the future and is likely to be replaced with the misbehavior that receives so much attention. A basic principle of positive parenting is the praising and rewarding of behaviors you would like to see more often.

The **"for the sake of the children trap"** occurs when parents are in unhappy marriages and rather than learning new ways to resolve their

constant marital conflict and frustrations they stick doggedly to the same marriage routines believing the sake of the children is more important. Research shows time and again that children who live in families where there is a lot of conflict and stress between the parenting partners develop more emotional and behavioral problems than those raised in stable families regardless of whether that stable family is a one- or two-parent family.

The **"perfect parent trap"** is the result of the human desire to be perfect rather than just competent. There is no such thing as a perfect parent and aspiring to become one will only lead to disappointment, resentment, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy. Rather, it is better to realize that parenting has elements of both a learned skill and an ongoing loving relationship between individuals.

The **"martyr trap"** is one where parents become so over-involved in the task of parenting that they begin to neglect their own needs for intimacy, companionship, recreation, privacy and fun. In these cases a parent's relationship with their partner will suffer and they may end up feeling dissatisfied and resentful. Quality parenting takes place when adults have their own lives in balance.

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THE POWER OF POSITIVE PARENTING

The one thing you can rely on about being a parent is that your child's behavior will sometimes frustrate you. This doesn't mean you are a bad parent, and it doesn't mean that your child is uncontrollable.

Even the happiest of family households can suffer tension and stress when dealing with children's behavior. Parents may feel upset and drained if they find themselves having to 'battle' with their child over such everyday issues as mealtimes, shopping, or bedtime.

Since you love and care for your children, you will try your best to deal with such difficult behavior. However, it's unreasonable to think that you can be a perfect parent — we just aren't built like superman or superwoman.

When you think about it though, it's not too surprising that being a parent can be tough. Raising the next generation is a vitally important task requiring effort and patience, yet most of us begin our parenting careers unprepared for what lies ahead. More often than not we learn how to raise our children through trial and error. And no matter how much experience we gain, our children (and indeed

the everyday experiences of life itself) always seem to be able to come up with something new for us to deal with.

So how do we know if we are bringing up our kids well, and how do we go about reducing the stresses that occur when we find ourselves struggling with behaviors we just can't seem to get a handle on?

As a parent and psychologist who has spent more than 20 years researching why children behave the way they do, I believe there is simply no single right way to be a parent. It is up to you to decide what values, skills and behaviors you want to encourage in your child and to develop your own approach to dealing with your child's behavior.

That said, we all know that good advice at the right time can be a big help. Practical tips on why your baby cries, dealing with temper tantrums, helping your toddler learn to eat by themselves, or helping your primary schooler with their homework can make being a parent less stressful and at the same time more enjoyable.

That's the idea behind the Positive Parenting Program ('Triple P' for short) which we have developed at the University

of Queensland in Australia. The program is based on extensive scientific research and offers parenting suggestions and ideas that have proven effective across a wide cross-section of Australian families.

It's called positive parenting because it aims to make it easier for parents to develop a positive loving relationship with their children through encouragement, attention and good communication. Using a positive parenting approach will not only help family life run a little smoother, it will also make it less likely that your child will develop more serious behavior problems into their adolescent years.

PARENTING TIP

One way that parents can find more patience and time for their child is to make sure they also find time for themselves. Taking care of your own needs for intimacy, adult companionship, recreation and time alone will help make parenting easier. If you are spending plenty of quality time with your child and they are able to be looked after in a safe environment, a break away from them once in while will do both you and your child a world of good.

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PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

It is plain enough when we read in the daily newspaper of a child engaging in some highly dangerous practice such as jumping on and off moving trains for the fun of it that this is a 'problem' behavior that needs to be discouraged.

Likewise, much of our policing and legal systems are aimed toward discouraging the behavior of adults who engage in illegal or dangerous acts that bring about loss, property damage or injury.

For parents though, the issue of dealing with behavior problems is often a lot less clear. Our children will always misbehave at times, do things we might not agree with, and act in ways that annoy or upset us.

Child rearing is strongly influenced by a parent's values and beliefs. What we see as being either acceptable or problem behavior is influenced by the values we consider important. For example, parents who view total obedience as important to family life may well interpret an adolescence's attempts to argue a differing point of view as a challenge to adult authority. Another parent may see it as a child learning to express an independent opinion.

I have always encouraged parents to help their children become responsible, self-reliant and self-disciplined; able to make independent decisions and solve problems. At the same time, children need to become civilized and socially

skilled human beings capable of living in harmony with those around them.

So how does a parent recognize the point when their child is showing a serious behavior problem requiring some outside help instead of something able to be dealt with through a bit of positive parenting?

All children behave at times in irritating, disruptive ways that may produce conflict within the family. 'Problems' such as making faces at the dinner table for example are seen in many children of a similar age.

Other behaviors such as crying, fussing, whining, attention seeking, fussy eating, bedtime difficulties, disobedience and thumb sucking are problems that usually decrease with maturity if handled sensibly. Likewise, hassles getting children to follow routines such as bathing, dressing, shopping or cleaning their teeth can be dealt with by parents effectively to prevent more difficult problems arising.

Of course, parents can't assume that these normal problem behaviors will simply go away without effort.

Don't fall for the old "it's just a phase, he'll grow out of it" trick.

Improvements in a child's behavior will not begin until action is taken. Parents need to learn positive alternative ways of reacting to a child's behavior when dealing with problems. Sometimes it takes just a minor adjustment in a strategy or tactic.

Other times may call on a rearrangement of a parent's own priorities to allow more time for their child.

Even with attentive, caring parents, some children do develop more serious behavior problems. The easiest way to recognize whether your family could benefit from professional help is to look at your child's behavior in relation to other children of a similar age. For example, a behaviorally disturbed youngster may not just occasionally fight with his brothers and sisters, but will also get into repeated fights at school, lose their temper frequently and destroy other children's belonging with little guilt or remorse. Troublesome behavior like this tends to occur frequently and persists over time.

It is important to seek help if your child shows repeated examples of antisocial behavior or emotional disturbances such as excessive worry, depression fear or obsessions. Help is available, although, disturbingly, research has shown that only one in five parents make use of professional support, and only two percent of children with identifiable mental health problems receive specialist mental health assistance.

Parenting Tip

It is important to honestly evaluate the way you handle a problem with your child and note how your reaction to their misbehavior in turn affects their reaction to your handling of the situation.

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INEFFECTIVE PUNISHMENT

The use of punishment with children is a topic guaranteed to stir heated debate between two diametrically opposed points of view. But to simplify the issue of punishment down to an argument about whether it is morally right or wrong to smack your child is to miss the point entirely.

So is to argue that children today don't get enough punishment for misbehaving and so simply need a "kick in the pants" to pull them into line.

Views such as these show a very limited understanding of children and their problems.

Many children who have been referred to our parenting program over the years have had more spankings than hot dinners. Insufficient punishment is rarely a problem — how punishment is used frequently is.

While there is little doubt a firm smack on the bottom can be an effective deterrent, particularly when a child is doing something dangerous, at best corporal punishment works some of the time, for some behaviors, with some children. When used ineffectively and inconsistently it more often than not leads to further behavior problems.

A wealth of research and experience about the way humans behave has shown us that consequences for misbehavior work best when applied immediately after the offending behavior has occurred and in

sufficient intensity to serve as a deterrent.

I have always recommended that parents consider using alternatives to physical force when disciplining their children. These alternative approaches need however to be specific and practical. Children do not thrive in an environment without rules, structure, guidance and consequences.

An important part of helping parents learn effective alternative discipline strategies involves showing examples where common types of punishment don't work and can lead to more misbehavior.

Punishment threatened but not carried out.

"Wait until your father gets home," is a threat sometimes heard in families. But if a child hears these threats of punishment often and rarely receives any consequences the threat won't do much to control behavior. Indeed some children consider threats of punishment a dare to test their parent's limits.

Punishment given in anger. Parents often use spankings and other punishments when they are angry with a child. But when parents become extremely angry there is a risk of losing control and causing injury. Outbursts of rage serve to make a child feel unloved, resentful and insecure. While it is inevitable a parent will sometimes feel angry, it is not always helpful to act in openly hostile ways when children misbehave.

Punishment as a crisis response.

A few years back a mother in our program had a 10-year-old who constantly harassed her with complaints about where he wanted to spend a long weekend. Several times she tried to reason with him that the family could not afford the trip, however when he kept up the nagging she eventually exploded, screaming insults at him and sending him to his room. Responding to the misbehavior with punishment before it became intolerable would probably avoided her reaching a crisis point and subsequently overreacting.

Inconsistent use of punishment.

A couple who came to us with a 7-year-old who was polite and well behaved at school but at home let loose with swearing and abuse whenever he didn't get his way, couldn't agree on how to handle the problem. The mother thought it best to ignore the behavior. The father insisted that any swearing should be dealt with by a good spanking with his belt and sending the child to his room. This meant the child got away with swearing some times and not others, and the problem behavior got worse over time, not better. Children cannot be expected to learn acceptable patterns of behavior if their parents' reactions are unpredictable.

Remember too, discipline strategies always work best in a caring, loving, predictable environment where children receive plenty of praise and encouragement when they behave well.

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ARE BOYS HARDER TO RAISE THAN GIRLS?

In an era of gender equality, the question of male/female differences is often a source of contrasting controversy. Employers are warned to treat the sexes the same or pay the price of litigation for the failure to do so, while an American author makes quite a good living out of telling us that men and women are from different planets.

For some parents, the question is not so much academic, as very real. I have often heard from stressed mothers sentences beginning, "The trouble with boys ..."

So what are the facts?

The science of psychology shows us that the individual differences seen between people, including between the sexes, are a result of both biology and upbringing. From the moment of birth, parents and other adults may treat boys and girls in different ways. Interactions with baby boys are often more physical and exuberant than for baby girls.

Perhaps the strongest factor playing a role in childhood gender differences is the developmental factors that affect children. Girls develop language skills and fine motor coordination earlier than boys inclining them towards such things as a quiet social tea party. Meanwhile, boys develop their large motor skills sooner than girls and thus rush around kicking and chasing footballs and the like. The male hormone testosterone also lends an aggressiveness and fondness for physical activity to a young boy's daily routine.

The result of all this for parents is that raising boys is not about having a quiet life.

In my experience many mothers in particular find boys noisier than girls. Many of the things boys do are active and necessarily loud. Dads can be more accepting of this noise level and are likely to dismiss it as a simple case of "boys will be boys."

But this biological tendency doesn't negate the need to encourage boys to learn necessary adjustments to their behavior. Whatever a child's gender, it is important for parents to be able to communicate with their children and to help them develop skills such as emotional control, patience, taking turns, and sharing.

For boys, the core social skills of communication and the regulation of emotions are often ones in which they lag behind. Because girls tend to be more verbally adept at an earlier age, this puts them in touch with their emotional world. They are better able to express their own feelings and understand the feelings of others.

It is therefore especially important for parents to help their sons learn that there are acceptable and appropriate ways of expressing anger, hurt, sadness and so on, without hurting themselves or others.

Boys are also subject to mixed messages about what it means to be male, which can cause them confusion and worry. For example, often sporting prowess is valued but an interest in art or music is not. For girls, it is generally okay to be good at sports, schoolwork, and to be artistic. But for boys, this flexibility is not an option.

As a result, some boys end up in emotional straightjackets, prisoners to a narrow vision of what it means to be a competent male. We need to be

sensitive as parents to what our sons' real interests and aptitudes are so that we can offer them diversity, not restrictions.

However it's also the case of course, that in some social situations boys may be punished by their peers or even by mum or dad when they express exactly the communication skills we would want them to — "Big boys don't cry."

It is important to remember that while boys might indulge in loud rough behavior, this doesn't mean parental discipline needs to be rough. Discipline should be about helping children learn that there are consistent consequences for their actions that will be enforced within a predictable, nurturing, and loving environment.

For a young daughter that might translate into a disapproving look or an explanation that what they are doing is hurting someone else, but for a boy who has not yet reached such a communication skill level you may need to immediately remove them from the situation, explain what they should be doing instead and give them time to behave well before returning them to play.

All of this doesn't necessarily mean that boys are harder to raise than girls, but that for certain families, the natural differences between the sexes may cause particular difficulties. Single moms need to find strong male models to help their sons develop important gender-based skills and behaviors. And while not always possible, it also helps if boys see some level of role-sharing and gender equality around a household so they are able to learn that men as well as women do housework, washing, cooking and ironing.

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"MOMMY, IT HURTS!"

Apart from the usual scrapes and bumps of a boisterous childhood, a surprisingly large number of children also suffer from recurring stomach aches that have no specific medical cause.

Known clinically as recurrent abdominal pain (RAP), this can produce pain intense enough to interfere with a child's usual activities in 10 to 15 percent of school-aged children. In the vast majority of RAP cases the child reports this pain even though a thorough medical investigation cannot come up with an answer.

Researchers continue to look at a number of possible causes for RAP. Anxiety and psychological distress have been investigated, although most children with RAP have been found to be psychologically quite normal. Some scientists believe that such children have an ill-defined physical disturbance that makes them vulnerable to abdominal distress.

Recent research has concentrated on the fact that children may learn within their family certain behaviors relating to pain. This idea is based on the fact that pain is a subjective experience and that people react differently to pain depending on their own personal tolerance. Contrast the child who accidentally hits his thumb with a hammer, lets out a quick yell,

holds back the tears and tries again, with the child who screams the house down, bellowing and sobbing with such conviction that his parents may well believe the entire arm has been torn off.

The things we say and do when we are in pain are termed 'pain behaviors.' These behaviors help communicate to others the amount of distress we are suffering and affect our own subjective experience of pain. Children naturally look to their parents to take their pain away. Complaining of pain brings them lots of attention — sympathy, cuddles, reassurance and perhaps a day at home instead of school.

While this kind of attention is appropriate for isolated episodes of pain, it can cause problems with a child suffering chronic, recurring pain. In this case, the episodes of pain will not go away for quite a while and the constant attention may lead the child to complain more, not less.

So while it can be reassuring for parents of children who have been found to suffer RAP to know that there is nothing medically wrong with their child, it is often hard to know exactly how to handle such a situation. If no physical cause for their pain can be found is your child merely 'putting it on?'

The short answer is 'no.' Despite the absence of any identified physical cause, the pain is indeed real and while many children with RAP simply grow out of it, up to a third may experience pain for several years. It is important therefore that an effort is made to help the child cope with pain in an effective way.

If your child suffers persistent pain that has been medically assessed as RAP it is important to let your child know that they are not seriously ill but that they will have to learn some new strategies to deal with pain. These strategies may include relaxation training through the use of audio tapes, or positive thinking which replaces self-thoughts such as "I hate this, I can't bear it." to "Hang in there, this will pass." Ask your doctor about these approaches to dealing with chronic pain.

Parenting Tip

A good way to monitor your child's progress when learning new strategies to cope with chronic pain is to draw up a simple pain diary using a 4 inch line in the shape of a thermometer with one end marked "no pain at all" and the other "really bad pain." Your child marks a point on the line rating how much pain they are feeling at three set times each day.

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RULING THE ROOST

"Rules are made to be broken," the old anti-establishment slogan says. Yet as adults, we know that the modern orderly world in which we live functions because the vast majority of us follow basic social rules and conventions. The freedom to question the appropriateness of such rules and to object to injustice is also fundamental to a democratic society.

It is not surprising then that many parents have mixed feelings about imposing rules. On the one hand they want their children to learn what is expected of them so they can get on with others. At the same time they do not want their children to be blindly obedient to adult authority.

For children to become socially responsible they must learn that reasonable rules and limits are there for their safety and well-being, not because it's convenient for parents. Rules help children learn exactly what sorts of behaviors are considered appropriate by their parents and what is not acceptable. They also help children learn an understanding of how fair rules are developed.

Families with no rules often live in chaos — stresses abound for both parents and children, and family life can become a continuous battleground.

However, too many rules doesn't help much either. While audiences

always get a chuckle out of the military-like order of the von Trapp household in the film *Sound of Music*, this type of approach to parenting can sometimes occur in real life, with all too negative consequences.

There are five things to remember when setting family rules. They should be: few, fair, easy to follow, enforceable and positively stated. And where possible, children themselves should contribute to decisions about the rules.

Keeping the number of rules small means less opportunity for children to break them and thus less problems with discipline. And while each family has to decide on what sorts of rules are appropriate, I believe there are some important rules for all children to observe.

- Children should always let their parents know where they are
- Children should always return home by the agreed time
- Children should respect and look after other people's property
- Children should speak to other family members in a reasonable manner

Of course, there's no point in setting rules if you aren't prepared to enforce them. Enforcement for family rules isn't about punishment, rather, children should be praised when they observe rules and have consistent

consequences if a rule is broken. Possible consequences include withdrawing privileges such as television watching for a set period, grounding children, extra duties or chores, or withdrawing pocket money.

It's important too that rules are clearly explained so that there is no confusion over how to follow them. Rather than having a long list of "don'ts," rules should be stated as positive "do's". This ensures rules are specific and easy to follow. For example, instead of telling your child "Don't make a mess in the bathroom," it is more helpful to say "Pick up your clothes and towels after taking a bath."

It's also a good idea to avoid vague using phrases such as "Be careful when you ..." or "Show respect to your elders," in place of explicit rules. They don't tell your children what to do and end up just sounding preachy.

PARENTING TIP

It sometimes useful to lay down specific ground rules before going to particular places such as visiting relatives, or traveling for holidays. In these cases the rules operate just for the duration of the trip. Call a family meeting to explain the rules, making sure there are no distractions, and ask for your child's opinion of the rules to see if compromises need to be made. When all are agreed ask your children to repeat the rules, and if necessary write them down and stick them on the fridge for everyone to see.

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SAFE AT HOME

Accidents in the home are the leading cause of injury and death in young children. **The Triple P - Positive Parenting Program** can help parents recognize and remove some of the dangers in the home so accidents can be avoided.

Home Safety

Young children need constant supervision, but that does not mean parents must hover over them and track their every move. Instead, parents can ensure their children are safe at home by taking a few precautions before letting their children play around the house.

- ✓ Place household cleaners, chemicals, matches or lighters and breakable items on high shelves or in lockable cabinets.
- ✓ Cover all exposed power outlets with plastic safety caps
- ✓ Keep all appliance cords out of reach so children do not pull appliances down on top of them.
- ✓ Keep all plastic bags out of reach to avoid suffocation.
- ✓ Any object less than 1½ inches wide such as buttons, coins, needles or pieces of toys should be kept secure to prevent a child from choking on them.

- ✓ Never leave your child unattended in the bathroom – children can drown in just 2 inches of water.

Safety Outside the Home

Parents should take steps to make sure the environment outside the home is as safe as possible.

- ✓ If children are playing near a pool, they should always be supervised and taught basic safety precautions like not running near the pool.



- ✓ Always supervise your children around family pets, like dogs. Teach children to approach dogs carefully, and not to approach strange dogs at all. Teach children how to be gentle with all pets to avoid any injuries.
- ✓ During the summer, it's easy for children to get sunburned. Always make sure your child is wearing SPF +15 water-resistant sunscreen and long sleeved shirts and hats when they are going to be in the sun for an extended period.

- ✓ Parents should always have a list of emergency numbers on hand in case accidents happen.

Ensuring a safe environment for your children can also decrease misbehavior, according to Dr. Matthew Sanders, founder of Triple P.

"If they're being supervised and watched then they're doing this in a safe

world where the parent doesn't have to keep saying things like, 'don't do that,' 'don't touch that,' 'come away from there,' or 'leave that alone,' which means there are fewer instructions, giving children less opportunity to disobey, which means there is less misbehavior."

- ✓ Outdoor play equipment should always be checked regularly to make sure it is in good condition, and soft surfaces like woodchip bark should be used underneath to cushion falls.

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SCHOOL MISBEHAVIOR

With the start of a new school year, many parents may be a touch apprehensive about how their child will get on with their new teacher and classmates, particularly if the child has had previous behavioral or learning difficulties at school.

There is little doubt that children's experiences at school as well as at home have a big influence on how children see themselves. This self-view colors their whole educational experience, impacting on their academic achievement.

And while teachers have always played an important role in the social education of children, ultimately it is up to us as parents to lay the foundations to help our children learn what is expected at school.

It is not surprising that young children who are defiant and disruptive may have trouble fitting in with the routines of school. Teachers generally expect a certain level of cooperation, such as following instructions, taking turns, and following rules — even from first graders.

One way for a parent to tell whether their young child is developing uncooperative behaviors that may lead to further problems at school is to give them

about 10 appropriate instructions over a half-hour period. (Make sure you don't do this while they are watching their favorite TV show!) If your child disobeys or ignores six to eight of the 10 instructions then you may need to help them learn better cooperation.

Parents should set a few simple good play behavior rules for their children when friends visit and be prepared to back up these rules with consequences. While it is common for young children to have occasional arguments with friends and siblings, they need to learn that spiteful comments, teasing, deliberately embarrassing, fighting and destructive behavior are not acceptable solutions to disagreements or disappointments. Examples of play rules are: be gentle, share and take turns, keep your hands and feet to yourself, and use your "inside voice."

Once a child reaches school age however, sometimes it is the parents who discover last that their child is disruptive, uncooperative and aggressive at school. Unfortunately, in my experience, it is not uncommon for parents of these children to only learn about the problem after a serious incident has arisen.

If this happens parents should obtain accurate information from the school about their child's behavior.

Try not to be defensive or make excuses but listen carefully to the teacher's views and share with them any similar difficulties you may experience at home. Ask the teacher how they think the problem should be resolved and how both of you can work together to help your child. A daily home-school report card which records a child's progress toward meeting set class behavior rules is a good way to start.

While a good working partnership between parents and schools can reduce the incidence of disruptive and aggressive behavior, further professional help should always be sought if a child shows persistent and extreme difficulties following normal social rules, is violent with other children and suffers outbursts of rage, lights fires, is repeatedly insolent or rude, has been skipping school, repeatedly steals or has major learning difficulties.

Parenting Tip

When meeting with teachers to discuss your child's problems at school avoid giving them advice on how they should teach, no matter how well-meant. Teachers often react negatively to advice from parents on how to run a classroom when it comes from someone who doesn't. Remember, your child may be only one of a number of children with similar difficulties.

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A SENSE OF SELF

As a parent and clinical psychologist I am always disturbed to pick up a newspaper and find a story about young kids getting into trouble with the law. Even more worrying is to then read certain adults' critical views about what is wrong with children who misbehave.

Why? Because the tragic truth is that many children who regularly misbehave already view themselves in a highly negative way. They may feel inadequate and lack the desire to achieve goals and face challenges. They may also believe bad things about themselves such as that they are just dumb, ugly, stupid, naughty and mean.

Adding to that negativity with a tirade of similar criticisms won't help the situation.

What we are dealing with here is the concept of self-esteem. Self-esteem is the term psychologists use to describe that vital component of every person's psychological make-up that defines who they are — your value as a person and how good you think you are at doing things and interacting with the world around you.

Children who have healthy self-esteem are likely to be happy, cooperative, successful at school and make friends easily. They are fun people to be around because they are eager to learn and succeed, and

because they cope with stress effectively.

However self-esteem doesn't come built-in at birth. We first learn our view of ourselves during childhood through the interactions we have with the people around us. As parents it is therefore very important that we help our children develop a true sense of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Encouraging self-esteem in children basically comes down to a consistent, positive approach to their upbringing.

Children who receive plenty of praise and encouragement feel good about themselves. A child who believes their parents have confidence in them by allowing them to do certain things by themselves will learn confidence. Telling your child you love them and spending time with them will help your child feel valued and cared for.

It is important also to encourage children to follow a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise and good grooming habits help children develop a positive image of themselves. And when your child achieves at something you can let them know that they should feel good about such accomplishments — it is okay to be different and be good at different things.

But of course, life isn't always about winning, despite what those sports shoes ads tell you, and it is equally important for the development of

healthy self-esteem that children learn how to deal with disappointment.

As a reaction to not getting what they want such as being chosen for a team, children may sometimes put themselves down, saying things like "I'm dumb, you hate me," or "I'm just stupid." If this happens, try to avoid being too sympathetic, instead encourage your child to try again after the set-back and to enjoy the activity or game even if they aren't the winner.

Rather than simply reassuring your child that everything will be alright, you can help your child develop their own sense of worth by letting them know that you understand their feelings of disappointment and that you are there to help them work out a reasonable way of dealing with that disappointment.

Remember too, when helping your child achieve in some activity to concentrate on effort not results. Praising your child for trying and making an improvement will motivate them to continue trying at a difficult task.

Parenting Tip

Laughter really is a great medicine. Children who feel good about themselves laugh spontaneously, develop a sense of humor and learn to tell funny stories. Encourage your child to laugh by listening to their stories, playing games and having fun together.

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SHOPPING FOR REWARDS

Shopping with the kids can sometimes be a bit of trial for parents, especially when children become bored and irritable. Preschool-aged children may end up whining, touching things without permission, running wild in the aisles and getting lost, or demanding something be bought for them.

Of course, it isn't that easy for children. Many shops seem to ensure your child will become over excited by the bewildering array of color, lights, and attractive items placed right at their own eye level. However, so long as you don't expect your young child to be patient for too long, you should be able to help them learn how to behave responsibly when you are shopping with them.

To make a start, plan a series of short practice shopping trips spending only about five minutes in a shop. Before you leave home tell your child where you will be going, what you will be buying and when you will be back home. Decide on a few appropriate shopping behavior rules and discuss them with your child. These rules might include: "Stay close to Mom or Dad"; "Do as you are asked"; "Walk down the aisles"; "Speak in a pleasant voice"; or "Ask before you touch."

As soon as you arrive at the shops involve your child in what you are doing. Talk to them about the decisions you are making. Children who are involved in a shopping trip are less likely to misbehave. If your child does not follow the rules you have set, calmly remind them and tell them what you would like to see them doing instead, for example — "Sarah, stop stamping your feet. Walk quietly."

If you are having persistent problems that are making shopping difficult, it might be best to try a more intensive approach. This makes use of a number of stamps or stickers that your child can earn toward a special reward at the end of the shopping trip such as a snack or a coin-operated ride.

First, decide how many stamps or stickers your child must earn by following the rules to get a reward and what that reward will be. You will also need to tell your child the consequences of not following the rules. It's probably best to use quiet time for this purpose — telling your child to stand quietly in the aisle for about 30 seconds before resuming shopping.

As your child follows the rules for a specified time, for example every two minutes or for every aisle passed, praise and reward them. If you use a small self-inking

stamp you can easily stamp the back of their hand at the agreed times. If you are using stickers you will need to prepare a sheet of paper onto which the stickers go before leaving for the store.

When your child is reaching the special reward easily, start to phase out the rewards by making them harder to achieve. Continue to use consequences consistently if your child misbehaves or breaks a rule. If they do not reach the goal by the end of the shopping trip do not give them the reward. You should not however criticize them or take away any stamps they have earned.

If all this sounds a bit over the top, remember that it will be well worth the extra effort to teach your child such a new skill when you both can later enjoy your shopping. And using rewards to help achieve goals is a natural part of everyday society — we all prefer praise to criticism and usually do our best when we feel that our efforts will be rewarded.

PARENTING TIP

Keeping your child interested and active while shopping can help prevent misbehavior. Try to get your child to find some items on the shelves, check prices, pass things to you, put them in the buggy, or spot different colors, shapes and sizes of items.

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SLEEPLESS IN THE SUBURBS

We all know that raising a child requires effort and a great deal of responsibility. As parents, we must spend years looking after the health and emotional well-being of our child, assisting them to grow into an independent adult while working to provide them with a stable, loving environment.

Of course, all this effort starts with the sometimes daunting task of day-to-day dealings with the behaviors of a new baby. For first-time parents one of the earliest challenges they face is helping their new-born infant develop a sleep routine that will see both baby and parent capable of making it through the day and night with some resemblance to normality.

Sleep isn't as simple as closing your eyes and opening them up some eight hours later — certainly not for babies, or indeed for adults. We actually move through a recurring cycle of sleep that takes us from deep sleep, light sleep, dreaming sleep, waking and back to sleep. Brief waking after each cycle is part of a normal sleeping pattern. For babies, each cycle takes about 45 to 50 minutes, half the time of adults.

This means babies will inevitably wake through the night. Most usually they will start to rouse during light sleep, moving, moaning or stretching and will possibly open their eyes and even cry a little before they waken fully or fall asleep again. It takes time for babies to learn to sleep to an adult routine and is therefore important that we as parents patiently help them to develop a regular sleep pattern.

The first step to understand a bit about your baby's normal sleep patterns. Knowing what to expect will also help you manage the changes in your own sleep. Tired, irritable parents are no fun for baby or themselves.

In the first three months, babies have an irregular sleep pattern, with many naps, some as short as only two hours. Their

brain is very active when they sleep and they seem restless — changing facial expressions, twitching, snorting and grunting as they sleep and sometimes even crying out.

From three to six months some regularity in sleep cycles start to develop and they begin to have more periods of deep calm sleep where they lie still, breathe quietly and stir less often.

After six months, babies are likely to be awake during the day for up to four hours at a time and have longer periods of sleep. At this age about half of all children will be able to sleep for around six hours straight.

By nine months, babies have developed a fair amount of control over their sleep and with more control over other skills such as grasping, making sounds and moving, the world becomes a much more interesting place — one sometimes worthy of staying awake when feeling tired, so as not to miss out on anything.

So, new parents can expect quite an extended time with disturbed sleep. But that doesn't mean you can't do something about making sure this period isn't any longer than it has to be, or that you or your partner suffer too badly. A few helpful tips can make all the difference.

Make your baby's room comfortable

Place your baby on their back to sleep on a firm mattress with no pillow. The room should be well ventilated, smoke free, with an even temperature. Some parents choose to have their baby in a bassinet or cot beside their own bed for the first few months so they can quickly feed them when they wake. Others find this disturbs their own sleep too much.

Work toward a regular pattern

After the first two weeks your baby will start to sleep at more regular intervals. Try to get to know your baby's cues for hunger and tiredness and setup a feeding pattern such

as sleep-wake-feed-quiet play-sleep and so on. New babies need to be feed every two to six hours, but a baby's cry doesn't always mean they are hungry.

Develop bedtime routines

A ground routine will wind down children and help settle them for sleep. Avoid stimulating games just before bed or a nap. For bedtime, a warm bath, dressing in night clothes, story or songs and goodnight kisses.

Put your baby to bed awake

It is important that your baby learns to fall asleep without you comforting them. In the same way that you leave your baby before they fall a sleep, if your baby starts to fall asleep when you are feeding them, stop feeding and put them to bed. If you are concerned about your baby starting to rely on feeding to fall asleep, try to separate the two by feeding them a little earlier.

Emphasize the difference between night and day

When you hear your baby wake in the morning, don't rush in right away. If they are not distressed, let them play quietly in their bed and gradually increase the amount of time before you get up and go to them. Try to stick to a regular rising time and use a different greeting than when you put them to bed as you brighten their room and let the daylight in. During the day, avoid darkening the room and reducing noise levels in an effort to get your child to sleep.

Look after yourself

Finally, remember if you become too stressed, both you and your baby will suffer. Rest when you can and take some time to do things you enjoy, even if it is for only half an hour. Treat you and your partner to a break once in a while by asking a relative or friend to look after your baby for a short time. And remember to be realistic about what you can get done in a day. You will have considerably less time for home and social activities and must lower your expectations or bring in extra help.

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DEALING WITH DISOBEDIENCE

The majority of parents spank their children at least occasionally. But research tells us that the more you spank your child the more likely your child will develop further behavior problems. Spanking may serve as a model of aggression — the very behavior we want our children to be able to control.

So is it child abuse to give an occasional smack for bad behavior?

No, it is not. What we as parents need to keep in mind is that any harsh, unpredictable punishment given in anger, such as spanking, can be severely damaging to children. Anything that has the power to invoke fear, anger, and retribution in our children carries risks.

But while an occasional single spank is not likely to turn your child into an aggressive adult it is ultimately a negative approach to dealing with misbehavior. And for children with more severe behavior problems, research shows that spanking is not very effective.

So how we do deal with misbehavior?

Firstly, expect it. We are humans, not angels, and we must all live our lives within limits. For children, these limits must be fair and appropriate and, for their own safety, they need to learn to accept those limits. However, the process of learning takes time. Disobedience from your child shouldn't really be considered a

problem unless it occurs frequently, such as when your child follows less than half the instructions given to them.

Parents will usually first experience disobedience when their child becomes a toddler. Toddlers are mobile and just beginning to learn independence and assertiveness. They may start to resist you. When you say "No" it can be like a dare to them. It is important to deal with this disobedience firmly and decisively. However misusing or overusing spanking to deal with this disobedience will cause harm.

Look for practical and effective alternatives.

For a start, make sure that you don't give too many instructions. Remember that every time you give your child an instruction to do something there is an opportunity for disobedience. Be clear in what you are saying and ensure that your child understands exactly what is required. If your child is busy watching their favorite television show accept that you are likely to be ignored until you can calmly and effectively gain their full attention.

With young children, when you see problem behavior occurring, stop what you are doing and move to within an arm's length of your child and bend down to their eye level. Gain their attention by using their name, hold their hands firmly and say "No" in a

firm calm voice while frowning and shaking your head from side to side.

With older children you should tell your child specifically what you want them to stop doing and what they should do instead. Be consistent with your attitudes to misbehavior and choose a logical consequence if your child does not do as you ask. Where possible remove the activity or toy that is at the centre of the problem and explain why you are doing this — "Frank, you have not done as I asked. TV is off for 10 minutes."

To help give your older child more independence, provide them with options to choose from where possible. Make sure they know the difference between choices and instructions and try not to give them too many choices about everyday routines.

Above all, don't forget to praise and reward your children when they behave.

PARENTING TIP

A good way to reduce the number of times you have to deal with disobedience is to reduce the chances of your child doing something that you don't want them to do. If you make some temporary changes in your home this can prevent you from having to continually tell your toddler "No," and "Don't touch." Put valuable and fragile things out of reach, use child-proof catches on cupboards, and close doors and gates to areas where it is not safe for your child to be alone.

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BEING A GOOD SPORT

News in the past of reported violent incidents at children's sporting events must leave some parents wondering whether they want their children to be involved in sports at all.

The fact is, playing sports helps children gain regular exercise, make new friends and learn valuable social lessons about teamwork, responsibility and competition. But too much pressure by parents excessively keen on winning can create anxiety and other emotional problems.

Standing at the sidelines yelling about dropped catches, missed tackles, or the suspect familial origins of the referee or opposition players isn't such a good role model for your children. And for some children the pressure to perform may bring tears and sore tummies on Saturday morning prior to a sporting event.

Of course it is perfectly normal to take pride in your child's sporting activities and to enjoy watching them participate in sports. What is more important though than your child becoming good at sports is to see them become a 'good sport.'

Children who are 'bad sports' can become too competitive, gloating when they win and being poor losers. They may cheat, play to win using whatever means are necessary, refuse to play if they think they cannot win, or display their temper.

It is important therefore to maintain a good balance between sports and

other commitments such as family outings, play, or school work, and to encourage your child to develop good sporting behavior. This will give them a wide range of opportunities and experience and teach them about the rules of fair play and the need to control tempers or deal with frustration.

Encouraging children to develop sporting skills begins early. Try to spend time with your young toddler playing games that develop muscles and coordination such as catch, skipping, balancing games, or rolling a ball to each other. Your child will welcome the opportunity to play active games, particularly if you are positive and offer lots of encouragement for small improvements in skill.

As children grow up they may naturally begin to like a particular sporting activity. If your child expresses an interest in a sport or joining a team that their friends belong to, be prepared to let them join. Even if your child chooses a sport you are not really interested in, so long as you are comfortable that it is not too dangerous or costly, the experimentation can help your child decide for themselves what they would like to do.

Trying out a sport for a season or a reasonable amount of time should be enough for your child to make a decision. However, unless your child is obviously distressed by the experience, it is not a good idea to withdraw children from a sport once

they have started the season. It can be expensive, and your child may learn that if they protest loud enough they will be exempt from activities they lack confidence in. Confidence comes with practice and persistence, not through avoidance.

Having settled on a sport, it is good idea for parents to encourage their child's regular attendance. Go along with your child to events and training, help out with uniforms and cheer them on. Your involvement can heighten your child's own interest.

If you notice poor sporting behavior during a game or event, wait until it is all over and tell your child what they have done wrong — "Joel, throwing your racquet into the net is being a bad sport." Say what they should have done instead — "If you feel frustrated during a game, take deep breath and count to 10." To reinforce this, provide your child with a negative consequence such as sitting out the next game or missing out on chatting to friends after the game, if the behavior occurs again.

PARENTING TIP

You can help your child develop their own motivation for improvement by taking note of what they do well in their chosen sport. Praise your child after a game or practice session by comparing your child's performance to their previous efforts rather than comparing them to other children. Leave the negative feedback for the coach or trainer.

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STOPPING STEALING

Many adults will probably recall a time in their childhood when they were guilty of a little stealing. Perhaps it was just a few dollars you found lying around the house, or a tempting trinket off a shop counter.

The truth is that young children do not always understand exactly what stealing is, and those that do sometimes steal to impress their friends or for a dare. For most children this "experiment" in dishonesty is short-lived, especially when they are caught and appropriately disciplined.

Stealing needs to be considered as a potentially serious problem, especially if it occurs outside the home. Of course if your child *has* stolen something, it doesn't make them a delinquent. Rather, you need to discourage stealing, find out the reasons your child has stolen, and take steps to prevent it leading to further problems at school and in the wider community.

It is perfectly reasonable to expect school-aged children to be honest and trustworthy.

For children who show a pattern of repeated stealing, steps must be taken to correct this behavior as soon as possible. The majority of adult criminals started their life of crime well before their teenage years.

One eleven-year-old boy I worked with found out his mother's Personal Identification Number (PIN) to her bank account and withdrew \$400 from an automatic teller machine over a period of two weeks. He was also caught stealing money from a teacher's purse and had stolen things from other children's bags at his school.

If you discover money or other items missing, or your child has something in their possession that cannot be accounted for, act immediately. Do not wait for proof. You may not always be able to prove that your child has stolen particularly if your child has learned to cover up by lying.

Tell your child the facts, for example "I had \$5 in my purse and now it is gone. We are the only ones at home." Do not ask for a confession, as your child may lie. Ignore protests and claims of innocence and carry out a suitable consequence for their actions such as the temporary removal of television or computer game time and repayment of missing money through extra jobs or loss of pocket money.

While this may seem harsh, particularly without proof, you should be prepared to act on your suspicions as it is more of a problem if your child is able to get away with stealing. You might like

to say something like, "I don't know for sure whether you did it, but I strongly suspect you did. If I'm wrong I'm sorry, but what I've said goes."

Steps can also be taken to reduce the possibility of your child stealing in the first place. Children are more likely to steal if money is left lying around the house, if they spend a lot of time on their own, or through peer pressure. Try to cut down the amount of time your child spends unsupervised either at home or out and always know where they are and who they are with.

Primary school children should not be left unsupervised. If someone is unable to meet them at home after school alternative care arrangements should be made.

If you are finding it difficult to discourage your child from playing with children who seem to be a bad influence, help them get involved in some sport or activity that do not involve these children.

Remember too, that persistent stealing may also be a sign of serious family problems or an indication of other difficulties with your child such as aggression, lying, disobedience, low self-esteem, or learning difficulties. If you are concerned that your child has significant problems seek professional help.

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SURVIVING STEP-FAMILIES

While an increasing number of couples are seeking divorces, marriage and long-term relationships still remain the preferred lifestyle choice for most parents.

Unfortunately, second marriages are no more likely to succeed than first time marriages, and a key factor in these failures is children. Research reveals lower rates of breakdowns for second marriages where there are no children than remarriages with children.

It is for this reason that psychologists working in the area of family therapy are continually developing new methods to assist step families survive and thrive as a healthy family unit providing a safe, stable environment for children.

Past research has shown children from step families are more likely to show aggression, have problems at school, suffer depression, be sexually active at a younger age, and leave home earlier than children from families with both biological parents.

The obvious stresses experienced during the transition phase toward a new family structure may deeply affect children.

On the one hand the child may be pleased for their parent and

excited about the idea of having a new "dad" or "mom." On the other, they may feel uncertain, sad, angry and rejected. They may feel left out of the new family or view their previously established position within a single parent family as threatened.

For parents, a second marriage represents a welcome relief from loneliness, as well as providing financial benefits, and an extra pair of hands. However, some mothers react to this new relationship by emotionally withdrawing from their children, providing less supervision and being less consistent in dealing with misbehavior.

But parents are also naturally protective of their children and many couples end their second marriage because a parent feels their children's relationship with their step parent is poor, even though the couple themselves get along well.

So what are the essential skills that will help children, parents and step parents survive the transition to a new family?

The key seems to be good communication and the ability to resolve family conflicts in a positive way.

For example, the issue of discipline is often a source of

friction between new marriage partners in a step family. A new step parent enters without an established role in dealing with misbehavior. Unless both parents are able to agree on an acceptable approach to discipline, conflict between partners may lead to inconsistent messages and the undermining of each parent in front of the children.

Because step families don't have a shared history, family celebrations such as holidays and birthdays, and even just common daily rituals need to be recreated with their own identity without threatening old and familiar patterns that children may want to hang on to. Therefore, extra concentration on communication and consultation among step family members is vital to the success of the new family.

Family meetings are a helpful way to aid this communication. They work best when they are kept short (no more than 15 minutes), stick to an agreed list of topics to discuss, and when fun issues as well as problems are discussed.

Meetings encourage children to express their opinions and to contribute toward solving problems. It is important though to avoid family meetings becoming "nag" sessions and to ensure that solutions agreed to are carried out.

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STRANGER ANXIETY

New parents can sometimes be quite surprised when their six-month-old baby suddenly screams in protest instead of putting on a beaming smile for grandma as she zooms in for a kiss and a cuddle.

While this might seem unexpected and can be a touch embarrassing at times, your baby is in fact exhibiting a natural stage in their social development. Termed 'separation anxiety,' about 75 percent of children go through a stage where they suddenly react with hesitation and fear to strangers or people they do not see everyday.

They may show behaviours such as fretting, crying, screaming protesting, and clinging which reach their peak soon after a child's first birthday and disappear by the time they are 2-years-old.

For parents who need to leave their young children with caregivers, separation anxiety can be upsetting, with some parents fearing they might be emotionally harming their child because of the distress they see.

It is important therefore that parents help their children cope with separation by understanding why such anxiety is fairly normal in the first place and allowing their child to feel secure.

Many things cause infants to react with anxiety, including

unfamiliar adults interacting with them, loud noises and being left in the company of an unfamiliar caregiver.

When infants lose sight of their parents, they often become upset because they do not know how long the separation will be. They cannot yet form a picture of their mom or dad in their mind and are therefore unlikely to wait calmly and confidently for their parent's return.

As they grow older, children learn that objects and people continue to exist even though they cannot see them and so eventually understand that wherever their parents have gone, they will always return.

To help your child cope better with separation anxiety it is important to spend quality time with them — talking, smiling, holding your child, and sharing enjoyable experiences. While at home, try to keep your child close by as you go about your usual routine. Talk or sing to them as you work. If you need to leave the room, wait for them to follow if they are able, or talk to them so they know you are nearby.

It's often a good idea to let your family and friends know your child is going through a shy stage to avoid too many incidents that may cause anxious feelings. If your child does get upset when being

held or spoken to by another adult, hold them yourself until they are calm. Infants become more anxious when parents ignore their distress.

You should not criticize your child for not wanting to go to another adult. Comments such as "Don't be silly," can make the problem worse.

When you need to leave your child, you should always use the same phrase such as "Bye, bye for now." This will help them learn that you are going away, but that you will return. Similarly, a regular greeting such as "Here I am again," indicates to your child that the separation is over.

Of course it is not always possible for parents to prevent their child protesting when being left in the care of others, but if you allow time for them to become familiar with a responsible caregiver and you are sure yourself that they will be well looked after in a safe environment, your child will eventually develop confidence and mix with others.

Parenting Tip

Always remember when dealing with separation anxiety that it is not good for your child to be too protective of them. Infants need lots of chances to meet and mix with others that you trust. Your child will learn that you are still nearby and available, even if they are with someone else.

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HANDLING TANTRUMS

It's something we've all seen or experienced - a loud and distressed toddler throwing a tantrum right there in the middle of the grocery aisle at your local supermarket. Somewhere nearby you will find an embarrassed Mom or Dad doing their best to either ignore the child or convince them to stop.

The fact is, tantrums are to be expected in childhood, particularly in 2-year-olds, and the first time a child throws a tantrum can be quite hard on parents, especially if there are visitors present or you are out in public.

So what's the reason behind it all?

Sometimes there are no obvious clues as to why a toddler will suddenly throw a tantrum, but most often it is when they are feeling frustrated or angry. Like adults, toddlers can become frustrated when they are unable to manage a difficult task or things just don't go the way they expect. Young children may also not yet know enough words to say exactly what it is they want, become overtired, or not like being told *No*.

Tantrums usually begin at about 12 months of age and are less common in 3 and 4-year olds as children begin to learn other ways to solve problems. Of course, children being the individuals that they are, some will have a naturally quiet and easy-going nature and may rarely have tantrums, whereas others with quick tempers may have frequent tantrums and will need their parent's help to grow out of the behavior.

But while tantrums often appear as a highly visible form of disruptive behavior, they present us with the important opportunity to help teach our children how to manage frustration and anger. Knowing how to deal with the inevitable frustrations of life and possessing the ability to express anger in appropriate ways are powerful tools for a successful adulthood.

A tantrum may last as short as 20 seconds or go on for hours. It may include crying, screaming, stamping feet and rolling around on the floor. Sometimes it will also involve the rather frightening sight of a child holding their breath, although all children will eventually take a gasp of air. The challenge

for parents is to deal with tantrums as soon they first occur and to teach your child to calm down quickly, thus reducing the distress on both yourselves and your child.

One of the best places to start tackling tantrums is by helping reduce the chances of them occurring at all. Where practical, put away items in your house that you do not want your child to touch. This avoids you having to say "*No*" too often. Provide a predictable environment for your child — let them know throughout the day what you are doing and what is going to happen. It is also a good idea to have a few simple and realistic rules and to keep to a routine for your child's meal and sleep times.

Tackling tantrums may take a few weeks of concerted effort and consistent application of "time-out" and other strategies. To help you see if progress is being made try to jot down each time you use "time-out" and how long it takes. After a week, the tantrums should be less frequent, and you will be well on your way toward helping your child learn some important new social skills.

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TEAM PARENTS

"Don't argue in front of the children," is an admonishment many parents may have heard at one time or another.

As a psychologist I know the wisdom in this advice, but after many years working with families I don't believe in giving parents a hard time simply for disagreeing about how to deal with their children's behavior — conflict between partners over parenting issues is common and to be expected.

What is important for parents to learn is how to deal positively with these differences through good communication. Communication allows parents to work together as a team and thus minimizes the impact of any conflict on their child's development.

And why is this so important?

Because children do best in a stable, predictable, caring home environment where conflict is low, communication is clear and disagreements are resolved without recourse to anger, violence or repression.

Of course working as a team isn't always easy. Each parent brings to the relationship their own beliefs, values, expectations and skills. They are influenced by childhood memories of their own parents, their life experiences, the opinions of relatives and friends — even what

they may read about in a daily newspaper!

It is understandable then that parents will have different ideas about how to raise children and how family life should operate.

It is also difficult to work together as parents when a couple's relationship may be strained by the day-to-day demands of a family, particularly if children are young or their behavior is difficult to manage.

But that's no reason to be pessimistic about the prospects for a united parenting front.

I have seen many couples over the past 10 years learn new ways to work together on parenting issues, look after their relationship, and use specific problem solving steps to resolve disagreements. These parents were able to present a consistent approach in the way each of them responded to their child's behavior and so made the job of parenting less stressful and their family life more enjoyable.

One of the keys to working well together as parents is to support each other. For example, if your partner is managing a problem behavior, you can support them by following through with discipline. Better to back up your partner than to interfere by coming to the rescue or taking the tough guy role.

If you are unhappy with the way your partner has handled a situation, wait until it is over and find a time to calmly discuss what happened. Remember though, that talking and sharing your ideas effectively involves also listening to your partner's points of view and acknowledging that you have understood them correctly.

Bad communication habits to be avoided when discussing parenting issues with your partner include raising your voice, interrupting, being sarcastic, not listening, and talking over each other.

It also helps to put aside a little time each day to talk together about your partner's day, especially where only one parent has been with your child. Talk about pleasant, fun things that occurred as well as any problems. And remember to praise and congratulate your partner when you think they've done a good job.

PARENTING TIP

Sometimes one parent can be unhappy in a relationship without the other knowing. If you are unhappy you need to talk to your partner about how you feel, because otherwise you face the risk of this stress affecting your relationship with your children as well as your partner. It may be difficult for you to talk, but plan a time where you will not be interrupted by your children and try to speak calmly about how you feel without dumping on your partner. Seek professional advice if you find yourself unable to resolve the problem.

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WHAT'S ON TELEVISION?

These days the technology of media and entertainment appears to change ever faster before our very eyes, one influential bit of now ageing 20th century technology still sits happily in the corner of our living rooms.

When television was first broadcast, people crowded around sets and watched with wonder. Today television is simply part of the backdrop — something we take for granted. In some households it murmurs away in the background, morning and night, a comforting companion. For others it springs into life issuing graphic snippets of global news immediately when mom or dad arrives home from work.

While researchers remain divided about the exact effects of watching television on our growing children, there is no doubt that television has a major impact.

So is television good or bad for your kids?

I hate to sound trite, but the answer is that it can be both.

Children can learn a lot about their world from seeing people, animals, places, things and events they may never actually experience. Television can encourage fantasy and create an enjoyable learning process. It also helps children relax and wind down after school or a boisterous activity.

But not all children's television programs are up to the benchmark of

"Sesame Street," and for older children we know as adults that the phrase "quality programming" doesn't cover too much of today's nightly TV fair.

Content aside, the very nature of television watching is passive and that means when children spend too much time watching television they miss out on opportunities for learning through doing — the nature of interactive activities. Homework, outdoor play, exercise, reading and time spent talking with parents and other family members must not be neglected.

As parents we can help make the effects of watching television more positive by influencing how much our children watch, what they watch, and whether we are around and available for children to talk to us about a confusing or upsetting program.

Of course, you need to decide for yourself how many hours of television you think your child should watch. It might be a good idea first to quietly note just how much television your child is viewing in a normal week. The figure for 7- to 11-year-olds could be at least 21 hours.

For children up to 12 years of age I recommend a maximum of only one hour per day during a school week and a little longer on the weekend.

If you want to set new television watching hours, make sure you tell your children about your plans and enlist their aid in seeing it through. Read the TV guide with your child and write down which programs they want to watch. When you agree on these, explain new ground rules such as "only watch selected programs," "the television will be turned off at other times, or if there are any arguments," and "no television before homework is finished."

When setting television watching rules, it is important to include something to combat the common habit children have of turning on the television "just to see what's on." Any time this or any other ground rule is broken, cancel the child's viewing for that night. If it happens again, be prepared to unplug the set and remove it from the room.

PARENTING TIP

It is sometimes hard for younger parents to cope with reduced television hours for their children because of their own viewing habits. Try watching most of your television after the children are in bed. Of course, there is another alternative. Families who decide to cut down on their television watching report that they all start talking to each other more, getting involved in hobbies and other activities, and children start to show an interest in reading.

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CREATIVE ARTS HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP

Sitting inside a semi-darkened room, eyes fixed on a brightly lit screen, hands clutching a small plastic console while thumbs and fingers move in a blur of complicated movements may be some children's idea of ultimate fun, but as parents we know that our children need to have a good mix of physical and mental pursuits to fill in their time after school.

The traditional view of children out in the backyard laughing while running around playing games is indeed a good antidote for too much indoors computer time, but we need to also remember that an interest in creative arts such as music, dance, drama, painting, drawing and sculpture are just as important to our child's development.

And that doesn't just mean little Mary should learn to play the piano. Young Jack could also benefit from an opportunity to dress up and act out a play or sing a song.

The arts enrich our lives and offer examples to explore cultural and individual identity, and to develop thoughts, opinions and feelings. If that sounds a bit high brow, just remember how many young preschoolers are gloriously happy to dip their fingers into brightly colored paint and create Jackson Pollock-like masterpieces on construction paper, or themselves for that matter.

In psychological terms, when children participate in the creative arts it promotes their language, social and intellectual development. It is a very natural way to interpret and think about their world and to express themselves. Without encouragement, as children grow older they commonly have less confidence in their artistic abilities and may miss out on experiences and opportunities for development.

So how do we encourage our children to be creative?

Tying them to a piano or violin, or dragging them around to post modernist art exhibitions isn't what we are talking about here. Rather, it's more an extension of the 'stick the drawing on the fridge door' approach. In short, take an active interest in what your child shows is a creative interest for them. For example, find out for them where lessons are available or where equipment can be borrowed, rented or purchased. Offer to help out by making costumes or offering any equipment you might have.

Of course, you need to also let your child try a few different things. What seems interesting initially might turn out to be too difficult or not in tune with their personality. Remember though not to let your child withdraw from lessons before the end of a term unless the activity is clearly upsetting them. Children need to learn that confidence at a task comes with practice over time.

Encouraging creativity in children doesn't have to be directly related to a specific art or craft. Lots of fun activities encourage creativity. Singing and dancing to any type of tune helps develop a child's sense of rhythm, melody, harmony and timing. You can help your child to notice details such as patterns, colors, shapes, lines and textures by talking with them about images of natural beauty you see everyday — a pattern of bark on a tree, the shape of a seed pod, the veins in a leaf.

There are also many art activities held specifically for children, particularly during school holidays. Take them to concerts, exhibitions, pantomimes, street performances and events in the park. Share your observations and talk to your child about their own reactions.

Of course, when your child does produce their very own work of art, drama, or music take the time to praise their efforts and give their activity attention. This why we stick the painting on the fridge. Not because

it is aesthetically pleasing, but rather because it tells our children that we value their creative efforts. Avoid negative comments when giving feedback and encourage practice and care for any instruments or equipment they are responsible for.

Above all, remember that creativity and the arts is as natural and vital to a child's development as the physical play that helps develop coordination and muscle development. You never know, you might even discover some of your very own creative interests in the process.

Tips for encouraging your child's music and performing arts activities.

- Be prepared for noise. A piano standing in a family room is much better than sending your child off to another room to practice because you don't like the sound.
- Help your child to move furniture around if they need space to rehearse a dance or play.
- Provide an audience. Don't force your child to perform if they don't want to, but involve other family members who can show an interest in your child's progress.
- Attend formal performances that include your child as often as possible.
- Remember to say something positive about your child's performance and leave any corrective feedback for their teacher.

Tips for encouraging your child's painting and visual arts activities.

- Keep small items for collages and art projects handy.
- Store art supplies where your child can easily access them and set up their own activities.
- Be prepared for spills and mess — so try and use old towels or shirts and an area that can be cleaned up easily.

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DRIVING YOU CRAZY

School holidays are a great opportunity for families to spend time together, especially when you all head off in the car to your favorite vacation spot. A touch optimistic, you say? Of course a family car trip is supposed to be fun, but it can be spoiled when children start to whine, complain, fight or tease each other in the back seat.

Young children often find car trips boring, particularly if they have nothing to do. It may seem to them that time is passing so slowly that the trip will never end. And when the words "Are we there yet?" begin to ring ever frequently in your own ears you may also begin to wonder if you have entered some hellish time-warp.

And it's not just the stress on the driver that makes it undesirable for children to misbehave in the car. It can easily become dangerous, especially if you are distracted from driving while attempting to sort out a noisy argument between your children. Some young children may also object to wearing their seat belt in the car — a situation which cannot be ignored.

So if you are heading off these holidays, plan ahead of time how you're going to deal with any problem behavior. Explain to your

children the need to be responsible in the car because of safety concerns. Tell them about the trip, how long it will take, and where you are going.

Decide on two or three simple rules such as "use a quiet voice," and "keep your hands and feet to yourself." Ask your child to repeat back to you these rules so that you both know what is expected. And remember to set a good example by wearing your own seat belt.

Before you set off, start your child in an activity. As you drive, talk to them and ask them questions. Point out things of interest along the way and regularly introduce new toys or activities to keep them interested. Try playing some audio tapes of children's songs or stories, or play that old favorite, "I spy."

For long car trips, make sure you include regular rest breaks to give your child a chance to get out, run around, and go to the toilet. Offer them a snack when they have been behaving well and help them to get started on a new activity if you notice them losing interest in what they are doing.

Remember if you're packing a little bag of activities to amuse your child in the car to include soft toys and paperback books — things

that won't become harmful missiles in the event of a sudden stop or accident.

For younger children, learning how to behave in the car is a skill you need to teach them just like learning to dress themselves. A series of short five-minute trips around quiet streets at times when you are not in a hurry is a good way to introduce your child to the car. Remember to praise good behavior often, particularly in the early stages.

With older children be prepared to stop the car if your children are misbehaving, wait until peace is restored, and then continue the journey. Sometimes it is not possible to deal with problem behavior in the car right away, especially if you are driving in hazardous conditions. In these cases, if your child is crying or being noisy but is still safely secured in their seat it is best to ignore the behavior.

PARENTING TIP

No matter how hard your preschooler might try to be good while traveling in the car, if their regular routine is disrupted it can be hard for them. Try to plan your trips to avoid your young child's usual sleep or meal times as a hungry or tired child is likely to become irritable.

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WAYWARD WANDERING

Crowded shopping malls and busy city footpaths are sometimes witness to the sight of a toddler leashed to his parents by way of a restraining harness.

Although this somewhat drastic solution can be helpful at the time, it is not usually recommended when dealing with the problems of a wandering toddler.

There is no doubt however, that when a young child strays in the wrong direction, or hides or runs away from their parents (even if in play), they may unknowingly run into danger, especially near strangers, roads, garages, machinery, or uneven ground.

That's why parents take the issue so seriously, and why in exasperation they may turn to a restraining harness. But the problem with a harness is that while it certainly stops the wandering and so keeps your child safe, it doesn't teach the child anything, and the wandering behavior often returns when the restraint is not used.

Better instead for your toddler to learn to stay close to you without the need for physical holding.

To stop children wandering it is important to act quickly and decisively, and to encourage them to stay close. Broadly, this involves making the behavior of

remaining close to you more rewarding for your child than the excitement of running away or wandering about on their own.

Of course, children aren't always being naughty when they wander. Toddlers are easily distracted by things around them and may unintentionally walk away to look at something that has caught their eye. And since young toddlers have just discovered the joys of upright movement, they want to explore their environment.

Some toddlers often test the limits of their new found independence by seeing how far they can wander away before someone reacts. Others will run away because they know someone will chase them and it becomes a game.

It is important therefore that children are not ignored and forgotten while they are out walking with adults. Children who don't receive some positive attention for staying close to mom or dad are likely to wander off in search of something more interesting.

Try taking your child on planned short trips (about 5 minutes to start), avoiding busy places, and as you walk talk to them, pointing out flowers, birds, or anything of interest. At first, praise your child frequently for staying close before

they have a chance to wander. Make sure the trip is at a time when your child is likely to enjoy it, not during usual sleep or meal times.

If your child starts to run off, immediately grab them and give them a firm instruction and follow up with action — "No, you are not staying close to Daddy. Now you must hold my hand for the next 20 steps." Ignore protests and complaints and carry out the consequence.

This hand holding strategy should be used only once during a trip and if your child wanders again then use the consequence of "quiet time." Explain to them that they have not stayed close so now they must stop and have quiet time. This involves removing your attention from your child for a short time.

You can sit your child on the pavement or stand on the grass verge until they have been quiet for 30 seconds. If necessary hold your child so they cannot move by wrapping your arms around them without hugging them. You may need to repeat quiet time a number of times during a trip. Remember each occasion when you resume walking to praise your child when they stay close.

Of course if they continue to struggle you will probably have to return home and try again next time.

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