

USEFUL TIPS AND STRATEGIES TO MANAGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

I recently attended a workshop about The Incredible Years Parenting Programme. There was some excellent information given which I wanted to share with you about understanding children's emotions, playing with your child, praise and reward. I hope you find it useful. If you are having real problems managing your child's behaviour and would be interested in attending the whole programme, please come and see me.

Pam

Helping children regulate their emotions

Just like walking, talking and toilet training, the regulation of emotional responses is a developmental achievement which is not present at birth - i.e. it must be learned. Parents can have a major impact on children's ability to regulate their emotions.

You need to provide as much stability and consistency as possible. For example, consistent limit-setting, clear household rules and predictable routines help children know what to expect. This helps them feel calmer and more secure. If children see their home environment as a stable, secure place, they will develop the emotional resources to deal with the less predictable world outside the home.

It is important to remember that when children respond with emotional outbursts, these behaviours are not intentional nor a deliberate attempt to make parenting difficult for you. Accept the fact that it is normal for children at times to sulk, to respond by yelling, cursing or breaking something, or to want to withdraw and be left alone. While these emotional responses can be draining and distressing for parents, your patience and acceptance are crucial factors in your child learning to cope with his or her emotional responses. By 'tuning in' and being understanding of your child's emotional states you can help your child tolerate increasing amounts of emotional tension.

One way to help children learn to express their feelings and control their emotions is for parents to use the language of feelings with their children to express their own feelings and to interpret others, for example, "I felt really frustrated when I could not fix that computer", "I can see you are feeling really angry about your toy car being broken by your brother". Encourage children to talk about their feelings, and do not show disapproval, for example, avoid statements such as "don't be sad", "you should not cry about that". Instead label the feelings and encourage them to talk about it, for example, "I see you are sad about that". We are trying to teach them to control their behaviour not their feelings.

Model your own emotional regulation for them, for example, "I'd better stop and calm down a little before I continue", "I was disappointed she did not pick me".

Teach children positive self-talk so when they say for example "I'm no good at football" you can coach them to say "perhaps if I practice a bit more I'll get better at football". Research shows that children whose self-talk is negative, get angry more easily than children whose self-talk is positive.

Most importantly, praise children's efforts to regulate their emotions, for example "that was great, you calmed yourself down", "well done you were patient and kept trying even though you were getting frustrated with that difficult piece of homework". Teach them also to praise themselves out loud, for example "I stayed really calm", "I tried really hard with that work".

Playing with your child

In a society that places such a tremendous emphasis on achievement in school, economic success and the importance of work, it is difficult to break loose from the idea that play is a waste of time.

As we play with our children, we sometimes try to structure or supervise our child's play by giving the child lessons on what to, for example, how to build the castle the "right" way. There is a place for "teaching", but the most important first step in playing with a child is to follow the child's leads, ideas and imagination, rather than imposing our own ideas or values. Playing with adults also helps children to interact socially by teaching them how to establish eye contact, to take turns and to be sensitive to the feelings of others. It is also a time when parents can actively respond to children in ways that contribute to their feelings of self-worth and competence. By giving a running commentary on what your child is doing, for example "oh you've chosen a red brick", "you're putting the chairs behind the table", you are 'teaching' your child about colours and positions by giving them the vocabulary, but you are not directing their play. It is believed that many young children need to hear things 40 times before they truly learn it.

Praise

Research has repeatedly shown that not praising (or paying attention) to good behaviour often leads to misbehaviour and poor self-esteem.

Temperamentally difficult and aggressive children can be hard to praise. Their behaviour often makes parents angry and undermines the desire to be positive. To make matters more difficult, they may reject praise. They seem to have internalised a negative self-concept: when parents present them with an alternative view, they find it difficult to accept. Yet difficult children need praise even more than others. Constantly look for positive behaviours to reinforce until your child begins to internalise some positive self-concepts.

Be specific about the praise, instead of saying "good job", you might say "I'm pleased that you are remembering to feed the dog every day". Show enthusiasm when praising by smiling, making eye contact or giving a pat on the back. Praise

immediately you have witnessed the behaviour. If you are trying to encourage a new behaviour, watch out for every time it happens, and praise as soon as they begin to do it, don't wait until it is finished, for example, "I am so pleased you have started tidying your bedroom".

Don't combine praise with commands or criticism, for example some people might say "you came to the table the first time I asked, that's great, but from now on how about washing your hands first". Do not remind them of prior failures or requests for future performance, this just undermines the praise given.

Giving positive instructions

Children are not always great at listening fully to instructions, and will only latch on to the last couple of words given. It is important that you give children positive instructions for what you want them to do, rather than what you don't want them to do. For example, if you tell a child not to run on the mud, they may latch on to run and mud, and will simply run across the mud. Instead you could say "I want you to walk on the path". This does not always come naturally, as our temptation is to say don't do something. By saying "I want you to sit quietly", "I want you to put the cars back in the box before getting the bricks out", you are giving children a clear instruction of what behaviour you expect from them. Then of course praise them for doing it!

Rewards

Children work hard to meet their milestones, playing cooperatively, learning to read etc, and encouragement and praise from parents help them to get there. Occasionally, they need a little extra incentive and rewards can be helpful.

When using rewards:

- Define clearly the behaviour you want e.g. sit quietly and read a few pages of your book
- Use praise and attention alongside the reward
- As soon as you see the behaviour you want, reward the child
- Don't try to change too many behaviours at once, and keep it simple
- Choose rewards that are cheap and fun e.g. extra bedtime story, 10 minutes of playtime, it does not have to be a toy or sweet
- For children of 5 - 6 years, surprise rewards work well
- For children 6 - 10 points or stickers earned can be traded for a reward of their choice (subject to your approval)
- Bribing children with the promise of a reward while they are misbehaving often does not work in the long run.

To sum up

The social, emotional and academic development of children is an incredible process. Give yourself permission to enjoy this process by trusting your instincts, learning from your blunders, laughing at your mistakes and

imperfections, getting support from others, taking time for yourself and by having fun with your children!