



How to Help Families in Trouble

Briefing Sheet

Helping parents help their children to behave well: behaviours, star charts, rewards and discipline

This briefing sheet is part of a series designed to work alongside the book *How to Help Families in Trouble – a short guide* (by Honor Rhodes, published by the Family and Parenting Institute). The book is available from the Institute's website: www.familyandparenting.org/publications

Behaviour generally

All human behaviour is a form of communication. We are born with a desire to control the world around us to our advantage, it is one of the reasons we are so successful as a species. We are flexible and able to learn quickly what gives us the things that we like and how to avoid circumstances and consequences we don't like.

Behaviours become 'bad' when they adversely affect others, either by being annoying or painful or risky. A crucial part of parenting is to raise morally and socially aware children, able to make a positive contribution to society at large and those whose lives they are entwined with in particular.

Patterns of behaviour

Children develop patterns of behaviour; they will behave in a certain way and that behaviour brings a reward, attention in the form of a smile or laugh from a parent, a treat or other form of reward. Patterns are easily laid down and without thought they can become the way families 'just are'. This tells us that changing how things are is both complicated and energy consuming. It means thinking about things we usually do not think about and that brings in its wake anxiety and self-consciousness, neither of which is pleasant, especially in our home and family lives. If we accept that things have to change, then we all need support and help, particularly if the going gets rough, when it is easy to fall back into our old and unhelpful patterns. All we are saying here really is that if you are going to help parents tackle behaviour problems, then they will need your support for some time and for you to be the motivator when 'the hill looks too difficult to climb'.

Why do children develop bad behaviours and what are the easiest ways to make a change?

Even in very young children, most poor behavior is driven by a desire for a reward - usually the child wants to get or avoid something. Ironically, much 'bad' behaviour may be merely attention seeking from their parent or carer. Negative or angry behaviour from a parent as a response will be better, from the child's viewpoint, than being ignored or overlooked.

Not much of this pattern is 'conscious'; the child is rarely thinking, "If I tip this box over so it crashes down and causes havoc in the supermarket then my mum will attend to me even if that is by shouting"; the child has just learned along the way that doing particular things elicits a response.

The best support we can give parents is to help them think very carefully about the behaviours their child or children exhibit and then decide what they want to see more and less of.

Most parents will need your help to decide what behaviours they are going to choose simply to ignore, what they are going to target for change to eliminate or reduce and what they are going to do to increase the behaviours they want to see.

Ignoring

One of the simplest and easiest techniques for reducing irritating but not risky behaviour, for example, whining and whingeing at certain points in the day, is to help the parent ignore the behaviour and to do something that does not involve the child. When the child stops the parent can turn to them and say, "Now that you are not making that noise I thought we might do..." and offer some positive activity that the child enjoys.

Distracting

'Distraction' is also a very good technique. When the unwanted behaviour is being exhibited by a child, the parent can look away but find a toy or book that the child likes and invite them to come and share the play experience. Very simple you will think, but interestingly this is a revelation for many parents who are so sensitized to their children's behaviour that they have an unhelpful conditioned response to it which involves shouting,

pleading or getting very cross. By giving ideas for a different response you can enjoy parents' sense of being liberated from a chain reaction that they really hate but have not, until you helped them, been able to change.

Many parents whose lives are troubled may tell you that they find playing with their children really difficult. It may well be that they shared very few such experiences with their own parents or they have some form of depression (surprisingly common and worth looking out for) that reduces their energy and capacity to be 'playful'.

Time Out

Time out is increasingly being used by parents as a way of offering a 'consequence' of poor behaviour to their children, not least as many TV programmes like 'Supernanny' use it. What parents often don't fully grasp is the complexity of the thinking behind it.

The basis for the success of 'time out' is the withdrawal of attention by the parent, not that the child is being punished by being put on a 'naughty step'.

Before ever starting to use 'time out' the parent(s) should explain its purpose and at a time when bad behaviour is not being demonstrated by the child, parents and their children might sit together in the designated 'time out' place for the agreed period together (a minute for every year of the child's age). Both the parent and the child can experience together how long and how uncomfortable this is going to be.

Time out must always be preceded by a warning: this gives the child an opportunity to change the behaviour and avoid the consequence. Children should not be sent/taken to time out places like the living room, TV room, or kitchen, where there are people around who will find it hard to ignore the child and be made to feel uncomfortable themselves.

A child's own bedroom is also not an appropriate place for time out as no one would want their bedroom associated with isolation and sadness, but also because a comfortable bed is available and a variety of games and other distractions are within easy reach.

Rooms like a bathroom with little available to entertain children are probably a much better place for time out.

As stated above the length of the time out is crucial - no more than a minute for every year of a child's age. If it is any longer, the consequence seems far too punitive for the child to take advantage of the learning.

Parents often ask if the door of the time-out room should be open or closed; this depends on the child and the extent or severity of the problem. What is important is that any child should be calm when leaving time out - this might mean intervening to take them out when there is just a moment of quiet.

One real benefit of time out is the separation of parents from their children after the unwanted behaviour, allowing upset parents to gather themselves and their thoughts so that they can respond best when a child returns to them.

Not enough praise and too much noise

One of the features of families where children are behaving poorly is that they are low on praise giving and fairly high on shouting and empty threats.

All children need praise - it feeds good behaviours and better still is an example to them of their parents' love and regard. By noticing and praising the behaviours we want to see more of, we increase them (this works with adults too, try it at work!).

Some parents will need to be taught how and when to praise. They may have simply lost the knack in the middle of strained and conflict driven relationships or, having never been much praised themselves, lack the skills to do so.

Model it - show parents that you are noticing good or better behaviours in children. You can say things like, "*You noticed your brother was upset and gave him the toy train, that was kind*" or, "*You really listened when your mum was talking didn't you, I noticed that and I thought how grown up that was*".

It can be really hard to find things to praise when the family is in real conflict and confusion. In this situation it is even more important that we are different in our response. When everyone else is shouting, turn to the family member next to you and talk quietly to them; the more interested you are in them, the more the other family members will notice and you should find that the noise levels drop as everyone strains to hear what interesting things you are talking about.

Parenting Programmes, like Triple P, Incredible Years and Strengthening Families

All these features - ignoring, distracting, praise and many more - are key components of most evidence based parenting programmes which many parents find immensely useful. You will need to know something about them to talk with parents about what they are like. Find out what is on offer in your area, how and when to refer and what support you can give families who are going through a programme. Better still, get trained to deliver a parenting programme yourself. Details are at the end of the sheet.

Star Charts

If you have a family who have a specific behaviour issue they want to address, consider whether a star chart can help. It is one of the simplest and most effective behaviour change mechanisms, very effective if used consistently for children in the three- to eight-year old age range, although it can work well for older children if it is made more sophisticated.

Keep it simple

The chart works best when dealing with just one (or at the most two) behaviour(s) at a time - more than that and it becomes too confusing for the child and parent to manage. The parent needs to decide what the desired behaviour is, for example:

- staying in bed once the light is out

- holding their parent's hand to cross the road
- keeping all the bathwater in the bath.

Keep it positive

All the behaviours need to be framed positively. We could not use 'Not kicking Grandma' as it would be hard to know when to offer the reward: after 5 minutes? After a day? Would they get a reward if they only punched her?

It also needs to be very specific, so we could not use, 'Playing nicely with the baby' as 'nice' is not defined and it would be too complex to do so.

How it works

On a chart (which can be bought off the shelf but better to help a parent make their own, again flip chart paper is good) the parent will add a star or any colourful sticker that will demonstrate that the child has demonstrated the behaviour the parent wants to see. A small example is set out below. There are four weeks' worth of boxes; we should rarely do more as boredom can set in and the chart can 'demotivate' if overused.

Sally's good bedtime tooth brushing chart

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	BIG TOTAL
★	★		★	★	★	★	6
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	BIG TOTAL
	★	★	★	★		★	5
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	BIG TOTAL
★	★	★	★	★	★	★	7
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	BIG TOTAL
★	★	★	★	★	★	★	7

Sally was able to choose her stickers and put them on her chart herself after brushing her teeth. She was prompted by her mother before tooth brushing time to remind her that a sticker was available to her when she had brushed her teeth for a full two minutes, using toothpaste and her own toothbrush.

This sounds a small and rather insignificant issue but, for this family, Sally's screaming refusals to brush her teeth made going to bed a source of frustration, misery and upset for all concerned.

Sally responded well to the chart. The 'gaps' in the first week related to a Wednesday night babysitter who was not asked to use the chart and felt confused by Sally's demands for a star even though she had not brushed her teeth (a powerful demonstration of the power of the reward!).

In the second week Sally had two days when she refused to brush her teeth, but rather than get back into the old pattern of nagging and attempts to make her do so by force, her parents (as coached by their parenting support officer) just said it was a pity that she would not get the stars. They used a good amount of 'ignoring' as also instructed and simply sent her to bed with a story as usual and a goodnight kiss. They did this without anger or any other words about the tooth brushing.

Sally was not rewarded by lots of attention for her very poor behaviour as she had been in the past, so behaving as her parents wanted rewarded her much more significantly. In the third and fourth weeks she happily brushed her teeth and it had become a trouble-free part of her going to bed ritual.

After the fourth week Sally's parents explained how pleased they were with her and said that they had bought her a special present, a set of colouring pens and a drawing book. Whilst the present was inexpensive, her parents had wrapped it up and tied it with a ribbon so that it felt very special to Sally.

Her parents went on to use a series of star charts with her for a range of other difficult behaviours, all of which were reduced or eliminated.

The trick is to help a parent pick a behaviour that is most easily changed rather than go for one that will be harder and of longer duration to change. All parents need to feel successful in their first encounter with a star chart to then give them the confidence to continue.

Find out more about Parenting Programmes

These techniques and many more are all key components of the Evidence Based Parenting Programmes and Approaches which many parents find immensely useful. See what is available and its evidence base at the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners website, www.parentingacademy.org

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