

A Guide to Supporting Young Children's Behaviour and Emotional Regulation

There is a lot of information in this document. The aim is not to overwhelm parents but to act as a point of reference should parents be seeking information on how they could practically deal with situations that will be arising for many of us while emotions are running high during lockdown. This list is not exhaustive nor do we expect everybody to try every strategy. They are just there as an aid to help. Please remember, you can always contact school staff for further specific advice.

Attachment

A strong healthy attachment with a parent or carer is central to children's emotional regulation. With a secure attachment children can learn to regulate stress in times of distress or anxiety. Spending time tuning in to children and enjoying each other's company will help to strengthen this bond, which should in turn impact on their behaviour.

Conflict/Arguments Between Siblings

Sharing is incredibly difficult for young children to do and so there will always be conflicts when children play together. Learning to resolve problems themselves is a valuable skill that will help them as they get older. Here is a simple model to help you teach this skill:

6 Step Conflict Resolution

Step 1. Approach Calmly

The very first step is to help your child/children calm down. If you miss out this step, they might not be ready to hear you. The best thing to do is to be calm yourself. Count to ten, take ten deep breaths or walk calmly away for a minute. Then concentrate on helping your children regulate their feelings. This stage might take a while. If they are fighting over a toy, hold onto the toy until the last stage.

Step 2. Acknowledge Feelings

Help your child understand how they are feeling by explaining their emotions e.g. 'You sound angry, I can hear your loud voice.' 'Yes, I can see you both want to play with the ball.' 'I can tell you're feeling frustrated.' Children need to express their feelings before they can let go of them. Don't try to offer solutions yet.

Step 3. Gather Information

Find out what happened. Try really hard not to make assumptions. Ask open-ended questions to help your children tell you what happened. eg 'What happened?' 'What's going on here? Please tell me.' Listen carefully.

Step 4. Restate the problem

Now, using the information your children have told you, retell the problem. Make sure you use clear, simple words eg. 'You both wanted the car. You snatched the car away then you snatched it back. Now you both feel sad and X was hurt.' If your child has said hurtful words, you might want to rephrase those.

Step 5. Brainstorm Solutions

Ask your children to come up with solutions, then help them put their ideas together. It's important that you accept their ideas, this helps children learn that they can solve their own problems. It also means that they are more likely, in the future, to be able to solve disagreements on their own.

Step 6. Follow Up

Help your children carry out their solution, making sure that no one stays upset. If they are unable to return to playing happily, you will need to repeat one or more of the steps above

After an incident has occurred

- Comfort the hurt child and encourage the other to make amends. If appropriate they could hug or get a tissue. Ask the child how they would like their sibling to make it better for them.
- Talk to both children about what happened and discuss/suggest an alternative way of behaving.
- If appropriate, encourage children to re-enact the scenario with the appropriate behaviour i.e. if one child has snatched a toy, they could then re-enact the scenario asking for a turn instead.



Please see this clip for an example of the Conflict Resolution Process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfHd6XtCWq8>

■ Tantrums and Emotional Outbursts

Having overwhelming emotions (often referred to as tantrums) is a normal part of a child's development. It is important that adults remain calm. These outbursts are an expression of a strong emotion that children are learning to deal with.

To help, adults need to:

- make sure the child is safe by moving objects away from them.
- try not to talk or reason with a child at this stage.
- hold the child gently if they will let you.
- de-escalate the situation by talking calmly.
- reassure by saying "It will be OK."

Children have strong feelings. Acknowledging that children have different emotions then encouraging them to express those feelings is key. An easy way to do this is by providing your child the words needed to express those particular feelings e.g. "You look very angry" "You don't look very happy! What's the matter?" Later on you might also choose a book to read where the characters are displaying particular emotions. That's a good way into a discussion.

If a child is prone to emotional outbursts it's a good idea to identify the triggers and discuss some calming strategies with your child beforehand. Children will need help to calm down (co-regulation) before they are able to start doing this for themselves (self-regulation). The strategies used will depend on the child and situation - for example distraction can work well if used early enough (before the child has become too upset), sensory toys and bottles, photographs of family and friends. A hug will help some children, others may need you to just sit near them, calmly reassuring and waiting. Finding a calm, comfortable and safe space can help children to learn to calm themselves. Why not try making a calming box with your child*

*See attached document "Making your own calming box" for further info/ideas

■ Emotion coaching

Emotion coaching uses incidences of "negative behaviour" as opportunities to teach children strategies for coping with difficult situations and emotions. It also reduces stress and builds trust and positive attachments. For these reasons it is almost always more effective than using sanctions or punishments.

The key things to remember are:

- 1) Recognise the child's feelings and empathise (*Take on the child's perspective*)
- 2) Labelling & validating (*Use words to reflect back the child's emotion*)
- 3) Limit setting (*if needed*)
(*Make it clear that certain behaviours are not accepted but retain the child's self-dignity*)
- 4) Problem solve with the child (*Explore, scaffold and empower*)

*Address the emotion your child is feeling **before** discussing the unwanted behaviour so they are calmer and more rational.*

Suggested phrases to use:

- *I can see that something's not quite right*
- *I'm sorry that happened to you, you must have felt really fed up*
- *I notice that you get upset when that happens*
- *That must have been really frustrating/annoying for you*
- *I would feel like this if that happened to me*
- *I understand why you might be annoyed*
- *It's normal to feel like that*
- *You look kind of fed up your face looks a bit cross*
- *I think you might be feeling.....*

For further reading on emotion coaching: <https://dadbloguk.com/emotion-coaching-dr-janet-rose/>

Rewards

Ideally it is best if a child is motivated by the satisfaction of doing the right thing rather than receiving a tangible reward such as a sticker. However, stickers or other rewards might work for some children for very specific changes to behaviour (eg toileting, dressing, tidying toys, etc) but the plan would always be to gradually move on from having these rewards. So, with this in mind, other rewards parents could give are, a smile, praise, a high five, sharing child's positive behaviour with another family member, sharing a positive experience with school's key adult/ writing a WOW sticker.

Further information on more specific behaviours

Children being uncooperative/refusing

When parents set expectations for their child, it is best if they are realistic and take into account the child's age or stage of development. Parental modelling of language and expectations is crucial i.e. when helping a child learn the basic polite rules of saying 'please' and 'thank you,' this will become more easily embedded if that child consistently experiences hearing and seeing those rules modelled by all adults around them. Useful strategies to use when setting limits could be:

- Say what you want your child to do e.g. "I would like you to...." (see Golden Guidelines at the bottom of this document for positive behaviour expectations)
- Say 'yes' rather than 'no' e.g. "Yes, you can have a go on the scooter after your brother but only when the sand timer runs out."
- Use 'when/ then' statements e.g. "When you have your coat on, then you can go outside."
- Give limited choices e.g. "Would you like to tidy away the cars or the blocks?" "Would you like an apple or a banana?"
- There are lots of sand timer and countdown apps available for your phone which could be useful.
- Give explicit praise: "Well done, you have been **kind**, you gave the ...to...", "Thank you for picking up that toy, you have been very **helpful**."
- Distraction/redirection is often a great strategy to use if you see/sense your child is about to do something they shouldn't, thus avoiding a power struggle, "Look! Quick - what's Spiderman/Peppa Pig doing over there!" "Quick - come and see this!". For more explanation of how/when to use redirection see <https://www.transformchallengingbehavior.com/blog/blog/redirection-a-magical-misunderstood-strategy>

Destructiveness

- In some cases this can be a result of overwhelming emotions - ie child is upset or frustrated by something, or could just be due to high energy levels/hyperactivity
- If the child is feeling strong emotion at this time it's important to calm them down and explore this before asking them to fix/tidy anything
- Point out what has happened, "Oh no...."
- Encourage your child to clear up the mess or reconstruct. For example, if they broke a sibling's model, encourage them to help reconstruct it - even better if they come up with this idea themselves
- Again, distraction/redirection can be used effectively in many situations if timed correctly
- Please see attached 'Letting off Steam' suggestions. These suggestions will help support children to burn off energy in a constructive way.

Swearing and Rudeness

- Parents reinforce expectations by saying, "We don't use those words at home."
- Praise child's use of appropriate language.

Biting

Biting is often a way of communicating rather than just 'bad behaviour.'

The child might be:

- **Expressing emotions:** some young children bite out of a way of showing love. They have really intense feeling and don't know how to show them. Biting is a way of expressing those feelings. (see above tips on dealing with emotional outbursts)
- **Experimenting:** young children are learning how their bodies work, they put things in their mouth to explore them. It's impulsive and they don't mean to hurt.
- **Defending:** young children learn to bite as a defence, especially if they can't talk. Sometimes a child will bite when they are feeling anxious or threatened.
- **Controlling:** some children think that biting is a way of getting what they want.
- **Frustrated or irritated:** a child may bite if they want a toy back, want adults' attention or can't cope with a situation. They might not understand turn taking or sharing. They may feel under stress. They don't necessarily mean to cause harm, but just can't find the words to express themselves.

In all instances, react swiftly and calmly. Children need to know immediately that what they have done is wrong. Move the child away somewhere quiet to calm down. If a child is teething or has sensory needs, provide an alternative to bite on. Say "No" firmly. "NO. That's biting." A visual aid, such as a red cross, could also be used. When things have calmed down try to help the child find way to express themselves in a more appropriate way i.e. to ask for or initiate a hug if they wanted to gain your comfort. Model and teach your child the speech they could use e.g., "I don't like you being that close" or alternatively introduce the stop sign, which is usually a red cross or the Makaton hand sign, which is a vertical palm, supported by single word "Stop." Focus attention on the hurt child but involve the other child in sorting out the situation if appropriate. Then praise generously when you see the child behaving well. Be specific e.g. "I really like the way you helped your brother pick up that heavy box, that was so kind of you."

Gun Play

- If a child is acting out stories from a TV programme, become familiar with that programme so that you can anticipate and respond to any scenarios you see.
- Join in the play and redirect it to become more 'help,' 'rescuing' or 'save the day' focus.
- Remind children to pretend play and encourage them to use gesture dramatically rather than actually have physical contact which could potentially hurt.
- When joining in, demonstrate your dramatic and acting skills e.g. act like you are trapped or frozen.
- Support children to set limits e.g. parents could say, "I'm not in your game, don't shoot me."

Supporting Children with Additional Needs

Strategies to support behaviour in young autistic children

- Aim to ensure routine, structure and predictability through the day. Use visual timetables and social stories.
- Use the child's interests as rewards.
- Find new ways of using the child's interests to engage them in new learning experiences.
- Provide the child with clear boundaries.
- Social stories are used by children to help understand how to deal with specific social situations

Strategies to support children with attention difficulties

- Provide children with special responsibilities and encourage others to see them in a positive light.
- Parents to introduce clear routines at home in collaboration with key adults at school and other professionals, if involved.
- Encourage the child to think positively about themselves by promoting positive self-talk. "You sat really well today, how do you feel?"

School's Golden Guidelines

I am gentle

I am kind and helpful

I listen and I take turns to talk

I look after toys and books

I tell the truth and say what really happened

I will try new things