

HABITS AND BEHAVIOUR



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As children grow, they start to learn some basic skills and habits, like using the toilet, sleeping through the night and learning how to behave themselves in public and at home. This chapter offers practical advice on teaching your child these vital skills – and on how to cope when things get tough.

- All children learn at their own pace and in their own way. It doesn't usually help if you – or other people – compare your child with other children.
- You cannot force potty training! If you do, you will make your child anxious and turn the whole issue into a battleground. Encouragement works much better.
- Lead by example. It's the best way for your child to learn everything from how to use the loo to how to resolve an argument.
- Getting into a good sleeping routine will help make everyone's life easier. Being calm and consistent can be the key to successful sleeping.
- Changes – like the arrival of a new baby – can disrupt your child's routine and change their behaviour. You can try to prepare for this. You need time to learn to cope too – with the practicalities and with your own feelings.
- Remember, all children behave badly from time to time. Other parents can be a great source of advice on how to cope when this happens. You don't have to struggle on your own!



Coping with ill or disabled children



Some children with illnesses or disabilities may find it more difficult to learn to do things like sleep through the night or use a toilet. This might be linked to their medical condition or disability and can be challenging both for them and for you. Do let your child specialist nurse or doctor know of your concerns. The charity Contact a Family can provide information, suggest further sources of support and put you in touch with other parents who have faced similar problems. See page 157 for contact details.

LEARNING TO USE POTTIES AND TOILETS

Children get bladder and bowel control when they are physically ready for it, and when they want to be dry and clean. Every child is different, so it's best not to compare your child with others.

- Most children can control their bowels before their bladders.
- By the age of two, some children will be dry during the day; however, this is still quite early.
- By the age of three, nine out of 10 children are dry most days. Even then, all children have the odd accident, especially when they are excited or upset or absorbed in doing something else.
- By the age of four most children are reliably dry.

It usually takes a little longer to learn to stay dry throughout the night. Although most children learn this between the ages of three and five, it is estimated that a quarter of three-year-olds and one in six five-year-olds wet their bed.



When to start potty training

It helps to remember that you really cannot force your child to use a potty. If they are not ready, you will not be able to make them. In time they will want to use it; your child will not want to go to school in nappies any more than you would want them to! In the meantime, the best thing you can do is to encourage the behaviour you want.

Most parents start thinking about potty training when their child is around 18–24 months, but there is no perfect time. It's probably easier to start in the summer, when washing dries better and there are fewer clothes to take off, and at a time when you can have a clear run at it, without any great disruptions or changes to your child's or your family's routine.

You can also try to work out when your child is ready. There are a number of signs that your child is starting to develop bladder control:

- They know when they have a wet or dirty nappy.
- They get to know when they are passing urine, and may tell you they are doing it.
- The gap between wetting is at least an hour (if it's less, potty training may fail and at the very least will be extremely hard work for you).
- They know when they need to wee, and may say so in advance.

You will probably find that potty training is fastest if your child has started to show any of the above signs before you start. If you start earlier, be prepared for a lot of accidents as your child learns.



How to start potty training

- **Try leaving a potty around where your child can see it and get to know what it's for.** If you have an older child, your younger child may see them using it, which will be a great help. It helps to let your child see you using the toilet and explain what you are doing.
- **If your child regularly opens their bowels at the same time each day, try leaving their nappy off and suggesting that they go in the potty.** If your child is even the slightest bit upset by the idea, just put the nappy back on and leave it a few more weeks before trying again.
- **As soon as you see that your child knows when they are going to wee, encourage them to use their potty.** If your child slips up, just mop it up and wait for next time. It usually takes a while to get the hang of it. If you don't make a fuss when they have an accident then they will not feel anxious and worried and are more likely to be successful the next time.

- **Your child will be delighted when they succeed, and a little praise from you will go a long way.** It can be quite tricky to get the balance right between giving praise and making a big deal out of it, which you don't want to do. It's best not to give sweets as a reward, as this can end up causing more problems. When the time is right, your child will want to use the potty, and they will just be happy to get it right.

Some common problems with potty training, and how to deal with them

My child is not interested in using the potty at all

Try not to worry. Remind yourself that, in the end, your child will want to be dry for their own sake. If they start to see the whole business as a battle of wills with you, it will be much harder.

My child just keeps wetting themselves

You have two options. You could go back to nappies for a while and try again in a few weeks, or you could keep going but be prepared to do a lot of changing and washing of clothes. Whatever you decide, try not to let it get you or your child down and don't put pressure on them. Try talking to other parents about how they coped. You also don't want to confuse your child by stopping and starting too often, so if you do stop, leave it for a little while before you start again.

Just when I think things are going well, there is an accident

Accidents will happen for a while, so it's always good to make sure your child knows how pleased you are when they use the potty or manage to stay dry, even if it's just for a short time. Even though accidents can be

very frustrating, you should try not to show this to your child. Explain that you want them to try to use the potty or toilet next time. If your child starts to worry, the problem could get worse.

My child was dry for a while, but now they have started wetting again

If your child has been dry for a while either at night or during the day, or both, and then starts wetting again, there may be an emotional reason. Disruption – like moving house, or a new baby arriving – or a change of routine can often have such an effect. The best thing you can do is be understanding and sympathetic. Your child will almost certainly be upset about the lapse and will not be doing it 'on purpose'.

My child's about to start school, and they are still not dry

By this age, your child is likely to be just as upset by wetting as you are. They need to know that you are on their side and that you are going to help them solve the problem. Talk to your GP or health visitor to get some guidance. They may refer you to a clinic for expert help.

Help and support

You can contact Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence (ERIC) for information (see page 183 for contact details).

help your child to learn



Bedwetting

Up to the age of five, bedwetting is considered normal, and treatment is not usually given. You may, however, find the following suggestions useful if your four or five-year-old is wetting the bed:

- Try not to get angry or irritated with your child – even if it is 3am!
- Protect the mattress with a good waterproof protective cover.
- Some children are afraid to get up at night. A night light or potty in their room can help.
- Cutting back on fluids will not help as your child's bladder will simply adjust to hold less. It is better for your child to drink around six or seven cups of fluid during the day so that their bladder learns to cope with a healthy amount of fluid. Avoid giving your child drinks with caffeine, such as tea, cola and chocolate, before they go to bed as these can stimulate the kidneys to produce more urine.
- Constipation can also irritate the bladder at night and cause a child to wet the bed. Making sure that your child is drinking enough fluid and eating enough fibre can help to make sure they are not constipated.

Constipation and soiling

If your child is not emptying their bowels at least three times a week and their stools are often hard and difficult to pass, they may be constipated. Their stools may also look like little pellets.

Soiled pants can be another sign, as soft stools (diarrhoea) may leak around the hard constipated stools. Too much milk and too little fibre can cause constipation. It may also suggest that your child is worried or anxious about something.

If your child gets constipated, they may find it painful to pass stools. This creates a vicious circle: the more it hurts, the more they hold back, the more constipated they get, and the more it hurts. Even if passing a stool is not painful, once a child is really constipated they will stop wanting to go to the toilet at all.

Ask your health visitor, GP or pharmacist whether a suitable laxative might help. They may be able to suggest other alternatives.



If the problem is not solved quickly, talk to your GP. The longer it goes on, the more difficult it can be for your child to get back to normal, so do get help. It might take a while for the treatments your doctor recommends to work, but keep trying until they do.

Once the initial problem has been solved, it's important to do everything you can to stop it coming back. The best way to avoid constipation is to make sure your child eats plenty of fibre. Fruit and vegetables, wholemeal bread or chapattis, wholegrain breakfast cereals, baked beans, frozen peas and sweetcorn are all good sources, and popular with children. They will also need lots to drink, but don't give them too much milk or squash (see Chapter 3 for guidance on suitable diets) as that can actually cause constipation. Lots of exercise also helps.

If changing their diet doesn't help, try to find out whether there is anything upsetting your child. Perhaps they are afraid of using the potty. Whatever it is, try to reassure them that it's OK. It might take some time, but letting your child be with you when you go to the toilet can help. Try to be as relaxed as you can be about it. If the problem still doesn't go away, talk to your health visitor or GP again.

Understanding bedwetting

If a child who has been dry starts to wet the bed again, it may be a sign that they have a bladder infection, constipation or threadworms. Alternatively, they may be worried or anxious about something.



SLEEPING

In some families, children simply go to bed when they are ready, or at the same time as their parents. In others, children go to bed early, giving their parents some child-free time. Some parents are happy to cuddle their children to sleep every night, while others want their children to be able to settle down on their own.



All of these approaches are absolutely fine, but you will probably find it helps both you and your child to establish a regular routine – what is sometimes called good sleep hygiene. Making sure your child is calm and ready for bed will help everyone to enjoy a peaceful night.



How much sleep is enough?

Just as with adults, babies' and children's sleep patterns vary. From birth, some babies need more or less sleep than others. The following list shows the average amount of sleep babies and children will need during a 24-hour period, including daytime naps.

- **Birth to three months.** Most newborn babies spend more time asleep than awake. Total daily sleep can vary from eight hours up to 16–18 hours. Babies will wake during the night because they need to be fed. Being too hot or too cold can also disturb their sleep.
- **Three to six months.** As your baby grows, they will need fewer night feeds and be able to sleep for longer stretches. Some babies will sleep for around eight hours or even longer at night. By four months, they could be spending around twice as long sleeping at night as they do during the day.
- **Six to 12 months.** At this age, night feeds should no longer be necessary, and some babies will sleep for up to 12 hours at a stretch at night. However, teething discomfort or hunger may wake some babies during the night.
- **12 months.** Babies will sleep for around 12–15 hours altogether.
- **Two years.** Most two-year-olds will sleep for about 11–12 hours at night, with one or two naps in the day.
- **Three to four years.** Most will need about 12 hours of sleep, but the amount can range from eight hours up to 14. Some young children will still need a nap during the day.



Establishing a bedtime routine

Getting into a simple, soothing bedtime routine early can help avoid sleeping problems later on. A routine could consist of having a bath, changing into night clothes, feeding and having a cuddle before being put to bed.

Your baby will learn how to fall asleep in their cot if you put them down when they are still awake rather than getting them to sleep by rocking or cuddling in your arms. If they get used to falling asleep in your arms, they may need nursing back to sleep if they wake up again.

As your child gets older, you might find it helpful to keep to a similar bedtime routine. Too much excitement and stimulation just before bed can wake your child up again. It can help to spend some time 'winding down' and doing some calmer activities, like reading.

An example of a routine could be:

- bath, then put on night clothes
- supper or a milky drink
- brush teeth
- go to bed
- bedtime story
- make sure comforter (dummy, cuddly toy or security blanket) is nearby, then
- goodnight kiss and cuddle.

You could leave a dim light on if necessary.

SOME COMMON SLEEP PROBLEMS

Lots of young children find it difficult to settle down to sleep – and wake up during the night. For some parents, this might not be a problem. If you are happy for your child to go to bed at the same time as you, or sleep in your bed, that is fine. But if you or your child are suffering from lack of sleep, you may like to try some of the suggestions here. Research shows that tips like these are more effective than medicines in treating sleep problems.

My child will not go to bed

- Think about what time you want your child to go to bed.
- Close to the time that your child normally falls asleep, start a 20-minute 'winding down' bedtime routine. Bring this forward by 5–10 minutes a week (or 15 minutes a week, if your child has got into the habit of going to bed very late) until you get to the bedtime you want.
- Try to set a limit on the amount of time you spend with your child when you put them to bed. For example, you could read one story only, then tuck your child in and say goodnight.
- Make sure your child has their dummy, if they use one, favourite toy or comforter before settling into bed.
- If your child cries, leave them for 5–10 minutes before going back in and settling them down again. Don't pick them up or take them downstairs. If your child gets up, put them back to bed again.
- Leave a drink of water within reach and a dim light on if necessary.
- If you keep checking your child, you might wake them up, so leave it until you are certain that they are asleep.

- You might have to repeat this routine for several nights. The important thing is to be firm and not to give in.

My child keeps waking up during the night

By the time your child is six months old, it's reasonable to expect them to sleep through most nights. However, up to half of all children under five go through periods of night waking. Some will just go back to sleep on their own, others will cry or want company. If this happens, try to work out why your child is waking up.

For example:

- Is it hunger? A later feed or some cereal and milk last thing at night might help your child to sleep through the night.
- Are they afraid of the dark? You could try using a nightlight or leaving a landing light on.
- Is your child waking because of night fears or bad dreams? If so, try to find out if something is bothering them.



- Is your child too hot or too cold? You could adjust their bedclothes or the heating in the room and see if that helps.

repeat
your routine

If there is no obvious cause, and your child continues to wake up, cry and/or demand company, then you could try some of the following suggestions:

- **Scheduled waking.** If your child wakes up at the same time every night, try waking them between 15 minutes and an hour before this time, then settling them back to sleep.
- **Let your child sleep in the same room as a brother or sister.** If you think your child may be lonely, and their brother or sister doesn't object, try putting them in the same room. This can help them both to sleep through the night.
- **Teach your child to fall asleep by themselves.** First check that everything is all right. If it is, settle your child down without talking to them too much. If they want a drink, give them water but don't offer them anything to eat. For this approach to work, you need to leave them in their cot or bed and not take them downstairs or into your bed. Let them cry for around five minutes before you check them. Over the next few nights, gradually increase the amount of time you leave them



before checking. It might take a week or two, but if you keep the routine going, your child should start falling asleep on their own.

- **Nightmares.** Nightmares are quite common. They often begin between the ages of 18 months and three years. Nightmares are not usually a sign of emotional disturbance. They may happen if your child is anxious about something or has been frightened by a TV programme or story. After a nightmare, your child will need comfort and reassurance. If your child has a lot of nightmares and you don't know why, talk to your GP or health visitor.
 - **Night terrors.** These can start before the age of one, but are most common in three and four-year-olds. Usually, the child will scream or start thrashing around while they are still asleep.
- They usually happen after the child has been asleep for a couple of hours. They may sit up and talk or look terrified while they are still asleep. Night terrors are not usually a sign of any serious problems, and your child will eventually grow out of them. You should not wake your child during a night terror, but if they are happening at the same time each night, try breaking the pattern by gently waking your child about 15 minutes beforehand. Keep your child awake for a few minutes, then let them go back to sleep. They will not remember anything in the morning. Seeing your child have a night terror can be very upsetting, but they are not dangerous and will not have any lasting effects.
- **Tackle it together with your partner.** If you have a partner, you should agree between you how to tackle your child's sleeping problems, as you don't want to try to decide what to do in the middle of the night! If you both agree what is best for your child, it will be easier to stick to your plan.

Help and support

Extra help with sleeping problems

It can take patience, consistency and commitment, but most sleep problems can be solved. However, if you have tried the suggestions on these pages and your child's sleeping is still a problem, talk to your GP or health visitor. They may have other ideas or suggest that you make an appointment at a sleep clinic if there is one in your area. Sleep clinics are usually

run by health visitors or clinical psychologists who are specially trained in managing sleep problems and can give you the help and support you need. In the meantime, if you are desperate, try to find someone else to take over for the odd night, or even have your child to stay. You will cope better if you can catch up on some sleep yourself.

A NEW BABY IN THE FAMILY

Coping with two children is very different from coping with one. It can be tough at first, especially if your first child is not very old. When it comes to dealing with the baby, you have got more experience and probably more confidence too, which helps. But the work more than doubles, and dividing your time and attention can be a strain.

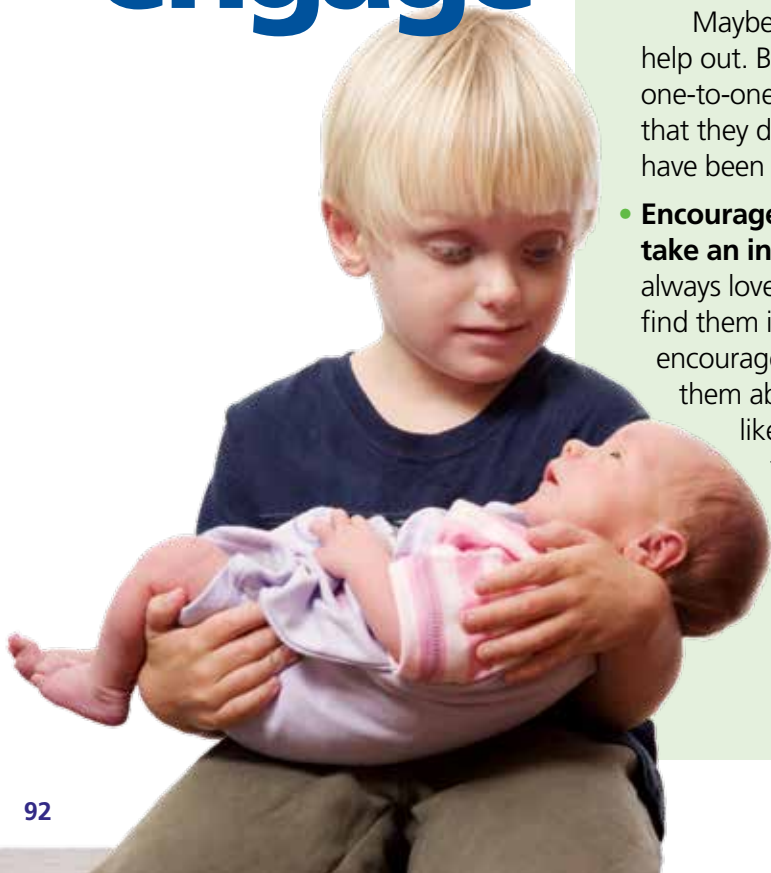
You may find that your first child shows some jealousy or attention-seeking behaviour. This can be dealt with by ensuring you focus on them too. It takes time to adjust to being a bigger family and caring for more than one child.

encourage your child to engage



Your older child, no matter what their age, has to adjust too, and some children find this difficult. The following suggestions may help:

- **Try to keep up old routines and activities.** Going to playgroup, visiting friends and telling a bedtime story might be difficult in the first few weeks, but sticking to established routines will help reassure your older child.
- **Your first child might not love the baby at first.** They may not feel the way you do. It's lovely if they share your pleasure, but it's best not to expect it.
 - **Be prepared to cope with extra demands.** Your older child may want and need more attention. Maybe a grandparent can help out. But they will still need one-to-one time with you so that they don't feel as if they have been 'pushed out'.
- **Encourage your older child to take an interest.** Children don't always love babies, but they do find them interesting. You can encourage this, by talking to them about what they were like as a baby and the things they did. Get out their old toys, and show them photos.
- **Provide distractions during feeds.** An older child may well feel left out and jealous when you are feeding the baby. You could find something for them to do, or use the feed as an opportunity to tell them a story or just have a chat.
- **Be patient with 'baby behaviour'.** Your older child might ask for a bottle, start wetting their pants or want to be carried. This is completely normal behaviour so try not to let it bother you and try not to say 'no' every time.
- **Expect some jealousy and resentment.** It's almost certain to happen, sooner or later. You can only do so much. If you and your partner, or you and a grandparent or friend, can sometimes give each other time alone with each child, you will not feel so constantly pulled in different directions.
- **Encourage your child to engage with the baby.** Try to turn looking after the baby into a fun game and encourage your child to talk to the baby.



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR

Children develop skills and awareness as they grow. Babies learn to sleep without you soothing them, young toddlers experiment with food (perhaps making quite a mess!) and they begin to play co-operatively with other children. It is sometimes easy to expect quite young children to be more independent, or better able to manage their feelings than is possible. It is normal for toddlers to have tantrums, especially when they cannot do something they want. They need you to help them learn how to cope with strong emotions, support and encourage them to do new things and give them confidence in themselves.

People have very different ideas about good and bad behaviour. What is bad behaviour to you might seem normal to other parents, and vice versa. Sometimes it's a question of what you are used to. Sometimes it's a question of circumstances. For example, it's much harder to put up with mess if you have not got much space, or with noise if the walls are thin.

Parents also react to their children's behaviour in different ways. Some are stricter than others, some are



more patient than others, and so on. It's not just a matter of how you decide to be. It's about how you are as a person. It's also to do with your child's individual character. For example, some children react to stress by being loud and noisy and wanting extra attention, others by withdrawing and hiding away.

You will probably find that you deal with your child's behaviour in your own way and set rules that fit the way you live and the way you are. But there will probably be times when your child's behaviour worries you or gets you down, and when nothing you do seems to work. This section will give you some pointers on how you might cope if this happens.

Understanding difficult behaviour

Sometimes it can help to take a step back. Is your child's behaviour really a problem? Do you really need to do something about it now? Is it just a phase that they will grow out of? Would you be better off just living with it for a while?

It's also worth asking yourself whether your child's behaviour is a problem for you, or for other people. Behaviour that might not worry you can become a problem when other people start to comment on it.

Sometimes, taking action can actually make the problem worse. At the same time, if a problem is

causing you and your child distress, or upsetting the rest of the family, you do need to do something about it.

Identifying the reasons for difficult behaviour

There are a number of possible reasons for difficult behaviour. Here are a few suggestions:

- Any change in a child's life, like the birth of a new baby, moving house, a change of childminder, starting playgroup, or even something much smaller, can be a big deal. Sometimes children show how they are feeling in the only ways they know how.
- Children are quick to pick up on it if you are feeling upset or there are problems in the family. Their behaviour may be difficult to manage just at the time when you feel least able to cope. If you are having problems, don't blame yourself – but don't blame your child either if they react in a difficult way.
- Sometimes your child may react in a particular way because of the way you have handled a problem in the past. For example, if you have given your child sweets to keep them quiet at the shops, they may well scream for sweets every time you go there.
- Could you accidentally be encouraging difficult behaviour? Your child might see a tantrum as a way of getting attention (even if it's angry attention!) or waking up at night as a way of getting a cuddle and a bit of company. Try giving them more attention when they are behaving well and less when they are being difficult.
- Think about the times when your child's behaviour is most difficult to manage. Could it be because they are tired, hungry, over-excited, frustrated or bored?



Changing your child's behaviour

Do what feels right

It's got to be right for your child, for you and for the family. If you do something you don't believe in or that you don't feel is right, the chances are it will not work. Children are quick to pick up when you don't really mean what you are saying!

Stick at it

Once you have decided to do something, give it a fair trial. Very few solutions work overnight. It's easier to stick at something if you have someone to support you. Get help from your partner, a friend, another parent, your health visitor or your GP. At the very least, it's good to have someone to talk to about what you are doing.

Try to be consistent

Children need to know where they stand. If you react to your child's behaviour in one way one day and a different way the next, it's confusing. It's also important that everyone close to your child deals with the problem in the same way.



Try not to over-react

This can be very hard! When your child does something annoying, not just once but time after time, your own feelings of anger and frustration are bound to build up. It's easy to get wound up and end up taking your feelings out on your child. If this happens, the whole situation can start to get out of control.

Of course, you would have to be superhuman not to show your irritation and anger sometimes, but try to keep a sense of proportion. Once you have said what needs to be said and let your feelings out, try to leave it at that. Move on to other things that you

can both enjoy or feel good about. And look for other ways of coping with your feelings (see Chapter 9).

Talk to your child

Children don't have to be able to talk back to understand. And understanding why you want them to do something can help. Explain why, for example, you want your child to hold your hand while crossing the road, or get into the buggy when it's time to go home.

Encourage your child to talk

Giving your child the opportunity to explain why they are angry or upset will help reduce their frustration.

Be positive about the good things

When a child's behaviour is really difficult, it can come to dominate everything. What can help is to say (or show) when you feel good about something they have done. You can let your child know when they make you happy by just giving them some attention, a hug or even a smile. There doesn't have to be a reason. Let your child know that you love them just for being themselves.

Rewards

You can help your child by rewarding them for behaving well, for example by praising them or giving them their favourite food for tea. If your child behaves well, tell them how pleased you are. Be specific. Say something like, 'I loved the way you put your toys back in the box when I asked you! Well done!'

Don't give your child a reward before they have done what they were asked to do. That is a bribe, not a reward, and bribes don't work!



Smacking

Smacking may stop a child doing what they are doing at that moment, but it will not have a lasting positive effect. Children learn by example, so if you hit your child, you are effectively telling them that hitting is an OK way to behave. Children who are treated aggressively by their parents are more likely to be aggressive themselves. It's better to teach by example that hitting people is wrong. There are lots of alternatives to smacking as a way of controlling your child's behaviour.

Help and support

Extra help with difficult behaviour

You can get help for especially difficult behaviour, so don't feel you have to go on coping alone. Talk to your health visitor or GP. Sometimes, a bit of support and encouragement might be all you need. Some children may need to be referred to a specialist where they can get the help they need. Having a child whose behaviour is very difficult can put a huge strain on you. You might find that you need help yourself. See Chapter 9 for more information.



Tempers and tantrums

Tempers and tantrums can start at around 18 months. They are very common at around this age: one in five two-year-olds has a temper tantrum every day. One reason for this is that two-year-olds really want to express themselves, but find it difficult. They feel frustrated, and the frustration comes out as a tantrum. Once a child can talk more, they are less likely to have tantrums. Tantrums are far less common by about the age of four.

The following suggestions may help you to cope with tantrums when they happen:

- **Find out why the tantrum is happening.** It could be that your child is tired or hungry, in which case the solution is very simple. Or they could be feeling frustrated or jealous, maybe of another child. They may need time, attention and love, even though they are not being very lovable!
- **Understand and accept your child's anger.** You probably feel the same way yourself at times but you can express it in other ways.
 - **Find a distraction.** If you can see that your child is starting a tantrum, find something to distract them straight away – for example, something you can see out of the window ('Look, a cat!').
- **Be prepared when shopping.** For some reason, tantrums often seem to happen in shops. This can be really embarrassing, and embarrassment makes it even harder to stay calm. Keep shopping trips short. You could start by going out to buy one or two things only, and build up from there. It can help to involve your child in the shopping by talking about what you need to buy and letting them help you. Once you have managed one quick trip without trouble, you are making progress.
- **Try holding your child firmly until the tantrum passes.** Some parents find this helpful but it can be hard to hold a struggling child. It will usually only work when your child is more upset than angry, and when you are feeling calm enough to talk to them gently and reassure them.



Hitting, biting, kicking and fighting

Most young children will occasionally bite, hit or push another child. Toddlers are also curious and may not understand that biting or pulling hair hurts. This doesn't necessarily mean your child is going to grow up to be aggressive. Here are suggestions for how you can teach your child that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable:

- **Don't hit, bite or kick back.** This could have the opposite effect of making your child think that it's OK to do this. Instead, make it clear that what they are doing hurts, and that you will not allow it.
- **Take them out of the situation.** If you are with other children, say you will leave, or ask the other children to leave, unless your child's behaviour improves – you will have to carry it out for this approach to work!
- **Put your child in another room.** If you are at home, try putting your child in another room (check that it's safe for them) for a short period.

- **Talk.** Children often go through patches of insecurity or upset and let their feelings out by being aggressive. Finding out what is worrying them is the first step to being able to help.
- **Show them you love them, but not their behaviour.** Children behaving aggressively are not always easy to love. But extra love may be what is needed.
- **Help your child let their feelings out some other way.** Find a big space, like a park, and encourage your child to run and shout. Just letting your child know that you recognise their feelings will make it easier for them to express themselves without hurting anyone else. You could try saying things like, 'I know you are feeling angry about...'. As well as recognising the feeling, it helps them to label and think about their own feelings.
- **Ask an expert.** If you are seriously concerned about your child's behaviour, talk to your health visitor or GP.



Coping with an active child

All young children are active, and it's normal for them to have lots of energy. A substantial proportion of children are overactive, and some (around 2%) genuinely do suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – what used to be known as hyperactivity.

However, a lot of children who are behaving in a difficult way and who have problems concentrating are not necessarily overactive, or may be suffering from a mild form of hyperactivity only. The challenge for parents and, sometimes, health professionals is to recognise the difference between 'normal' behaviour problems and ADHD symptoms, which require early treatment and management.

Below are some tips on managing an active child. If these tips or the other information in this chapter on dealing with difficult behaviour don't help, talk to your health visitor or GP. You can also get information from the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS). See page 182 for contact details.

- **Keep to a daily routine as much as you can.** Routine can help if your child is restless or difficult to manage. It can also help you to stay calmer and cope better with the strain.



- **Make time to concentrate on your child.** One way or another, your child may be demanding your attention for most of the day (and sometimes the night too). Sometimes, you will have no choice but to say 'no' to them. That will be easier to do, and easier for your child to accept, if there are certain times each day when you give them all your attention.
- **If possible, avoid difficult situations.** For example, keep shopping trips short.
- **Try to get out every day.** Go to a park or playground or another safe, open space – anywhere your child can run around and really burn off some energy.
- **Avoid giving your child cola drinks, tea and coffee.** These all contain caffeine, which can make children 'jumpy'. A lot of sugar can also have an adverse effect.
- **Set small goals.** You could try to help your child to be still or controlled, or to concentrate, for a very short time, then gradually build up. You cannot transform your child's behaviour overnight.

WHEN EVERY DAY IS A BAD DAY

There is no such thing as a 'perfect' parent and even good parents have bad days. Most parents go through phases when one bad day seems to follow another. If you are tired or moody, or if your child is tired or moody, it can be hard to get on together and get through the day. You can end up arguing non-stop. Even the smallest thing can make you angry. If you go out to work, it's especially disappointing when the short amount of time you have got to spend with your child is spoilt by arguments.

Most children also go through patches of being difficult or awkward about certain things. Some of the most common are dressing, eating and going to bed at night. It can be a vicious circle. Knowing that they are making you cross and upset can make them behave even worse. And the more tense you get, the less able you are to cope, so they carry on behaving badly, and so on.

As a parent, you cannot hand in your notice or take a week off – unfortunately! Here are some ideas that might be able to help.

Stop. And start again ...

If you are going through a bad patch, a change of routine or a change in the way you deal with things can be enough to stop the cycle of difficult behaviour. Here are some ideas:

- **Change the timetable.** An argument that always happens at a particular time may not happen at another. Try to do the difficult things when your child is not tired or hungry or when they are most co-operative. For example, try dressing them after breakfast instead of before, or have lunch a bit earlier than you normally would.
- **Find things that your child enjoys, and do them together.** It doesn't have to be special or expensive. You could try going for a swim, to the library or just
- **Ask yourself, does it really matter?** Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. But having an argument or telling your child off about certain things can get to be a habit.
- **Say sorry.** When you lose your temper because you are tired or upset, apologise. You will both feel better for it.
- **Remember, all children are different.** Some like sitting still and being quiet, while others want to spend every waking minute learning and exploring. If your child is 'into' everything, the best thing you can do is give them as many opportunities as possible to let off steam and explore safely.





- **Remember, the way you and your partner behave has an effect on your child.** Happy parents tend to have happy children. If you and your partner are having difficulties, contact Relate (www.relate.org.uk). For more information on relationships see page 144.
- **Young children are still learning.** Children under three cannot always understand and remember what they should and should not do. Even after this age, it's hard for a child to remember instructions.
- **No one is perfect.** You are not perfect and neither is your child! Don't expect too much of yourselves.
- **Look after yourself.** Looking after young children can be exhausting, physically and emotionally. Having some time to yourself can help you to manage better. Try getting an early night or finding someone to talk to about how you are feeling.

Talk about it

It does help to talk to and spend time with other people, especially other parents. It's often true that 'only parents understand'. They may look calm and capable from the outside (and remember, they are probably thinking the same about you!), but they would not be human if they did not get angry and frustrated at times.

If you don't already know any other parents near you, go to page 157 for information about local groups. Groups don't suit everybody, but at the very least they are a way of making friends and spending time with people who have children the same age as yours. If the first group you try doesn't suit you, it's worth trying another one.

If every day has been a bad day for a while, and you feel that things are getting out of control, get some help. Talk to your health visitor or phone a helpline. Talking to someone who understands what you are going through may be the first – and biggest – step towards making things better.

Sometimes, you may have other problems. If you are miserable, trying to be happy for your child's sake may seem impossible. See Chapter 9 for more information. Go to page 157 for a list of organisations that provide help and support for new parents.

Help and support

Confidential support and advice

If you want to talk to someone in confidence, try:

- www.parentingsupportni.org
- NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or www.nspcc.org.uk

talking to others can help