

# Tips for Parents



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## Understanding and Responding to Children's Behaviour in the Early Years

Throughout your child's early years, you might find that they become overwhelmed by big emotions. These emotions can lead to behaviours such as hitting, throwing, biting, or refusing to follow instructions. Luckily, there are ways that you can help your child develop 'self-regulation skills' that will allow them to manage these big feelings and behaviours as they continue to grow. Educational Psychologist Dr Nicola Canale offers an insight into children's behaviours in the early years – with suggestions on how parents can respond to those tricky moments.



### Building self-regulation skills

Children's behaviours are very much linked to their stage of development. Their brains are still developing rapidly in the early years and some of the behaviours that younger children display are outside of their control. Parents or care givers can help children to learn how to understand their emotions and develop more control over their behaviours by helping them to develop an important set of skills called **self-regulation skills**.

Developing self-regulation skills takes time. Every child is unique and the development of these skills is a mixture of a child's individual differences and their environment. A big part of this environment is the interaction and relationship they enjoy with their parents or care givers. When parents or care givers are faced with these behaviours it is important to respond in ways that help in the moment, but also help your child to develop self-regulation skills.

# What is happening when big emotions overwhelm children? – The ‘Upstairs’ vs. ‘Downstairs’ Brain

Dr Dan Siegel uses the **‘Hand Model of the Brain’** to demonstrate what is happening in the child’s brain when these big emotions overwhelm them.

He talks about the brain being made up of the ‘upstairs’ or the ‘thinking’ brain and the ‘downstairs’ or the ‘emotional’ brain. In reality the brain is far more complex than this but it can be a simple and helpful image to remember.

When all parts of the brain are working well together, you can think and feel things at the same time. You feel calm yet alert and are ready to explore, learn and take on board new information.

When children (or adults) feel overwhelmed, then the ‘downstairs / emotional’ brain can override the ‘upstairs / thinking’ brain. Dr Siegel calls this **‘flipping the lid’**.

After **‘flipping the lid’**, older children and adults have usually developed the self-regulation skills needed to return themselves to a state of calm (self-regulation) whereas younger children still need adult help to do this (co-regulation). Young children need lots of experiences of co-regulation to help them to self-regulate as they grow.

In other words, every time an adult helps a child to return to a state of calm when big emotions have taken over, they are helping them to be able to calm themselves in the future.

## Tantrums vs. Meltdowns

Dr Siegel’s **‘Hand Model of the Brain’** can be helpful when thinking about the difference between a tantrum and a meltdown.

Sometimes children might be having what is referred to as an ‘upstairs brain tantrum’. This is when a child might be behaving in a way to try and get something they want by, for example, whinging, repeating the same request over and over, etc.

At other times children might be having what is referred to as a ‘downstairs brain tantrum’ or ‘meltdown’. This is where they are overwhelmed by big feelings and emotions.

Younger children, particularly very young children, are much more likely to be having a ‘downstairs brain’ tantrum or ‘meltdown’ and will need help from an adult to bring them back to a state of calm before the adult is able to respond to the behaviour.

## Punishment vs. Discipline

Using punishment to respond to a child’s unwanted behaviour might result in a ‘quick fix’ – but is unlikely to lead to any longer lasting change. Punishment is also unlikely to support the child’s development and could impact negatively on the child’s self-esteem and wellbeing.

On the other hand, positive discipline, which comes from the Latin word disciple (‘to teach’) will lead to longer lasting changes, and will support child development. It can also increase a child’s self-esteem and wellbeing...which is a win-win situation for both parents and children.

# Responding to children's behaviour in the early years

We know that responding to your child's behaviour in the early years might be challenging from time to time – take a look at Dr Nicola Canale's seven tips on how you can respond to your child's behaviours and support their ongoing development and wellbeing.

## The Seven C's of Responding to Behaviour – Dr Nicola Canale, 2020 (Adapted from Parenting in the Moment © Kim S. Golding, 2015).

### Step 1

**Consider:** How can I be with my child during this tricky parenting moment?

### Step 2

**Calm yourself:** Check whether you are feeling calm and in control of your own emotions. It's important to calm yourself first so that you are able to respond to your child instead of reacting to them.

### Step 3

**Calm your child:** If your child is overwhelmed by big emotions they will need your help to calm down. Every child is unique. You, as their parent, will know what helps. Some children like to be hugged and others may need a bit of space with you sitting nearby and using your voice to help them return to a state of calm.

### Step 4

**Curiosity:** Be curious about some of the underlying emotions or unmet needs that would explain why your child is behaving in this way. A useful acronym to remember in the early years is **HALT**. This stands for **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, **T**ired. Are any of these needs unmet? Could this be the cause of their behaviour?

### Step 5

**Connection:** Join the dots for your child. Connect the underlying emotion or need to the behaviour you are seeing e.g., "I think you are tired and that's why you are throwing your toys..." Connecting your child's emotion to their behaviour helps them to feel understood and soothed, and will also help to develop their self-regulation skills as they grow.

### Step 6

**Correction:** This is where you provide a limit or boundary around the behaviour e.g., "I think you are tired and that's why you are throwing your toys, we need to put the toys away and have a rest". If an age appropriate consequence is needed, then natural consequences work best e.g., "you hurt your sister with the toy, the toy is going away" or "you wouldn't put your wellies on so there is not enough time to go to the park".

### Step 7

**Connect (again):** Once you've set down the limit and stuck to it reconnect with your child, maybe with a hug or reading a story together. It's okay to say sorry to your child if you have been cross. This will help you and your child recover from these little ruptures and your relationship will remain strong. Don't revisit the behaviour at a later time in the day, be like Elsa and 'let it go'.

## It's OK to ask for help

There are services and organisations which can give you support and advice.

You may find these helplines useful:

- **Community Advice and Listening Line (C.A.L.L)** – [callhelpline.org.uk](https://www.callhelpline.org.uk) – call on **0800 132 737** (24 hour service), or text 'help' to **81066**. This is a confidential helpline which offers emotional support on mental health and related matters
- **Samaritans** ([samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)) on **116 123** (confidential 24 hour service). You can get in touch about anything that's troubling you, no matter how large or small the issue.



## Where to get advice and support

Universal parenting support and advice is provided by midwives, health visitors, GPs and your local authority. Early help programmes such as Flying Start (if you live in a Flying Start area) and Families First are also available.

Look after yourself. Meeting up with other parents can be great for your wellbeing. Your local **Family Information Service** ([www.fis.wales](https://www.fis.wales)) will be able to tell you what's on in your area.

For positive parenting tips and expert advice, visit: [gov.wales/giveittime](https://gov.wales/giveittime)

