

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



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1. Introduction

This booklet has been developed for Welsh Government by two educational psychologists from Cardiff Parenting, who are also parents of young children. Educational psychologists work with children and families, using evidence about how children grow, learn and develop. The word 'parent/s' in this booklet includes all who are in a caring role for a baby, infant or young child.

Every child and every parent is unique. The aim of this booklet is to provide parents with up-to-date information for understanding and responding to young children's behaviour. The ideas in this booklet can be described as advocating a 'positive parenting' approach. This approach recognises that, in order to thrive, children need to experience loving relationships with their parents alongside age-appropriate supervision, structure and boundaries. The hope is that this booklet helps you as a parent to make decisions about what will work for you and your child.

Babies, toddlers and young children are growing and learning every day. Every little moment shared with them, from morning until bedtime (and often through the night), is a chance to help build their brains and support their development and

wellbeing. This means putting them on a positive path that will allow them to take advantage of all the wonderful opportunities that lie ahead.

A child's early years is an exciting and rewarding time, but it can also be a challenging one for those who care for them. Young children can frequently become overwhelmed by big emotions that can lead to big behaviours that parents may find tricky or stressful at times.

Whilst many of the ideas in this booklet can be used with all children, it is acknowledged that parents of children with additional learning needs and/or a disability may face additional challenges that are not addressed in this booklet. Details of organisations that may be able to provide further information can be found in the **Support** section of the Parenting. Give it time website (www.gov.wales/parenting-give-it-time).

Parenting. Give it time was developed by the Welsh Government to provide positive parenting practical information, advice and support for parents and caregivers with responsibility for raising children up to the age of 18 years of age.

Meeting up with other parents can be great for your wellbeing. Your **Family Information Service** will be able to tell you what's on in your area.



2. Becoming a Parent: The First 1000 Days

Your baby's first 1000 days start from before they are born and continue up until their second birthday. This is a very important time for child development as their brain and body are developing faster than at any other time in their life.

Your baby's behaviour

Your baby is born with an amazing capacity to be able to connect and communicate with you. If you watch your baby closely, they tell you what they like and dislike and show you the things they need from you.

'Baby behaviour' describes the movements, sounds and responses that your new-born baby uses to tell you their thoughts and feelings. For your baby, their behaviour is their language. When you watch your baby and try your best to understand the meaning of these behaviours, you are better able to understand what your baby is saying.

Being sensitive to your baby's behaviours, and meeting their needs, helps to build connections in their brain that will support their development and wellbeing as they grow. During this important period, you can lay a foundation of health and wellbeing that will last your child a lifetime, and carry on into the next generation.

All babies are different. Some parents notice these characteristics in the first weeks and months of a child's life. For example:

- Some babies are able to sleep through anything, whilst others need a dark and quiet environment.
- Some babies like lots of physical contact and others find lots of handling quite overwhelming.
- Some babies move between being in different 'states' e.g., asleep, awake and crying, very quickly, whilst others move between these states slowly.
- Some babies may need a lot of adult support to calm them when they cry, whilst others are able to be soothed more quickly.

For more information on your baby's behaviour visit: www.brazelton.co.uk/parents/your-babys-language

There is also an app called Baby Buddy that has been designed to support parents and your baby: www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/baby-buddy

Why your baby might cry

Crying is your baby's way of telling you that they need your help to soothe them. Although they don't know the reason why they are crying, your baby may be crying because they are telling you that they are:

- **Hungry** – *"I may be hungry."*
- **Lonely** – *"I feel safe when I can see your face, hear your voice, smell you and feel your touch. Crying is my way of asking to be held and to get close to an adult."*
- **Wet or dirty** – *"I may be uncomfortable in a wet or dirty nappy."*
- **Tired** – *"Tiredness can make me grumpy just like you."*
- **Too hot or too cold** – *"Generally, you can dress me with one more layer than you have on."* For advice on safe temperatures and dressing see: www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/baby-room-temperature
- **Uncomfortable** – *"I may feel uncomfortable because of something scratchy like clothing tags or a zip, or a wet nappy."*
- **Overstimulated** – *"I can get over-excited, especially if there have been lots of visitors or things going on, with lots of sounds, sights and smells."*
- **Struggling with wind** – *"I may feel uncomfortable or in discomfort because of trapped wind."*
- **Unwell or have a fever** – *"If I have a high temperature, I may have an illness."* If you would like medical advice, contact your GP or **NHS 111 Wales** for advice. You can call them on **111**.

Your baby's cries can be difficult to cope with

Caring for a baby who cries a lot can be an especially tiring and stressful time. You might need to ask for some extra help and support to be able to meet your baby's needs until this phase passes (often after the baby is 3 months old).

Ways to try to comfort your crying baby include:

- Holding your baby where they will be able to see you or feel your familiar heartbeat. During your baby's first month, they can focus only about 20cm to 30cm away.
- Smiling, talking, singing or humming to your baby. Humming is also calming for adults, as it creates rhythmic vibrations. Try stroking your baby's back rhythmically or gently swaying, to create a gentle rhythm.
- Skin to skin contact, like baby massage, can soothe your baby and you may find it relaxing too. Close contact triggers a hormone called oxytocin, which soothes both parent and baby.
- Consider offering a feed. If breast feeding, offer the breast. If bottle feeding, consider offering a dummy. Sterilise dummies as with bottles. Don't dip them in anything sweet and try to limit their use.
- Give your baby a bath or try going for a walk or drive together.



You must never shake your baby. This can damage their brain. Always support your baby's neck and head whenever you lift them or lay them down. If it is getting too much, you need to make sure your baby is in a safe place (e.g., a clear, safe cot away from animals). Then you can leave the room for just a moment until you feel calmer. Or you can ask a friend or family member to care for your baby for a while so you can have time to feel better. There is a **Cry-sis** (English language) helpline on **0800 448 0737** (lines are open 9am to 10pm, 7 days a week).



3. Understanding your child's development in the early years

You help to support your child's emotional wellbeing

Children develop a sense of who they are and what other people are like through their relationship with you. For example, they learn that they are loved, important and can trust adults to help them feel better, by how you respond to them. Your child's relationship with you will influence the way they see themselves and influence how they go on to form relationships with others. What happens during this very important period in your child's life lays the foundation for their emotional wellbeing, resilience and adaptability – the important skills they need to learn and thrive throughout their life.

You help to build your child's brain

Before your baby is born, their brain is developing in the womb. This is why a pregnant mother's diet, mental and physical health is so important. At birth, your baby has 100 billion brain cells but few connections (synapses) between these cells. It is your love and responses that help wire up these connections in the brain.

In your baby's first years of life, these connections develop at an extremely fast pace. This relates to, for example, the rapid development of motor skills and vision. Your baby learns to hold their head up, reach, grab, sit, crawl and maybe even start to walk during this time. They also develop from only being able to see things close up to being able to focus on things at a distance.

During the third year of life (age 2-3), your infant's brain has twice as many connections as a grown adult brain has. Only some of these connections will be kept and taken into adulthood. It is your infant's experiences that helps decide which of these connections are kept and which are lost. The least useful, or least used, will be 'pruned' away and lost. The most useful, or most used, will be kept. It is truly a case of use it or lose it.

You help to develop your child's language and learning

When you play, talk, sing and read books with your child it supports their early language development. Your baby tunes into your tone of voice and the sounds you make. Within the first few months, your baby is able to distinguish between the language they hear at home and other languages. This is before the brain becomes fine-tuned to their home language.

In the second year of life, a 'vocabulary explosion' often occurs, where your child starts to say all the most familiar words they have been hearing in their life. This is linked to an increase in synapses in the brain and the brain becoming more connected.

Helping your child to develop language skills helps your child express themselves, helping them to play and talk with friends.

Some children will need additional help and support to develop their language skills and parents may need help to help them to use different ways of communicating. Please speak with your Health Visitor or GP if you have questions or concerns about your child's speech and language development.



You help your child to develop self-regulation skills

During this time your child is developing an important set of skills that will help them understand and manage their emotions and behaviours as they grow. These skills are sometimes called **self-regulation** skills. When your baby is born, their ability to self-regulate is still very limited. You can help your child to develop self-regulation when you use your voice, movement and responses to help your child to settle and feel calm again. When your child experiences this, time and time again, they start to make sense of their emotions and begin to build strategies for self-regulation as they grow. These skills will help them in all aspects of their learning and relationships as they grow.

You help your child develop their window of tolerance

We all have our own individual ability to handle stressful situations. This is known as a **window of tolerance**. Our window is often linked with our biology, how people helped us to manage our own

feelings and emotions as a child, and the things we are currently facing in our everyday lives.

When we are inside our window of tolerance we are at our personal best (calm but alert). We can think, love, learn, be playful, and understand other people's feelings.

We all have different triggers that will push us out of our window of tolerance.

When we are hyper-aroused and outside our window, our heart rate and breathing gets faster; we might feel anxious, over-whelmed or frightened; and we might show this by becoming angry, aggressive or running away.

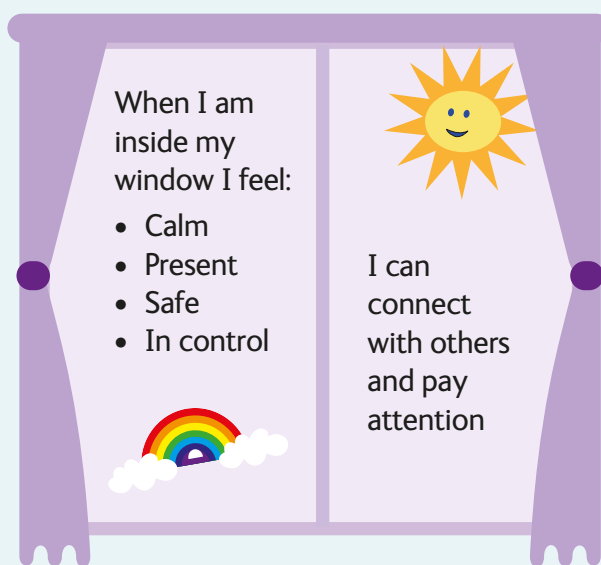
When we are hypo-aroused and outside our window, our heart rate and movement slows down; we might feel flat, shut down, empty or low; and we might show this by being still and withdrawn, or having no energy.

During difficult or stressful times, our window can become particularly small. The image below gives examples of how we can all stay inside our window.

Our Window of Tolerance

I can **help myself** to stay inside my window by:

- Being aware of my triggers and what pushes me outside of my window
- Doing things that I enjoy to keep me mentally and physically healthy
- Pausing and taking a deep breath, or counting to five, before reacting.



I can **help my child** stay inside their window by:

- Staying inside my own window (staying calm)
- Showing my child ways of staying inside their window, e.g., deep breaths
- Noticing and planning ahead to avoid triggers to their behaviour
- Helping them know that all emotions are OK
- Connecting with their emotions before correcting the behaviour.

Adapted from the work of Dr Dan Siegel

4. Understanding your child's behaviour in the early years

What is your child trying to tell you through their behaviour?

All behaviour is a form of communication. Young children often communicate their feelings and needs through their behaviour. This is because their brains are still developing (see section 3) and they do not yet have the words or understanding to communicate verbally, or in other ways. They are finding their way in a world of adult expectations, with a child's brain.

A useful image to remember when trying to figure out what your child might be trying to tell you through their behaviour is the iceberg image (see diagram below). On the tip of the iceberg is the behaviour you can see, like shouting, refusing, throwing, etc. Underneath the water is the rest of the iceberg (hidden from sight under the water). The things you can't see are what's going on inside

your child's brain and body e.g., how they are feeling and whether there are any needs that you need to attend to.

The following questions can be helpful when wondering about these behaviours:

- Why is the behaviour happening? What else can you see?
- What might be going on inside your child's mind?
- With this in mind, how can you help?

A useful acronym to remember in the Early Years is **HALT** which stands for **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired**. This can be helpful when wondering about what's going on under the surface of these behaviours. If your child is feeling any of these things, then you are likely to see changes in their behaviour. Only when these needs are met, might you see the behaviour change.

Nicola talks more about understanding and responding to children's behaviour in a video which can be viewed on the following link: gov.wales/childrensbehaviour

The Behaviour Iceberg



The tip of the iceberg

This is the only part of the iceberg that is above the water. This is what you can see. This represents the behaviours that you can see and hear.

Under the water

The majority of the iceberg is hidden under the water. This represents the feelings and needs you don't see.

Big Feelings can lead to Big Behaviours

During the early years, when your child's brain and nervous system are still developing, it's normal for your child to feel overwhelmed by big emotions. This can result in big behaviours such as tantrums, meltdowns, hitting, throwing, biting and shouting.

Dr Dan Siegel has come up with a good visual prompt called the **hand model of the brain** to help you understand what's happening in your child's brain when these big emotions take over. When strong emotions overwhelm you, you do something that Dr Siegel describes as '**flipping our lid**'. This is when the parts of the brain responsible for thinking things

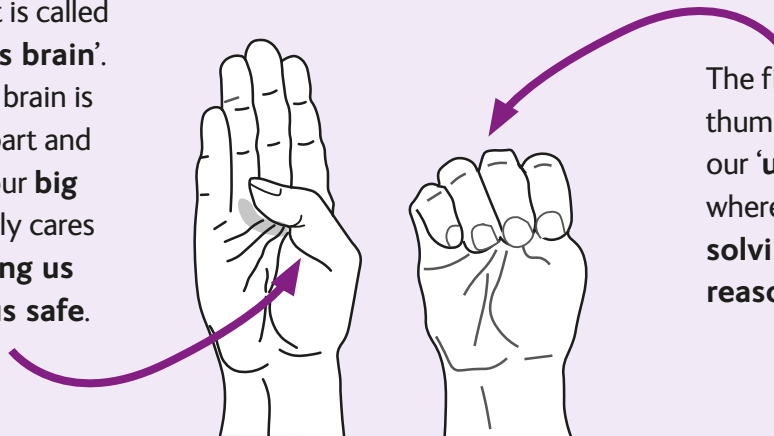
through (the upstairs brain) becomes disconnected from other parts of your brain (the downstairs brain) which can lead to you feeling out of control and reactive.

As an adult, when you 'flip your lid', you have usually developed the self-regulation skills needed to bring the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain to work in harmony again.

When your young child 'flips their lid' (which they often do as the connections between these parts of the brain are not as well developed) they need you to help them to get all the different parts of the brain working in harmony again.

Hand model of the brain

Here, your thumb represents what is called the '**downstairs brain**'. This part of our brain is the emotional part and is in charge of our **big feelings**. It really cares about **protecting us and keeping us safe**.



The fingers covering our thumb is what is called our '**upstairs brain**', where our **problem solving, logic and reasoning** occurs.

Source: 'School In-Reach CAVUHB'



5. Supporting your child's development and behaviour in the early years... and beyond

Every child (and parent) is a unique mixture of what you bring into the world (your biology) and what the world brings to you (your environment). Your child will have individual differences that need different levels of support from you as an adult. Some children will be more laid back whilst others will be sensitive and become easily overwhelmed. Children may also have an additional learning need or a disability that can make it harder to develop certain skills.

When your child feels overwhelmed by big emotions, they need you as an adult to be curious about why these behaviours are happening and to remain calmer, kinder, and wiser when responding to these behaviours.

Your ability to try and remain curious and try your best to work out what is going on in your child's mind when they behave in a certain way, is an important skill that you need to use a lot during your child's early years and as they grow. It is your parenting superpower, and it gives you lots of clues about what your child might need from you and how you can respond to them to make things better.

This skill is also helpful when you are trying to work out what is going on in your own mind when you react in a certain way to a behaviour that your child is displaying e.g., did you overreact? Did you respond in the way your own parent/s responded to you (even if you didn't really want to do so)?

The way you are able to support your child through difficult moments, as well as during calmer times, will support their development, learning and well-being. This will then help them to display the behaviours you want to see.



Being a good enough parent

As a parent, you often feel a lot of pressure to do things perfectly, however, this is unrealistic and can cause you guilt and stress when things don't go to plan. There is no one perfect way of parenting and being a good enough parent will be enough for your child. You will get things wrong at times, but you can always make things right again. As professionals, we call this '**rupture and repair**'. Experiencing these small '**ruptures**' along with a '**repair**' can actually help to build your child's ability to cope with the ups and downs of life as they grow.

Being a positive parent

Positive parenting is not about perfect parenting. It is an approach that focuses on building a warm, loving and affectionate relationship with your child in order to help them feel safe and secure. It also promotes routines, boundaries and clear expectations around your child's behaviour.

Studies have shown that positive parenting approaches with babies and toddlers:

- improves children's self-regulation skills and increases positive behaviours;
- improves children's ability to cope with stressful situations and supports their wellbeing;
- leads to greater gains in imitation and play;
- improves children's learning later in life.

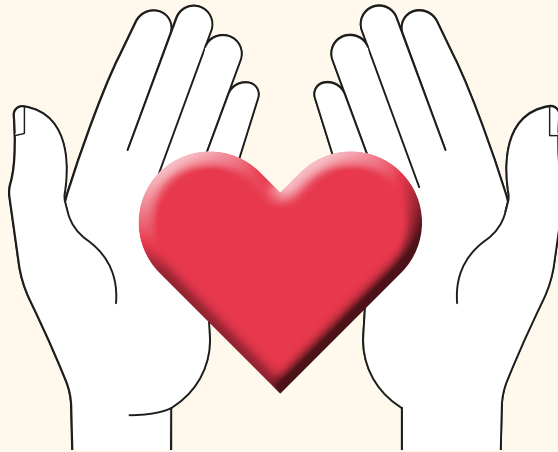
Connection before Correction: The two hands for parenting

One way of thinking about how you put a positive parenting approach into action on a daily basis is to think about what Kim Golding and Dan Hughes refer to as the **two hands for parenting**. The two hands symbolise how children need both **connection** (to feel safe and secure and unconditionally loved) and also **correction** (to have routines, boundaries and limits around their behaviours in place) in order to thrive.

Using connection strategies with the aim of understanding your child's experience, before implementing behaviour support, will likely help to build trust between you and your child. Avoid discipline or consequences until you have an understanding/explanation for the behaviour. Discipline, consequences or increased structure, will likely be more successful if your child feels understood and connected to, first.

The two hands for parenting

Connection –
“I think you are tired and that’s why you are throwing your toys”



Correction –
“You hurt your sister with the toy, the toy is going away”

Source: 'School In-Reach CAVUHB'



Give time to positive parenting

Your child needs your time and support in order to develop and learn from you. If they could, this is what your child would tell you that they need from you.

Time to love me

“Show me love and affection – you can’t spoil me with too much love or too many cuddles.”

Giving your child love and attention will help you become close. Close contact triggers a hormone called oxytocin, which makes you all feel happy. You need to try to make time to be physically close and give cuddles every day, so that, as they grow, your child will:

- know that they are loved and can give love to others;
- feel calm and safe;
- feel relaxed and at ease;
- feel more secure and confident;
- be better able to manage upsets and problems.

Time to interact with me

“See how I respond to the way you speak, move and hold me. I am listening to your voice, cuddling into you when it feels good or arching away if I am uncomfortable. Watch my clues about what I like and dislike, even in my first weeks and months of life.”

When your child cries or smiles you respond with eye contact, a smile, a song, words or a cuddle. This helps build connections in the brain. This back-and-forth contact, known as ‘**serve and return**’, helps your child to develop. This is as important to your child’s development as your child grows older (right up to their teenage years).

Play with me, play everyday

“Play is fun. It’s how I learn, and how I work out who I am, how the world works and where I fit into it.”

One of the most important things you can do with your child is play. The time you spend playing together gives your child lots of different ways and times to learn. Your child will be happy if they have plenty of time and space to play. You don’t need lots of expensive toys.

Make the most of everyday activities

“Every day is an adventure for me. I am curious about the people around me and these new experiences. Repeating experiences helps build the connections in my brain.”

Daily activities are opportunities to connect with your child in a meaningful way. These include bath time, nappy changing, mealtimes and dressing your child. You can give your child cuddles, cwtches and tickles during nappy changes or bath time. On the way to the shops or school you can take a few minutes to point out something that might interest them. These interactions with your child don’t have to take up much time, but they can make a real difference.



Time to notice me

“I learn about myself through your eyes. If you let me know that I am loved and worthy of love, then I will believe it too. From you, I will hear what I am good at and I will believe the things that you say about me.”

It's important to notice the behaviours, efforts and qualities that you like, love and want to see in your child, so that they know to repeat these. Let your child know that you love them, just for being them. You can do this by:

- Using your child's name positively.
- Noticing your child just for being who they are. Praise doesn't always need to be used to encourage a certain behaviour. There is nothing better than seeing your child's face light up when you say thank you e.g., *“Thanks for letting me play shops with you, you are such a fun person to play with.”*
- Letting your child 'overhear' you talking positively about them too. *“Dad, did you know that he was really kind to his friend today when he...”*

When giving praise for doing other things, you can:

- Notice your child's effort as well as the outcome e.g., *“You tried so hard to put your socks on, I am really proud of you trying like that.”*
- Show genuine enthusiasm when you give a compliment, smile and look at your child.
- Give your child genuine praise when you see a positive behaviour, with words, a shared look, a smile, thumbs up or another gesture, a hug or positive touch.
- Let them know what made you happy or proud, e.g., *“Thank you for picking that up.”* This helps your child learn what behaviour you like to see.
- Make it clear to your child what you are praising. It will show that you were paying attention and that you really mean it. Instead of saying *“Well done”* say *“I loved the way you shared your doll with your sister.”* Praise is more powerful when you make it clear what you are praising your child for.



Time to understand me

“When you wonder about how I am feeling and give it a name, I feel better and understand that my feelings are ok, and that they can be managed.”

Being curious means wondering about the thoughts and feelings behind your child’s behaviour. It shows them that you are trying to tune into their feelings, understand them and give them a name. Research has demonstrated how important it is for you to be curious about what is going on inside the mind of your child. You show your child you are trying to understand this by using your face, voice and body.

With a baby this could be saying things like:

- *“Oh dear, I think you might be cold because your nappy is wet, let’s get you changed.”*
- *“What a lovely smile, I think you are really happy to see me.”*

As your child grows you can continue to be curious. Putting your child’s feelings into words is a helpful way of showing them that you understand. This will help reduce stress and calm any big emotions that they might be feeling. It can also help your child to develop an understanding of their own feelings. It also helps them to understand that what might be going on in their mind is different to what is going on in the minds of others.



Time to comfort me

“Calm and soothe me when I’m upset, so that I begin to learn how to manage these big feelings.”

Young babies do not have the ability to calm and regulate their own emotions. They need your help to do this. Every time you calm your child when they become unsettled or distressed, you are not only helping them to understand that adults can be trusted to make them feel better, but are also helping them to develop an important set of self-regulation skills.

You can comfort your child by holding them or being close to them. By using rhythmic or reassuring touches, you can show them how to take deep breaths and stay calm.



Time to talk and communicate with me

“Even before I can talk, I pick up on your voice, the tone you use with me and others and the words that you use. Talk with me, sing to me, read to me, so that I will learn how to communicate with you and others.”

Learning to talk is one of the most important skills that your child needs to develop before they go to school. Being able to talk and communicate well is proven to help your child make friends, learn to keep friends, learn to read and have better opportunities in life.

Even in the womb, your baby can hear your voice. From birth, your baby will respond to familiar voices. The first two years of your child's life are very important. During this time they will learn all the skills needed for talking. These include looking, listening, copying and making early sounds.

Talking and responding to your child will help a babbling baby grow into a happy, healthy and talkative child. This also includes singing, playing and reading together.

Time to make me feel safe and secure

“I need you to help me feel safe with routines, so that I know what to expect, what is expected of me and what is going to happen.”

You may need to find a routine, order or structure that works for your family. You can make routines for your child around meals, snacks and sleep times. A predictable routine makes your child feel safe and know what they can expect. You can let your child know if a change is coming. Your child will come to expect and accept change better when they know it is coming. Family expectations around behaviours teach your child what behaviours are acceptable. Having a routine supports this learning.

Time to teach me

“I need clear and consistent expectations and limits around my behaviour.”

You need to keep expectations clear and simple and in keeping with your child's age and ability. The number of expectations you have will depend on your child's ability to understand and remember. With your young child try to focus on two or three at any one time. Use positive language to reinforce these expectations e.g., *“We use gentle hands”* instead of *“No hitting.”*

You can tell and show your child what you want them to do instead of what you don't want them to do. For example, you can say *“Please put your toys in the box, thank you”* and then show them what to do, rather than *“Don't leave your toys out.”* It also helps to praise your child for following routines and expectations. This makes it more likely that your child will follow the routines and rules in the future.





Being your child's role model

Babies and children learn by imitating. From the moment they are born, your child listens to what you say and watch what you do. By watching how you behave, your child will learn about how to react in similar situations. You are your child's role model. Your child will repeat what they've heard you say and they'll imitate what they've seen you do.

Children are not born knowing what acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is. Your child learns this as they grow and develop, and by watching how you behave; how you treat them and other people. Your child also picks up on your relationships with their other parent, even if you think you are doing a good job of hiding any conflict.

Your child learns to express and manage their emotions by watching how you and family members express and manage your emotions. You play an important role in showing your child how to express strong feelings. When things get stressful, you need to try and keep calm. You must remember your window of tolerance and take a deep breath to get some oxygen into your brain, and help your brain connect. This will encourage your child to do the same. Your child won't understand that shouting is not allowed if that is what they see you do.

Time to care

"Look after yourself so you are better able to look after me."

You are the most important part of your child's life. Your emotional well-being has a big effect on the emotional state of your child's brain. Finding ways to relax and manage your own stress can help. Getting a break, or sleeping well, may help you cope better with everything.

Remember, no-one is perfect, and nobody gets it right all the time. Looking after your young child can be hard. Most parents feel negative emotions from time to time. These feelings are typical and normal to have.

It is important to learn to manage your own feelings of anger and frustration, to enable you to enjoy being a parent. This will result in a safe, happy home for your child.

To try and look after yourself:

- Set aside time for yourself. Being a parent can feel harder when you are tired and stressed. If you get a break to relax, then you are more likely to be able to cope with everything. Take 10 minutes to listen to music, read a magazine or talk to a friend.



- Get together with other parents and their children. Your child will enjoy the company of another child and you will enjoy some adult conversation.
- Try not to spend time feeling guilty about the jobs that should be done when your child is asleep. Use some of this time to relax and do something enjoyable.
- Try and eat well. This can be difficult for busy parents. **NHS Healthy Eating** has lots of ideas for simple and quick recipes, as well as tips to stay fit and healthy.
- Try and include exercise in your routine.
- Get outdoors.
- Keep up with a hobby that you enjoy.

It is vitally important for you as a parent to feel safe in your own home and in your own relationship in order to be able to care for your child. If this is not the case for you then you can talk to a health professional, in confidence, about this.

The **Live Fear Free** helpline can also help: **0808 80 10 800** or visit www.gov.wales/live-fear-free.

Taking care of each other

The quality of the relationship between parents is also very important, regardless of whether you are parenting together or apart. Healthy communication between you and your partner can reduce stress in the family.

Taking care of your child

Keeping up to date with immunisations, exercise and having a healthy balanced diet are all key to good physical development. From birth, breast milk gives your baby the best start. Feeding your baby is a great time for brain-building; make eye contact, sing, smile and have a cuddle.

As your baby grows, you need to offer them a healthy diet. This helps their brain grow.

Please talk to your Health Visitor or GP if you have queries about immunisations, vitamins or healthy eating.



If things get too much

It is helpful if you get to know your own body's signals for when feelings of stress are building up. Getting angry or yelling can turn things into a major battle. When you shout at your child it triggers cortisol, a stress hormone. This makes it much harder for them to listen and learn.

Learning to manage your feelings will be beneficial to your health and your relationship with your child. Do not smack or physically punish your child. This is illegal in Wales.

If you feel stress getting the better of you, it may help to:

- **Stop and count to 10 or even sing before you act** – Counting and singing engages a different part of the brain. It also diffuses tension so you can reset your emotions.
- **Try to breathe out the tension** – Try to breathe out for longer than you breathe in.
- **Take some time out** – Make sure your child is safe and leave the room briefly, phone a friend, play favourite music. Ask a friend or family member to care for your baby or child for a while, to have time to yourself. If this isn't possible, it's important to find a way that works for you and keeps you and your child safe.
- **Work it off** – Exercise can help you deal with stress and big emotions. You could put your child in their pushchair and go for a walk to let off steam.

- **Ask yourself** – “*Is it worth getting angry about?*” Is it about what your child has done or is it about you feeling stressed.
- **Think it through** – Are there some things that cause higher levels of stress than others? Are there ways of avoiding those situations?
- **Try not to bottle things up** – It may help to talk it over with a friend or family or talk to other parents. It can be helpful to share experiences and tips.

By learning to recognise and manage your own feelings and emotions, it may mean that you can calm situations before they start to escalate. Keeping calm in stressful situations, and managing your own feelings in the moment, means that you can calm your child.

If you still feel angry, anxious or stressed, in spite of everything you have tried, it may be worth getting some advice. It may help talking it through with a counsellor or getting some advice on managing your anger. Speak with your GP about this or talk to your local **Family Information Service**.

You may find these helplines useful:

Community Advice and Listening Line (C.A.L.L.) – **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 Cymru – call on **116 123**. You can get in touch about anything that's troubling you, no matter how large or small the issue.



6. Responding to unwanted behaviours

As well as using Positive Parenting approaches to help support your child's development, behaviour and wellbeing on a day-to-day basis, this approach can also be used when responding to tricky behaviours 'in the moment'.

One way of doing this is to use **The 7 C's** below:

- 1. Consider:** How can I be with my child during this tricky parenting moment?
- 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. You may find some of the suggested strategies on the previous page helpful.
- 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.

- 4. Curiosity:** Be curious about some of the underlying emotions or unmet needs that would explain why your child is behaving in this way. Are any of the **HALT (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired)** needs unmet? Could this be the cause of their behaviour?
- 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.
- 6. Correction:** This is where you will 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."*
- 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'.



Discipline vs Punishment

Using punishment to respond to your 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 your child's development and could impact negatively on your 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 your child's self-esteem and wellbeing, which is a win-win situation for both you and your child.

Do not smack or physically punish your child. This is illegal in Wales.

7. Using the 7 C's during tricky parenting moments

There are moments in your busy lives that you can plan ahead for, to try and avoid unwanted behaviours from occurring. You need to stay curious and try your best to work out what is going on in your child's mind during these times. You can also use the 7 C's if you need to respond to behaviours in the moment. Below are some examples of some common tricky times.

Shopping

“Being in a busy shop with loud noises, new people, lots of colours and smells might be a bit overwhelming for me. I might want to touch things that look nice, and I feel frustrated when I'm not allowed. I might want to walk or run around, which isn't safe, but I don't yet understand.”

What might be going on in your child's mind:

- There is lots of waiting around, their immature brain is not designed for waiting.
- The adult is not as available to play and interact like other times.
- The shop can be unfamiliar, noisy, have bright lights, be too warm, have new sounds and smells and unknown people. It's a lot for the senses to take in and process.
- They are sitting in a trolley or pushchair and unable to move about.
- There are lots of exciting things that they aren't allowed to touch.

You can plan ahead by:

- Asking your child to help prepare a shopping list. They can draw pictures, cut out catalogue pictures or make marks on the paper.
- Trying not to go close to meal or nap times or when you're in a hurry; remember **HALT** (see section 4).
- Packing a drink and healthy snack and bringing along a small toy or book to interest your baby or toddler.



- Depending on your child's age and stage of development, there's lots to keep your child interested, e.g., you can sing songs, play eye spy, look out for things of a certain colour, pick up a free brochure on the way in to the shop to look at or look out for items in the brochure.
- Avoiding shopping at busy times, to avoid waiting in queues.
- Thinking about which shop and which aisles you want to go down, to avoid temptation.

You can respond by:

- Being calm. The shop can be a loud place with unexpected movements and new people. Try to stay calm and within your window of tolerance if things get stressful. Counting to ten and taking a few deep breaths might help.
- Being curious and making a connection. *“I wonder if you are feeling a bit frustrated because you are sitting in the seat and not walking right now.”*
- Offering correction if needed. Be clear that you aren't buying things that are not on the list *“I understand that you'd like that toy, but it's not on the list today.”* Stick to the boundary that you have set and move on.
- Connecting (again). *“Let's look out for red things in the shop or sing our song together.”*
- Trying to think about what triggered the problem. You might be able to avoid that situation next time.
- It can be stressful if your child has a tantrum whilst out shopping. Don't worry if there are people watching. Stay calm and forget about them. Most people will be watching with sympathy as they've probably been through it too.

Biting

“When I am a young baby, I love to explore new things by putting them in my mouth. As I get older and I grow teeth, putting things in my mouth starts to be called biting. I don’t yet understand that it hurts other people.”

What might be going on in your child’s mind:

- teething;
- exploring things and people – babies and toddlers use their mouths to explore;
- frustrated, excited or angry and don’t have the words to express themselves;
- seeking connection from an adult;
- over-tired;
- responding to another child’s aggressive behaviour;
- copying others;
- worried or anxious about a change in their life like a new baby or house move; or
- interested in the reaction they get and don’t understand it causes pain.

You can plan ahead by:

- Having lots of safe objects for biting, e.g., teething rings or crunchy snacks (like plain crackers, carrot sticks or apple pieces).
- Trying to anticipate trouble and moving your child before they bite.
- Giving your child some simple choices, for example *“red top or blue top?”*, *“apple or banana?”* If you give your child some choices they will feel a sense of control. This may help reduce biting.
- Helping your child express their feelings. Name your child’s feelings when you observe them, e.g., *“You feel cross because you want to go on the bike. It’s Carys’s turn now, then you can have a go. Do you want to play with the train or the dolls, while you are waiting?”*

- Making time for active play every day. Go to the park, play in the garden or put some music on and dance.
- Trying to avoid stressful activities where there will be lots of other children on days when your child is very tired.

You can respond by:

- Being calm. Don’t bite your toddler back. This will hurt your child and give them the wrong message that this behaviour is OK.
- Being curious and making a connection. *“I wonder if you might have bitten Thomas because you are feeling a bit frustrated that you don’t have the car.”*
- Offering them something else to bite, e.g., a teething toy.
- Offering correction. Calmly let your child know it’s not OK to bite people.
- Connecting (again). *“Let’s play with the trains together now.”*



Bedtime

“Feeling tired is a very strange feeling that I can’t control. I might want you to stay with me because you make me feel safe. When I am tired, I might display big emotions and need your help.”

When you go to bed feeling lonely, sad or out of control, you experience elevated levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) the next day. If this is what it is like for you, what might it be like for your child whose brain has not yet developed in the way yours has, to help you make sense of these feelings?

It’s no coincidence that children are better able to happily fall asleep on their own (and stay asleep at night) when the thinking, planning part of their brain is better developed. This part of the brain also helps you think about what to do with the raw emotions you feel.

“When I wake in the night it feels strange because things seem different than when I fell asleep. I might need you to help me feel safe again so I can go back to sleep.”

No matter what your age, everyone sleeps in cycles which take you through stages of light, medium and deep sleep and back again. Adults have sleep cycles lasting around 90 minutes (4-6 cycles per night). Children’s sleep cycles are shorter; babies have a sleep cycle that is around half as long as an adult’s, for instance, and have around 14 cycles per night.

At the end of a sleep cycle, one of two things can happen for adults and for babies/children:

- Adults begin another sleep cycle straight away.

- Adults wake at the end of a sleep cycle. Sometimes, you have no idea why you have woken during the night. The same is often true of children.

As an adult you have the ability to reason, meet your own need (e.g., getting a snack, or using the toilet) and go back to sleep. Your child may not; they might need your help to meet a need (which they often can’t pinpoint) and fall back to sleep. This helps you understand why your child might (understandably) wake during the night. Whilst this can be stressful and tiring it is often to be expected given their age and stage of development.

What might be going on in your child’s mind:

- They like to be close to you and bedtime can be lonely.
- They don’t yet have a well-developed sense of time *“I’ll see my mum/dad in the morning.”*
- They do not yet have the ability to reason and understand explanations for what they see and hear *“that shadowy bump looks might look like a monster but I know it’s just a pile of clothes.”*
- They are feeling tired and aren’t sure how to understand uncomfortable and strange feelings.
- Are they hungry? If your child is over a year old it may help to give them some (sugar-free) cereal and milk before bed.
- They haven’t linked their sleep cycles. Is there something that might have roused them from sleep and prevented this?
- Are they waking up because of bad dreams? Try to find out if something is bothering them during the daytime, when it is safe to talk. Your child may feel safer and happier at night when their daytime problems have been addressed.
- Do they feel uncomfortable in the dark? Try leaving a nightlight on in their room or leave a landing light on. Do they have a safe, comforting toy or item to make them feel safe?
- Have they had enough cues and winding down to tell them it’s time to sleep?



- Has their level of melatonin (the sleep hormone that naturally increases in your body throughout the day, making you feel ready for sleep) reached a high enough level?
- Are the conditions they fell asleep to the same as when they wake during the night?

You can plan ahead by:

- Thinking about timing. If your child takes a long time to fall asleep you might be putting them to bed too early. If they get too wound up to sleep you might be putting them to bed too late.
- Having a consistent bedtime routine. Do the same thing every night at the same time. Find the routine that works for your family.
- Letting your child know bedtime is coming up. *“When we have finished this game it will be time to get ready for bed.”*
- Avoiding too much stimulation before bed. Try to avoid loud or boisterous play or screen-based activity like TV, computers, tablets or other handheld devices. The blue light from TVs and tablets can affect some children more than others. Think about reducing brightness on devices or using a blue light filter. You might also like to think about what they have eaten and how that might affect on sleep.
- Checking your child has done everything they need to avoid them calling out during the night. Have they had a drink? Been to the toilet? Got their favourite teddy?
- Giving them a safe thing to take to bed like a teddy, or blanket. Leave a night light on or leave the door ajar. Then tuck your child in and say goodnight.
- Thinking about what you can do to promote the sleep hormones that encourage sleep. Making sure your child experiences sunlight early in the morning (drawing curtains when they wake, getting outside early) and dimming lights in the evening can both be helpful. It can be helpful to use warm or red lighting in bedrooms.

- If your child keeps getting out of bed, think about if there is anything else they may need (this might be you). Return your child gently and calmly to their bed. Do this as many times as it takes until your child stays in bed. It can help to give them a safe thing to take to bed, like a teddy, or blanket or something that reminds them of you. It can be helpful for them to have access to this object during the day, particularly when you cuddle or spend nice times together, so that they associate the object with you and the comfort you bring. We call this a transition object, because it is something that allows them to hold you in mind when you are not there.

You can respond by:

- Being calm. At the end of the day, you can feel tired yourselves and be thinking of the jobs you need to do when your child is asleep. Try and stay calm so that your child feels calm too, which will help them relax ready for bed.
- Being curious and making a connection. *“I wonder if you’re feeling a bit sad because you are tired and that’s making you cry. Take a deep breath.”*
- Offering correction. *“It is sleepy time now, lie down and close your eyes.”*
- Connecting (again). *“I love you, goodnight. I am just by here for you.”*



Mealtimes

“Sitting and eating isn’t always fun for me. I might not like the tastes and the textures of all foods, and I might find it tricky to sit still. I want to explore.”

It isn't always easy to get the family to sit down to enjoy a meal together. But it is worth the effort. Sharing family meals gives everyone a chance to catch up and enjoy each other's company. Watching you and other family members eat a range of foods can encourage your child to try new foods.

What might be going on in your child's mind:

- Their tastes are developing.
- It's tricky to sit still for periods of time, they would rather be on the move.
- Food can be unpredictable, apples can sometimes be sweet and sometimes sharp.
- The feel of foods doesn't appeal to your child.
- Your child would rather play with food than eat it.
- Your child is developing their skills and is frustrated that they can't feed themselves.
- Your child does not like getting messy or certain textures.

You can plan ahead by:

- Eating with your child and sharing the time together.
- Allowing your child to decide how much to eat. Toddlers have small stomachs and can't eat much food at one time. Give them small portions and praise them for trying, even if they only manage a little. Offer healthy snacks between meals.
- Offering your child a few different things on their plate to encourage them to eat.
- Trying to avoid using food as a reward. Offer a variety of foods that include healthy portions.
- It helps to have meal times at a similar time every day. Try to have meals before your child gets too hungry or tired to eat.
- Remembering that your child may not eat the same amount each time. Just like you, some days your child will be hungry and other times they will be less hungry.
- Involving your child in preparing the meal. It's enjoyable for your child to do this with you and it may help them to try new foods.
- Letting your child feed themselves. Offer finger foods (cut food into strips or fingers) and let your child use their hands rather than a spoon or fork. In the early days of learning to eat, your child will find this easier to manage.
- Letting your older child serve themselves and give them limited choices. *“Do you want broccoli or green beans?”*
- Giving them the same food in a different way. Your child may refuse cooked carrots but enjoy raw carrots cut into sticks.
- Being positive and calm and praising them when trying new foods. Ignore the fussing as much as you can. If you give your child lots of attention when they are fussy or refusing food, it may encourage them to keep behaving that way.
- Avoiding distractions and making mealtimes a time together. Try to switch off the TV, and away from their toys or other distractions.



- Putting a plastic mat under the highchair or having a cloth at the ready. Spills happen, it is normal for your child to be messy when they are learning to feed themselves.
- Children love to play with their food and this is one of the ways they learn. Letting your child play with their food, even if they make a mess, helps them to be better and healthier eaters when they're older.

You can respond by:

- Being calm. It can be very frustrating when your child refuses to eat certain foods or refuses to eat at all, especially when you have taken time to make it. It's perfectly normal for toddlers to do this. Keep calm so they feel calm and relaxed about mealtimes.

- Being curious and making a connection. *"It looks like you might be enjoying that pasta from the smile on your face. I wonder if the sauce is a bit hot/messy/tricky for you to get in your mouth today."*
- Connecting (again). *"Let me help you with that and I'll eat mine next to you."*



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** 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** will be able to tell you what's on in your area.

Parenting. Give it time provides positive parenting practical information, advice and support for parents and caregivers with responsibility for raising children up to the age of 18.

For positive parenting tips and expert advice,
visit: gov.wales/giveittime

