



TIP SHEET

Child Behaviour Problems



Being a parent can be a very rewarding experience. It can also be a very demanding, exhausting and frustrating role. The challenge for parents is raising healthy, well-adapted and well-adjusted children. However, for many of us, we often take on this role with little or no preparation or training. Many of us complain that there were no guidebooks or instructions! Instead, most of our learning is done through trial and error!

Often parents are seeking to find the “right way” to raise their children. However, there is no single correct approach, as there are many different views, and each of us have different values that we hope to inspire in our children.



Causes of Child Behaviour Problems¹

Commonly asked questions by parents is: Why do children act the way they do? And how can children from the same family be so very different? To understand the answers to these questions there are a number of factors that need to be considered:

- **Genetic Factors:** Children inherit certain genes from their parents, which serve to influence some of their behavioural and emotional characteristics. Children also inherit different temperament characteristics. For example, some children are more active than other children, always on the go and looking for adventure, where as others more shy and inhibited, or sensitive and difficult to settle.

- **Environmental Factors:** Children learn by observing others and by the environment in which they are raised. Understanding how children learn by their environment is useful in identifying how to deal with problems.

Example's:

- **Accidental Rewards:** Often there are accidental rewards or hidden pay-offs for children's naughty behaviour. This

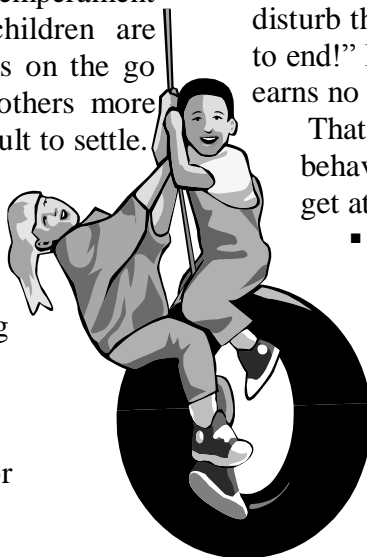
may involve attention (such as eye contact, talking, a wink or a smile) material rewards (e.g. a new toy or game), activities (parent distracting child with a game), or food rewards (such as biscuits, lollies etc). For example, if you accidentally laugh when your child says something rude, the extra positive attention may increase the likelihood of them doing this again.

- **Escalation Traps:** Children often learn that if they keep asking for something with increasing volume and escalating misbehaviour, they are more likely to get what they want. For example, a child may ask for a chocolate while at a shopping centre. You may say “No” a number of times. However, if your child persists and starts screaming and crying, you may fall into the trap and give in to them. The danger of this approach is that your child is rewarded for becoming more demanding and learns that if they persist and escalate eventually mum and dad will give in.

- **Ignoring Desirable Behaviour:** Many children find that there is little or no pay-off for good behaviour. In fact, mum or dad doesn't even give them any attention when they are behaving well. Parents often think, “I won't go in to their room and disturb them, they are being so quiet I don't want it to end!” However, a basic fact is that behaviour that earns no attention is less likely to regularly occur.

That is, if the child is ignored when they behave well, they may learn that the only way to get attention is to misbehave!

- **Modelling:** Children learn by watching others, thus if mum or dad gets angry and yells or screams, the child may learn that it is ok to scream when they have a problem too. Similarly, if parents use “smacks” often for misbehaviour, the child is more likely to hit a lot as well.



¹ Source: Sanders, Markie-Dadds & Turner, 2002



- *Ineffective Punishment:* For example, punishment threatened but not carried out or inconsistent punishment (e.g. rules and instructions are not consistency applied from day to day, or between parent to parent). Inconsistency makes it difficult for children to learn what is expected of them.
- *Parents Beliefs and Expectations:* These may range from thoughts surrounding our child's behaviour such as "It's just a phase", which may prevent us from dealing with the behaviour straight away, to taking blame and feeling that it's all your fault the child is they way they are. This makes it even harder to manage problem behaviour and remain consistent in our approach.
- *Other factors:* These include the state of the parents' relationship, stresses, lack of support, presence of depression, anxiety or other emotional difficulties experiences by a parent, children's peer group, school, TV and so forth.

- ✓ Don't take away stars for misbehaviour on their behaviour chart.
- ✓ Ignore undesirable behaviour (that means no eye contact, talking, smiling etc).
- ✓ State the behaviour you want you child to display in simple, clear terms (in the positive). For example, "Sarah please use your nice voice to ask for a piece of cake" (not "Sarah don't use a whining voice").
- ✓ Back up your instructions with logical consequences. That is, if you child does not follow a rule or instruction, then choose a consequence that fits the situation (i.e. turn the TV off for 10 minutes or remove the toy). This strategy works best if consequences are brief (i.e. no longer than 30 minutes).
- ✓ Give your child plenty of affection (e.g. holding, cuddling, tickling, kissing, or massaging).
- ✓ Set a good example for your child. Model the behaviour you would like to see them use in life.



What Are Some Idea We Can Do to Manage and or Prevent These Problems?

- ✓ Work as a team with your partner and be consistent in your parenting and rules.
- ✓ Develop set routines for your child.
- ✓ Set clear specific house rules and have a family discussion about the new rules.
- ✓ Have a break from your children now and again- this is normal and healthy for both of you!
- ✓ Spend quality time with your child. Research tends to suggest that frequent, short periods of quality time (i.e. even 1-2 minutes) are beneficial for your child.
- ✓ Praise and reward your child whenever you see them engaging in behaviour that you like (no matter how big or small).
- ✓ Start a behaviour chart for a particular behaviour and keep it on the fridge. Then the child can receive a star each time they do the behaviour correctly. Negotiate with your child a few ideas for rewards for when their chart is full (these rewards do not have to be big or expensive. Quality time is a great reward too!).

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact your GP, Local Child Health Centre or the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of Children's Behaviour Problems.

