

# Parenting Positively



## PARENTING SKILLS

For parents of children  
between 6 and 12



Family Support Agency



**Barnardos**  
No child gets left behind

This booklet is one in a series on **Parenting Positively**. Parenting is a very rewarding job but one which can be difficult at times, especially when parents are faced with challenging situations. The aim of this series is to provide information and guidance to parents of children between the ages of 6 and 12 to help create a positive, loving and supportive relationship between you and your child.

The series covers general parenting skills as well as complex life issues such as bullying, bereavement, separation and domestic abuse. There are booklets for parents outlining children's understanding of a particular issue and how you can support them. There are also booklets for parents to read with their children, which may help your child to better understand what is happening and help you as a parent to answer any questions he or she might have.

Each booklet also gives further resources that you can follow up for more information and help on the issue covered.

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This series was produced by the Family Support Agency and Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

The Family Support Agency provides support to families through locally based Family Resource Centres, through supporting organisations providing Marriage, Relationship, Child and Bereavement Counselling Services and by directly providing Family Mediation through its 16 family mediation centres to couples going through a separation or divorce. It carries out research, provides information and advises the Minister on family related matters. The Family Support Agency was established as a statutory agency in 2003.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

Compiled by Val Mullally.

# Introduction

Being a parent is probably the most important job we can do in our lives. To parent positively we need to understand what it takes to do the job well. The more we understand about a child's development and needs, the more we can be aware of what it takes to create healthy environments for children to thrive.

Throughout human history, people have lived in small, close-knit communities, but today not all parents have relatives nearby to support them and give guidance in child raising. In some ways we intuitively know how to make good and wise decisions about parenting, but sometimes the stresses and mixed messages of the world can make it difficult. Therefore, we need to take every opportunity to learn more about what it takes to parent effectively.

## What does parenting positively mean?

Most parents love their children, but sadly some children do not experience feeling loved. Parenting positively is about understanding each child as a unique individual and knowing how to communicate your love effectively. It is about listening, understanding, praising, encouraging and being a good role model for your child.

As positive parents, we need to be thinking not only of the immediate situation, but also to be asking ourselves such questions as:

- How can I respond to this situation in a way that will help my child to grow?
- What are the personal values I hope my child will choose?
- Is my behaviour demonstrating these values to my child?
- Will my actions help my child to grow to be a kind, caring, responsible adult?
- Am I creating a family atmosphere where my child feels loved?

## What are the benefits of parenting positively?

Parenting positively creates happier homes where children are naturally more co-operative. Children who grow up feeling secure and loved have lower stress levels, better overall health and are likely to do better at school.

## It seems that different parents do things differently

Parents often express amazement at how two children from the same family, within the same home are so different. In the same way, parents vary in their own temperaments, their life experiences and their values on which they base how they parent their children.

Most of us start from the basis of the parenting style we experienced from our own parents. We then either parent in a similar style or we react against that style and do the opposite. Be conscious of the reasons that you parent the way that you do. Ask yourself if the parenting methods that you use are positive and helpful.

## What is meant by a 'parenting style'?

Parenting style means the type of behaviour that you use when interacting with your child.

Many people are now trying to develop an approach to parenting that combines the most helpful aspects of these different approaches.

### **Autocratic (or authoritarian) parenting**

Autocratic (or authoritarian) parenting is based on the belief that the parent is always right and children must obey. Although this is helpful in some ways, as children need limits to keep them safe, children often feel frustrated and even unhappy because they feel as though what they think or feel doesn't count.

### **Permissive parenting**

Permissive parenting is where parents want their children to feel happy and to grow up with minds of their own, so they let the children do what they want. However, children need limits and often feel unsafe when there are no clear boundaries or consequences to their behaviour. If adults don't take responsibility, children can feel insecure and can grow up to think only of themselves.

### **Democratic parenting**

Democratic parenting aims to involve children in decisions about their lives, but the parent takes a lead role and encourages appropriate behaviour without using excessive control or allowing children to do whatever they want.

## Is there a 'right' way to parent?

There is no *one* way to parent. Every child and every family is unique, with its own history and its own way of doing things.

Think about *how* you want to parent to help your child to grow up to be all that he or she has the potential to be. This isn't about thinking about what career your child might follow, but about what sort of person he or she might be and what sort of values he or she will have.

Make a list of things at home that really matter to you, such as kindness, communication, honesty, fun. Then choose the three that are most important to you. When you focus on the outcomes you want to achieve, you will create a suitable environment in which your child can thrive.

## How can I be a positive parent?

Children need to know that they matter to you, just for who they are. Although you want your child to do well, he or she needs to know that your love is unconditional – that nothing would ever end this love and that you always want to keep the connection between you.

Help your child to do things for him or herself and to gain confidence. Listen to your child and protect him or her – both physically and emotionally.

Part of protecting children is making sure that when you leave them in the care of someone else they are safe. Whenever you are arranging any form of child minding, make sure that this person (or childcare centre) will take care of your child's needs – not only physically but emotionally too.

In many ways, children live in a different world to the one we grew up in, with mobile phones, the internet, playstations and many other gadgets that can make life more exciting, but also more dangerous. Children do not have the life experience to understand the dangers that may face them. You, as a parent, need to know how to keep your child safe. A very helpful guide is the

booklet, 'Parents, who listen, protect' (See Sources of Further Information at the back of this booklet).

### Think about what your child needs:

- Does your child know you love him or her, no matter what?
- Do you discuss fair rules and keep these consistent, so that your child feels safe?

For example you might say, 'You can choose to watch this television programme tonight or you can choose to keep your television hours for later this week.' If your child chooses to watch the programme now, he or she can not also have the extra hours later in the week. Your child needs to experience the consequences of the decision he or she makes.

- Do you acknowledge your child's feelings, viewpoints and experiences (as well as your own)?
- Do you allow your child to experience reasonable consequences for his or her actions (providing his or her physical and emotional safety is never put in danger)?

## How do I help my child have self belief?

Believing in yourself is often termed 'self esteem'. Self esteem is based on three main components:

1. Self confidence
2. A sense of belonging (connectedness)
3. A sense of self worth (value)

### How do I help my child to develop self confidence?

Self confidence comes from being competent, from knowing '*I can do it!*'. Children over the age of six have generally grasped the basic life skills, such as feeding, dressing and talking. Now they are refining their social skills, learning sports, crafts or other activities, and improving their knowledge.

Children need to feel able to cope with the challenges of everyday life so give your child help, guidance and support when it is needed, without taking over. When helping your child to learn new skills, break the task into 'doable' pieces and give plenty of encouragement.

For example, if your child needs to phone a company as part of a school project, give the necessary help. You might need to help your child to find the number by showing how the names are listed alphabetically. You might also discuss with your child how he or she will start the conversation, what questions will be asked and how he or she will end the call. Perhaps you could encourage your child to write out the questions and have pen and paper ready to write down any answers. If your child is nervous, you might even role play the call beforehand. However, at the end of the call, you want your child to have the inner satisfaction of saying *'I did it!'*

The more competent children are in carrying out tasks independently and mastering new skills, the greater their level of self confidence will be.

### How do I help my child to feel that he or she 'belongs'?

Children need a strong sense of being of value for who they are as unique, lovable individuals and not just for what they do. They need to know with who and where they belong.

- First and foremost, make sure that your child has a sense of belonging to the family. Even if this family is living under more than one roof, your child needs to know *'these are the people who matter to me and who care about me.'* If you and the other parent live in separate homes it is important never to criticise one another to your child and not to question him or her about family life in the other home, unless there is genuine concern for the child's safety. If you have a new partner, wait until that relationship is well established before introducing this person to your child. Make sure that you still have special time for your child – just the two of you.
- Traditional celebration times such as birthdays are part of feeling *'I belong'*. Most importantly, spend time together and share experiences. Family time together is important but children also need one-on-one time with their parents (ideally both with dad and with mum or another significant person). Grandparents are often important people in children's lives because they take time to listen to children's stories and to tell children the stories of their own lives. This is all an important part of feeling connected to family.



- There is an African saying '*It takes a village to raise a child.*' Many of us do not have the privilege of living in closely-knit communities any more, but we can create communities. Consider doing things with other families who have similar values and interests to you. Children will enjoy activities with their peers such as Scouts, Girl Guides, sports and activities.
- We also have a sense of connection with the world at large – not only by being aware of it but by responding to it. Perhaps as a family you could create opportunities to connect to the needs in the world beyond. A TV programme about some concern could lead to helping in some practical way or collecting for a cause.

Remember, as a parent you need to know where your child is and who he or she is with.

### How do I help my child have a sense of self worth?

We have a sense of self worth not only by being told that we are valued, but also by having something to contribute. Children need to be encouraged to practically help in the home, being shown and guided through tasks until they are competent, and given acknowledgement for their contribution.

For example, it is more affirming for children when you positively comment on what you notice, rather than using general expressions like '*You're brilliant!*' Your child will feel happy that his or her efforts have been noticed when you say something like, '*I see you have washed the dishes and put them back in the cupboard. That's really helpful of you.*'

## What information is helpful to keep on track with positive parenting?

Knowing more about how children are at different stages of their development helps you to understand what your child is going through, what he or she can cope with, where support is needed and what exciting new possibilities there are. Understanding more about your child's development at this stage will guide you to make helpful decisions.

## What is important to know about 6 to 12 year olds?

As children get older, signs of development are less obvious than in earlier years but equally as important.

Every child will grow at his or her own pace and reach different stages at different times, but there are some guidelines available to assist you as a parent with your unique child.

While each of a child's areas of development progress alongside one another, so that the whole child is developing, it helps to consider the different aspects:

### Physical development

By the age of six, children are coordinating and 'fine tuning' both small and large muscle movements. For instance, they are learning to run, dribble a ball and weave in and out of obstacles at the same time. Their coordination is improving significantly and they can now cope well with tasks like writing, drawing patterns, sewing and woodwork.

By about ten years old, some children are already beginning to show signs of puberty. It is really important that you know how to prepare and support

your child during this critical period. If you are comfortable talking about body changes, your child is far more likely to come to you with any questions he or she has regarding sexuality.

### Cognitive development

From the age of six upwards, children can compare and contrast, sort, explain and use more complex questioning, and they become literate. They can reason, problem solve and understand concepts they have not directly experienced (for example, they can talk about space or historical events). Their understanding of mathematical concepts (such as big/bigger/biggest) is also usually established firmly by this stage.

### Language development

Children are now usually able to communicate effectively, not only about the concrete world around them but also about what they think, feel, imagine and dream. For children to express themselves it is important to have parents who take an interest in them and who truly listen to what they want to share.

### Emotional development


Children can now recognise their own feelings as inner signals of how they are experiencing life. They are also aware of other people's feelings. Ideally, children are able to effectively control their emotions. In other words, in usual situations they can calm themselves down when upset, angry or excited.

### Social development

Children are usually secure in their relationship with their own family by this age and now start building stronger friendships with peers (usually of the same gender).

This is a natural part of your child's growing up. Encourage your child to bring friends home so you can get to know them.

Children become more independent from the family and move into another social arena as they attend school and activities outside the home. They also become more aware of the wider community in which they live. Socially and emotionally, they are gaining a greater sense of who they are as unique individuals, which is vital to the development of a healthy self esteem.



You have an important role in supporting your child's developing abilities while setting clear and reasonable limits for him or her to safely enjoy other relationships. Your child still needs you to set the boundaries. Be careful not to expect your child to reason and make social judgements that an adult would.

## How can I best support my child's development, and what activities will help?

Children need appropriate challenges and activities balanced with quiet time to just 'chill out' at home, play time, relaxation and opportunity to use their imaginations.

Children go through natural learning stages. Trying to push children to do things before they are naturally ready will only cause damage to their self esteem. Although they need activities that will challenge them, if an activity is too hard or if they do not get enough practical support, children will become discouraged and give up.

When children are ready to start new skills, they will show a keen interest, asking about it and trying to do it for themselves. For example, when children are ready to read, they start asking what words mean, pretending to read and showing an interest in books and in signs.

You can support your child's development by:

- Spending time reading together, even when your child is able to read well.
- Taking your child to the library regularly to choose the books he or she is interested in.
- Playing cards and board games together. These develop thinking and social skills.
- Sharing creative activities, like woodwork, gardening, sewing, arts and crafts. Try to have art materials like paper, interesting old recycling items such as cardboard boxes and buttons and crayons available.
- Creating plenty of opportunity for physical exercise, team games and outdoor activities.
- Providing puppets, dressing-up clothes and other props. Children love to create their own plays.
- Providing traditional toys like skipping ropes, balls, dolls, toy cars and construction toys. These are often far more suitable for encouraging a child's development than many of the technological toys advertised so heavily.
- Limiting computer and television time. Encourage activities that develop social, emotional and physical skills.

- Giving plenty of time for free play. Children need unstructured time where they can use their imaginations to create their own games.
- Noticing when he or she learns new skills, not only with your words but with your eye contact, interest and enthusiasm.

Have fun with your child, take time to play with him or her, to share activities and just enjoy being together. Children need time with their parents, especially through play and relaxing activities in which children actively take part, to feel calm and connected. Try to spend twenty minutes a day playing with your child when you get home from work and see the benefits.

## How do I discipline my child?

First, ask yourself, *'Is my response to my child's behaviour helping to develop his or her full potential?'*

Old-fashioned punishment caused children to respond out of fear, but we now know that we are not at our best when we are anxious or fearful. When children feel safe they behave better and learn better.

What we also now know is that the human brain is wired for connection. Children need to feel emotionally close to their parents and they *want* you to be pleased with them. So the more you can discipline in a way that keeps the communication lines open, the more your child is likely to respond (See Sources of Further Information for further help).

All children need to feel connected to their parents, but at the same time they are trying to find out who they are as unique individuals and how they fit into the bigger picture outside the home. Children need limits to keep them physically and emotionally safe, but it's *how* we do it that makes the difference.

## What do I do when my child's behaviour is not okay?

First of all, **HALT** and ask yourself, *'What is my child's behaviour trying to tell me?'*

**H** – Is my child Hungry or is there some other problem with his or her diet?

Is my child thirsty?

Has my child had too much sugar or too many colourants or preservatives?

Sugar, colourants and preservatives often make children overactive and can cause them to act aggressively. Beware of hidden sugars – even some breakfast cereals have very high levels of sugar. The more natural a child's diet is, the healthier he or she is likely to be, both physically and emotionally. So ensure that your child has plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

## A – Is my child Angry, Agitated or Anxious?

Anger is always a signal that a person needs change. Try to imagine each situation from your child's perspective. Sometimes you will still keep on the same course of action, but you can show your child that you understand how he or she feels. Children may also experience anger when they feel loss. (See the booklet in this series on Coping with Death.)

If your child is Anxious or Agitated, there might be an upset in relationships. Children spend a large part of the day away from home and sometimes their behaviour is trying to signal to us that they are not coping with the challenges they are facing. Learning to truly listen is one of the key skills offered in an effective parenting course. (See Sources of Further Information at the back of this booklet).

Your child's Agitation might also be physical. He or she might be over-hot, need exercise, etc. Aggressive behaviour may be a result of children not having had enough time and opportunity for play.

## L – Is my child Lonely or iLL?

Being alone is not the same as feeling lonely. We all need time to be alone, but if your child is feeling 'left out' on a regular, on-going basis this can seriously knock self esteem. Be aware that a child who is bullying or being bullied needs particular support. (See the booklet in this series on Coping with Bullying.)

When we are feeling ill, we all act in a less mature way. Deal with the symptoms and try to give the love and reassurance that your sick child needs.

## T – Is my child Tired?

Children at this age often start pushing the boundaries to try to stay up later, but they need a good night's sleep and a regular bedtime. Cranky behaviour is often a sign of a child being over tired, so make sure your child gets at least 9–10 hours sleep a night.

Children settle better if they have a regular bedtime routine. Even children who can read enjoy having a bedtime story read to them or taking turns reading chapters. What matters is that settling to bed is an enjoyable, relaxed time. Try to 'slow down' in the last hour before bed, so that your child begins to relax.

Pre-teens still need plenty of sleep. Keep to an agreed routine, expecting them to have homework finished and then to settle quietly in their own room. Televisions belong in communal living areas – not in bedrooms, which need to be calm and restful.

By taking time to stop ('HALT') and think about what your child's behaviour (and your own) is trying to tell you, you can sort out problems in a way that shows your child you value him or her and you value yourself.

## What about when I feel stressed out?

It is really important to remember that you need to look after your own needs too. When you feel as though you're likely to 'flip the lid', give yourself a break. Ask yourself if any part of 'HALT' fits for you too. Then take care of your needs for rest, food, reassurance or whatever it is. If you want to meet your child's needs, you have to first do the same for yourself. If you're running on empty, you won't have the energy you need to parent positively.

## What if my child's other parent thinks differently?

If your child's other parent doesn't always have the same values and ideals as you do, you need to discuss these and figure out how to come to a satisfactory compromise.

Even if you aren't living with your child's other parent, if you are both involved with their upbringing, it is a great help if you can agree on the values that you want to have in your homes.



You won't always handle discipline issues in the same way, but if you are agreed on the values you are trying to model, you will both be steering in the same direction.

## What if our family isn't 'traditional'?

In today's society, families come in all shapes and sizes. Not everyone in a family is necessarily a blood relative and not all families live together in the same house. What is most important is that children feel safe and loved by whoever is taking responsibility for their well being, whether father or mother, single parent, grandparents or step parents.

If you are parenting alone, whether as a father or a mother, try to include people in your life who will give your child the benefit of healthy relationships with both men and women.

Whatever your family situation, what matters most is that the needs of your child are met.

There are organisations that offer support should your family need it (See Sources of Further Information).

## How do I improve my parenting skills?

Combine your own experience with learning from other people, support groups, the internet, reading and parenting courses. The best teacher of all is your own child.

As children have different needs at different stages, it is helpful to take relevant parenting courses.

As you keep improving your knowledge, learn to trust your own inner wisdom and develop effective communication so your child can share with you how he or she is experiencing life.

## Can anyone parent positively?

Yes, and being a parent should be an enjoyable experience.

Whatever parenting style you choose, remember that it is important to spend time with your child and listen to what he or she has to say. Aim to provide limits to keep your child safe but also have fun together.

If you spend the time to understand and support your child's development and behaviour, he or she will grow up feeling loved and valued, and will go on to develop both confidence and a strong self esteem.

# Sources of Further Information

## Useful Publications

### **All About Children: Questions Parents Ask**

Tony Humphreys (2004) New Leaf, US

### **Family Well-Being: What Makes a Difference?**

(2003) (available from [www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie))

### **501 Ways to be a Good Parent**

Michele Elliot (1996) Hodder & Stoughton, London

### **Meeting Your Child's Deepest Emotional Needs**

#### **Managing Anger in the Home**

#### **Dealing with Discipline**

#### **Helping Your Child to Cope in the Real World**

Val Mullally (audio CDs on parenting see [www.pacerparenting.com](http://www.pacerparenting.com))

### **Parents, who listen, protect**

Health Service Executive (HSE) (2007)

### **Raising Boys**

Steve Biddulph (2003) HarperThorsons, London

### **Self Esteem – the key to your child's future**

Tony Humphreys (1996) Gill & Macmillan, Ireland

### **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families**

Stephen Covey (1999) Simon and Schuster, UK

## Useful Contacts

### **Barnardos**

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[www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie)

### **Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)**

29 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2

Tel: 01 676 7960 Email: [ispcc@ispcc.ie](mailto:ispcc@ispcc.ie) [www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)

### **Parentline**

Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Tel: 1890 927 277 Email: [info@parentline.ie](mailto:info@parentline.ie) [www.parentline.ie](http://www.parentline.ie)

### **The Office of the Ombudsman for Children**

Millennium House, 52-56 Great Strand Street, Dublin 1

Tel: 1890 654 654 Email: [oco@oco.ie](mailto:oco@oco.ie) [www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)

### **For information on Parenting Courses in your area contact**

#### **Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre**

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