

**T1434 The Parents' Survival Guide:
Helping Your Child Be Better Behaved
Sample Pages**

Table of contents

1. The Parents' Survival Guide: A unique contribution
2. The Parents' Survival Guide: Using the book and the free disk
3. The four different ways of working with parents
4. Children, discipline and behaviour: Notes for parents
5. What sort of child would you like?
6. How to make your child better behaved
7. Should we really bother with children's behaviour?
8. Arguments against thinking about behaviour
9. Is your child badly behaved?
10. Setting the rules
11. Are today's children different?
12. When changing behaviour, does the means justify the end?
13. Reward and bribes
14. Discipline, punishment and love
15. Motivating your child
16. Specific problems
17. Handling group peer pressure
18. Bullying
19. Protecting against bullying
20. Special behavioural problems

6. How to make your child better behaved

Making your child better behaved is easy. It just means permanently changing your child's behaviour. After all it's not good if you put a lot of time and energy into making your child better behaved today, only to find that your child is back to her or his old ways tomorrow.

Unless your son or daughter is preparing to become a saint the fact is that your child will do things that you don't like. Ideally you would like your child to stop doing these things, and do something else instead. So you want to change your child. Not necessarily change your child's entire personality - but just remove some of those really annoying habits.

There is nothing odd about this thought. The fact is that you change your child all the time - or at least you try to. If you tell your child to wash her or his hands before a meal you are trying to change behaviour. What you really want however is for your child to remember to do this before every meal so you never have to say it again. Ever.

Although it may seem a mammoth task when you are faced with difficult behaviour at home every day, it is really not so hard to improve the way your child behaves.

Here's how you do it.

Imagine that you could improve one aspect of your child's behaviour straight away. What would you wish for?

Would you wish for your child to be happy? Or perhaps less active? For your child to stop whining? For your child to be more open and friendly, and less shy? Or perhaps more polite? Or tidier? Or maybe you'd go for one or more of the behaviour patterns from the introduction - confident, full of self-esteem, that sort of thing.

Of course everyone will have his or her own wishes. For some there will be a wish for the child to be less active. If that's you, you may be surprised to find some parents wishing for their child to be more active. The father of the hyperactive child would give anything for his son or daughter to sit down and watch a video for an hour. The mother of the child that watches cartoons all day long on satellite TV would do anything for a child that got up and did things. That however is the beauty of children - they never do what you want.

So now, make a choice.

Choose just one way in which you would like to improve your child's behaviour, and then write it down below. So you might write, "I'd like my child to be happier", or "I want my son to be less noisy," or whatever.

Write in your answer here:

Now lets face the hard bit. How are you going to change your child's behaviour?

Let's think first of all about who is going to do the changing. You are obviously involved. But will you be bringing in other people? Your husband, wife or partner? Perhaps your child's older brother or sister. Maybe your own parents - especially relevant if they live with you or do a lot of baby-sitting. You don't have to involve anyone else at the moment, but just write down the people who you think could lend a hand in the scheme to change your child so that your child is less clumsy, more relaxed, or whatever you wrote down above.

Write down who else will have to share in your drive to change your child's behaviour:

In many families it is the mother and father who combine to try and change a child's behaviour. The key point is not who is involved, but that they are in agreement about what is going on. Imagine for example a situation in which the father says, "We really should try and stop him crashing around like this. He's breaking things, he's rude to me, and now he's not being invited to other people's houses because he's so over the top".

This may seem fair enough. But if the mother says, "You're fussing too much. He's just a boy. Boy's have lots of energy. I'd sooner have a boy with energy than a wimp for a son". Then you have a problem. You cannot have the father trying to make the child less boisterous, and the mother thinking there is nothing wrong at all. All that will happen is that instead of making the child better behaved you will simply make him increasingly confused and unhappy.

So your first job will be to ensure that you and the important people around you actually agree on what you are going to do.

Now, let's imagine for a moment that you have agreement with the people involved. It is now time to start changing your child's behaviour for the better. How are you going to do it?

Here are the typical ways in which people try to change a child's behaviour:

- Reward examples of good behaviour.
- Punish or ignore examples of bad behaviour.
- Be a good example to the child by showing only the good behaviour yourself.
- Set up situations in which the child can be encouraged to behave as you want.
- Talk with the child about the problem, gently encouraging the child to change his or her ways, and explain what you are trying to do.
- Use lots of humour and lots of love in everything you try to do.

The people who succeed in changing their children's behaviour usually use all of these methods. All the time.

What they do in fact is make the issue of changing their child's behaviour a big part of their daily life.

So it is very important to understand exactly what you are trying to do at this point. As you realise just what you are about to take on, you might say, "Oh she's not that bad..." or "I don't really want to change her..."

Of course, that's fair enough. Persuading your child to change should only happen when you really do want to make a change. It is vital to be sure that you really do want matters to change before starting on this project. If life is fine without any changes - that's all right.

However you may well decide you do want to go ahead. This might be because...

- Your child is wasting opportunities by not working hard.
- Your child is making other people unhappy by her or his behaviour.
- Your child's behaviour is causing you stress.
- Your child is getting into trouble because of his or her behaviour.
- Your child is being rude, or refusing to do what he or she is asked.
- You have dreams and ambitions for your child and you find your child's attitude is getting in the way.

So we'll assume you are going to continue, and you want to change your child's behaviour in some way for the better. The ways of doing this were given above.

They are so important, here they are again.

- Reward the good.
- Ignore or punish the bad.
- Be a good example.
- Set up the right situations.
- Discuss the issue with your child.
- Use humour and love.

Before doing anything else, undertake an experiment. Watch the way people deal with their children's behaviour. Every parent - including you - is trying to change their child's behaviour all the time. How are they doing it?

The answer is that they use one method more than any other: punishment. They shout, maybe they smack, they threaten... In second place comes rewarding the good - usually where the parent tells the child how well he or she has done. The other methods come a poor third.

This is part of the normal treatment of children in our society. (We don't like to think that this is true, but spare a moment next time you are in a supermarket to watch the way parents deal with their children. What you will probably find is that while the child is doing nothing wrong he or she is largely ignored. But then, when the child decides to take matters into his or her own hands ...)

Punishment is therefore the most common way of trying to change children's behaviour. Unfortunately, it is the least effective method. Of course punishment has a role to play in changing behaviour but it is generally only effective in the short term. In the long term its main effect is either nothing, or it is to leave a deep worry inside the child. Which of these two occurs depends on how often the punishment is given, what the punishment is, and what the relationship is with the parent the rest of the time.

Generally speaking ignoring bad behaviour is more effective than punishing it in the long run. However it can be very difficult to ignore a child's bad behaviour - especially if your child is creating havoc in the supermarket and you can overhear every passer by saying, "What that child needs is a damn good smack" or "Can't understand the mother letting her get away with it" or "That's pure selfishness letting the child do that - don't they know there are other people trying to shop too...."

How do we know that punishment doesn't work very well in the long term? Well there are hundreds and hundreds of learned studies conducted in institutions such as universities and prisons all over the world, and they all show the same results. But if you don't like academic studies, just think about it. Most of us use punishment as the way to change our children. But we know that we will have to punish them again soon. If punishment worked, surely they'd stop doing the naughty things and everything would be fine?

But this is not to say that punishment should never be used. Far from it. The problem is not that punishment never works, but rather that many people end up using punishment as the only method of changing behaviour. For punishment to be successful it needs to be combined with other forms of behaviour control. Generally the parent tries hard not to punish the child, and so does nothing in the face of bad behaviour until finally pushed to the very limit, at which point the punishment starts. From the child's point of view the parent is unpredictable and erratic - there is no telling what the parent will do next. From the parent's point of view the child is wilfully naughty.

All of this is very frustrating. But there is a simple solution close at hand. What does work in terms of changing behaviour (and it works very quickly) is the constant use of all the methods of changing behaviour: reward, being an example, develop the right situations, discussing and lots of love and humour.

And this is the challenge that faces all parents. You have written down one way that you want to change your child's behaviour. You have decided who you have to persuade in your household to join you in the venture.

Now you have to write down how you are going to do it. You should write down the behaviour that you want to change, and then give practical examples of what you intend to do. An example is given in each case to help you along.

The behaviour

(For example: refusing to tidy things away)

Rewards to be used

(For example: for the evening meal there will only be fruit for pudding. If however before the meal starts the child has tidied up her room and any other area of the house where she has been working or playing, then a much preferred pudding will be on offer. Coca-Cola, the child's favourite drink, will also be available at weekends for the evening meal if any mess has been tidied up without asking by mealtime.)

The good example

(For example: I am going to tidy up everything as I go - never leave anything out of place and I'll try and ensure my child sees me do it.)

The new situations

(For example: I will work with my daughter on rebuilding her Scalextric track. At the end we shall tidy up together.)

The discussions

(For example: "You know that I get upset about things not being tidy, don't you. Would you like to make me happy by tidying up a bit?)

The love and humour

(For example: lots of big hugs whenever things are put away, and extra big hugs when they are put away without being asked. Instead of saying "Will you put those things away at once," you say, "Now I think in about 8 seconds I am going to look at the table and I bet it will be clear and I will give Brian a really big hug, leap onto the table, dance for joy, climb up the outside of the house, crawl through the bedroom window...." [It all depends on your family sense of humour].)

There are a few further points to remember as you work to change your child's behaviour.

- a) You will need energy to do this. Don't start when you feel run down and tired.
- b) Don't be tempted to work on two fronts. Only try and change one type of behaviour at a time.
- c) Remember that a lot of behaviour is habit, or comes from the child's personality. If you find yourself thinking that your child is behaving in a certain way just to annoy you, you make it much harder for yourself as well as your child. It's easier if you remember that for most children behaviour just happens.
- d) The whole process works best if your child knows exactly what you are trying to do. Keep talking. Explain why you want a certain type of behaviour. And talk it through again.

