

# Parenting

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*School age*  
*– 6 to 12 years*

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## Typical behaviours and how you can help

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In this stage children are developing their sense of self. They are learning about rules and the need for them, and how responsibilities and freedoms work. They are learning about, and questioning, the values that rules are based on. They are learning and practising a wide range of new and essential practical, social, and emotional skills.

### **Testing boundaries and rules, challenging parental decisions, arguing and expressing preferences, developing interests and friendships**

Encourage their interests, support their friendships, listen to their ideas, and talk to them about their opinions. Examine your rules and allow them some input if appropriate, but be firm and clear about rules that are non-negotiable. Be clear about acceptable behaviour and model respectful ways to express and debate opinions. Acknowledge when you are wrong, and make sure they know you still love them even when you disagree with them.

### **Becoming more able to control their emotions, but may still need help with the more difficult ones such as anger and jealousy**

Model control and respect for others in your relationships. Acknowledge their negative emotions and talk with them about strategies to deal with them. Encourage them to come up with these themselves.

Praise both effort and achievement, and help them to deal with disappointment.

### **Learning to cope with a wide range of social situations as they move through primary school**

Support them in their efforts to make friends, and talk to them about how to handle difficult situations as they arise. Discuss behaviours and feelings with them, and encourage them to think about why people might behave in particular ways. Role-playing can be helpful for working out how to respond to difficult situations. Talk to their teacher if there are problems at school, and be the safe person they can come to with any problems.

### **Asking lots of questions, and keen to share their achievements. May become frustrated when things seem “too hard”**

Support them in their learning – read with them, play games with them, and share their excitement. Encourage them to find their own ways of doing things. Praise effort, and help them break tasks into manageable ‘bites’. Don’t expect perfection, and help them to understand that effort is required for achievement. Teach them skills and responsibility by giving them age-

appropriate tasks at home – clearing the table, sorting out and putting away their clean laundry, feeding the cat etc. Appreciate their input into the running of the family.

### **Developing their imagination, keen to tell stories – both made up and about their experiences – and keen to test themselves with new things**

Encourage their interests, listen to their stories, and provide opportunities for them to experience new things. Talk to them and ask them what they think. Allow them to do things their way where possible. Unless it is particularly dangerous, allow them to experience the natural consequences of their actions.

### **Becoming aware of societal norms about gender relationships, may find that peer pressure makes friendships with the opposite (or same) sex difficult**

Talk to them about relationships and feelings, and about coping with peer pressures and the behaviours of others. Support them to be strong in their identity.

**From about 10 girls may start entering puberty, boys start a little later. May start to experience physical changes, and become moody or dramatic. May want time alone**

Help them to understand what's happening to them, and begin this conversation before it does. Books are very useful for focussing your conversation and enabling the child to look things up themselves. Respect their space and stay calm in the face of outbursts. The emotionality of this stage is caused by changes taking place in their brains – it is not a deliberate attempt to drive you crazy! Talk to them when they are calm.

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## General parenting strategies

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- Praise and encourage appropriate behaviour, and talk about strategies for dealing with negative feelings and relating to others. Encourage and model empathy.
- Help the child to express feelings, and to connect thinking, feeling, and appropriate behaviour. Acknowledge their feelings and help them to deal with negative experiences, such as disappointment, and behaviours, such as anger. Model appropriate behaviour in your treatment of them, and in your relationships with others, and take time out to calm down yourself if you are angry.
- Set and enforce rules. Be prepared to negotiate on some rules, and expand boundaries as the child matures. Do not negotiate around rules about safety, their welfare, or acceptable behaviours. Be consistent and develop a clear, authoritative “No” voice for enforcing these rules. Children need to know where the boundaries are, and unacceptable behaviours often stem from uncertainty about what is and isn't allowed.
- Answer questions truthfully and matter-of-factly. If you find a subject difficult, talk to your local librarian to see what books or other resources are available to help you. There are lots of good books around for children on sex and reproduction, bodies and boundaries, puberty etc. Make use of them – they help to focus your conversation, and enable the child to look things up themselves.
- Use humour whenever possible, but always laughing with, not at. Follow your child's lead, and encourage their imagination.
- Continue to encourage understanding of cause-and-effect. Allow the child to safely

experience these, remembering that they need to “fall over” occasionally to learn.

- Have routines, especially around mornings, homework, and meal and bedtimes. Children feel safe with predictability.
- Keep reading to them, and talk about the stories and pictures. Listen to their stories.
- Allow plenty of time for free-play. This is how they learn about themselves and how to relate to others.
- **Look after yourself.** To parent well, you need to be well. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and don't feel guilty about taking time for yourself when they are elsewhere.

## Strategies for normal but negative behaviour

### Aggression

- Have a clear rule that aggressive or violent behaviour is not acceptable. Have a clear consequence for it – loss of screen time, removal of toys etc. Ensure the child is not exposed to aggressive behaviour – including your own or on-screen. Enable them to earn back lost privileges etc through appropriate behaviour – this reinforces their learning and encourages their self-control. If there's no chance of

changing the outcome – gaining their privilege back earlier – then there's no incentive to behave well. Model anger control, negotiation, and respect for others – including your child. Encourage using appropriate words (and tones) to express feelings, and help your child with these. Reward positive behaviours with praise and encouragement, and help your child deal with 'big' emotions such as disappointment or frustration. When they are calm, talk with them about how they feel at such times, and what might help them to feel better – eg a cuddle, a little bit of time alone. Help them come up with their own solutions – and to tell you how you can help – and reinforce them with praise when they use them.

**REMEMBER: They are still just learning to control their emotions, and how you respond to them will affect how they do this.** They need to learn consequences, but they need to be supported lovingly through this learning, and to know that it is the behaviour, not them, that you disapprove of.

- Use TIME IN rather than Time Out as a method of calming a child down, and not as punishment. Help the child to self-soothe. Enforce consequences for problem behaviour after the child has calmed down and is able to understand what is happening and why.

- Use consequences as both penalty AND reward. Remove a privilege or a favourite toy (but never the toy they go to for soothing) as a consequence for negative behaviour. Enable the child to earn their treasured item or privilege back earlier by engaging in positive behaviours that are related to the behaviour you are trying to change. If the consequence is for hitting their sibling, for example, they can earn it back by playing nicely and seeking help from you if they feel they are getting angry again. In this stage it can be effective to remove something for several days or a week, but to enable its return to be brought closer by a day for every day that they behave appropriately. This reinforces the behaviour you want. Encourage and support them in their efforts to behave appropriately, and look forward enthusiastically to being able to return their toy/privilege to them. See TIME IN.

### **Lying**

- If your child lies regularly, ask yourself why the child needs to lie. Are you modelling lying yourself? Often parents forget about the ‘little white lies’ they tell themselves, and expect total honesty from their children. Children learn about truthfulness from the adults in their world. They also learn tact and consideration this way. Is your child

punished for honesty, eg “Aunty Meg is fat”, when they state facts? Children punished for honesty can become confused and learn to lie to protect themselves. A lie can seem a better option than telling the truth and risking being punished. Praise honesty, particularly if being honest might be to the child’s disadvantage. Lying in this stage can also still be part of the child separating reality and fantasy, trying to make the world the way they want it to be. You can help them by gently pointing out the reality while accepting their need for fantasy – “I know it would have been lovely if things had happened that way, but...”. If they are upset, leave this conversation until they have calmed down and have less emotional investment in their story. Read to them and talk about stories with consequences for untruthfulness, e.g. ‘The Boy who Cried Wolf’. Encourage them to think up their own stories of untruthfulness having bad consequences – this puts their imaginative abilities to use in the positive direction of understanding the need for honesty.

### **Rule breaking**

- Remember that this is part of the child’s development – it is how they learn. Consider the rule. Is it important? Is it appropriate? Does it need discussion? Could the child have some say in this

particular rule? Is the rule fair (put yourself in their position)? If the rule is not open to negotiation, remain consistent with the consequences. Consequences teach children responsibility, and it is confusing if they keep changing.

Consequences can be natural or logical, but remember that children are not mini-adults in their ability to use logic.

Consequences need to be in the right “currency” for the child.

Natural consequences are, for example:

- Child won't wear a coat – child gets cold – child learns to dress for the weather.
- Child not ready for school – child is late and has to explain why to the teacher – child learns to be on time.

Logical consequences can be explained to the child as a series of choices that they must make. Explain what the consequence for a particular behaviour will be, and that they have the choice of stopping the behaviour or experiencing the consequence. For example, a child is unwilling to tidy their room, but wants to go to the park. Provide them with the choice of tidying their room and you will take them, or not-tying their room and you will not. When using logical consequences:

- Emphasise that the child made the choice or the decision.

- Ensure they have the time and ability to do what you have asked them, and know what is expected – eg how tidy their room must be.
- Do not get into a fight or argue about the consequence, and don't give in. Example: if you have made it clear that you will take them somewhere if their room is clean at 2pm and it is 3pm before the job is done, at 2pm it is the time to say 'I see you have chosen to stay home' and say no more.
- Generally children want to please, so always recognise and acknowledge/reward their good behaviours.

## **Parent Helpline**

If you have found this information useful and would like to talk with one of our trained telephone support workers, give our free Nationwide Parent Helpline a call on **0800 568 856**.

**Parent Help is a non-profit organisation supporting parents to build strong and resilient families/whānau free from abuse and neglect.**