



# Challenging behaviour in children

Parenting is an incredibly rewarding and challenging experience. At times, it can feel like a real rollercoaster of emotions – particularly when your child is behaving in ways that are difficult to manage and understand.

Children's behaviour can be challenging in different ways at different stages. Often, this behaviour is developmentally 'normal', which means it fits with the age they have reached. Sometimes, however, a child's challenging behaviour becomes more frequent and difficult to manage. When this is the case, daily life can become exhausting for you as a parent. Remember it is possible to come through this – with support, your child can find healthier ways to express and manage their feelings, and both of you can experience a more positive family life.

In this guide, we provide information and advice for parents of primary aged children. Some suggestions may also feel appropriate for older children and young people.

## What is challenging behaviour?

Just like us, children behave differently at different times. Feeling upset, sad, cross, frustrated and lots of other kinds of emotions is a normal and healthy part of their life. Many children go through phases of testing boundaries, and they are likely to behave in ways that are harder to manage when they are tired, ill or stressed. It is normal for younger children to have tantrums sometimes, while older children may sometimes shout, storm out or lash out.

When we talk about 'challenging behaviour', we mean behaviours that are persistent and difficult for both you and your child to manage – and that may have a significant impact on your child's wellbeing, daily routine, school life, and relationships with family and friends. You may recognise some of the challenging behaviours we often hear about on our Parents Helpline:

- Having lots of angry outbursts or 'tantrums'
- Regularly shouting, swearing and being very argumentative
- Frequently shoving, hitting, biting and kicking other family members or children at school
- Kicking, hitting, smashing or damaging things in the home
- Regularly refusing boundaries and routines, including not wanting to respond to reasonable requests
- Behaving impulsively and taking physical risks – for example climbing in ways that are unsafe and breaking things
- Blaming others for their behaviour
- Being unkind or bullying towards other family members or children at school
- Persistently getting into trouble at school
- Refusing to engage in conversations about what's going on or to access support

This behaviour can affect your child's wellbeing by:

- Getting in the way of daily routines that are important for their wellbeing – such as sleeping, eating, being active and spending quality time with you
- Putting them or other people at risk of harm
- Preventing them from having positive experiences within the family or at school
- Negatively affecting their relationship with you
- Disrupting their learning and their ability to make friends at school
- Leaving them isolated and/or withdrawn

For both you and your child, this kind of behaviour can feel overwhelming – especially if it's happening on a daily or weekly basis. Remember that even when things feel really stuck, there are things you can do to help your child find new ways of managing their feelings – and below we list some ideas you can try out.

## Why do children behave in challenging ways?

The way your child behaves is a communication about how they're feeling. Younger children rely heavily on communicating through their behaviour because their language skills, as well as their understanding of themselves and the world around them, are still developing.

When your child is acting out, it can be useful to think about the image of an iceberg. We only see the tip of an iceberg because the majority of the ice is floating underwater. Similarly, when your child is behaving in certain ways, there will be a range of emotions going on under the surface that you can't see – and your child is unlikely to be aware of these or able to talk about them without help.

Underneath their challenging behaviour, a child may be feeling:

- |              |                  |             |
|--------------|------------------|-------------|
| • worried    | • angry          | • ignored   |
| • anxious    | • jealous        | • unheard   |
| • insecure   | • bored          | • invisible |
| • sad        | • overwhelmed    | • unloved   |
| • uncertain  | • out of control | • guilty    |
| • frustrated | • unsafe         | • ashamed   |

Experiences your child might be going through that can trigger some of these hidden feelings and lead to challenging behaviour include:

- Changes like moving into a new class, moving to secondary school or having a new adult or sibling in their life
- Changes within the family, such as parents separating or a family member becoming ill
- Changes in routine, or a lack of consistent routine
- Not having clear and consistent boundaries, rules and limits
- Being bullied, either inside the home, at school, online or elsewhere
- Difficulties in relationships, including with friends, siblings and one or both parents
- Comparing themselves to siblings, peers or others
- Finding it difficult to communicate and express themselves
- Copying behaviours learned from others
- Getting stuck in cycles of behaviour they cannot break on their own
- Being expected to do tasks that are beyond their age and development
- Not having basic needs met – such as feeling safe and loved, attention from and quality time with parents or carers, and having fun and playing
- Experiencing or witnessing abuse such as domestic violence

As a parent, it's helpful to think about the feelings and experiences that might be going on for your child underneath their behaviour. By opening up a conversation, you can find out more about how they're feeling.

## How can I talk to my child about their behaviour and feelings?

- **Find a suitable time and place to talk.** If your child finds it difficult to talk, it might help to start a conversation while doing an activity like washing up, cooking, or walking. This helps the conversation feel more relaxed and less confrontational for both of you. You can find more ideas for activities to help you start a conversation at [www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/20-activities-for-20-minutes).
- **Make it clear that the behaviour is the problem, and not your child.** Let them know that it's okay to feel however they feel, whether that's sad, angry, worried or something else, and that you can work together to find new ways of managing these feelings.
- **Explain why the behaviour is not okay so they understand.** For example, you might say that while it's normal to feel angry, it hurts other people when they hit.
- **Be curious, empathetic and non-judgmental about what's going on.** Focus on listening and trying to understand things from their perspective.
- **Use simple phrases** such as 'I notice there is a lot of shouting happening', 'I think something might be upsetting you', 'I feel worried you're not happy', and 'I need you to know you can talk to me about what's going on'.
- **Reassure them** that you love them and want to help them feel happier and enjoy things again.
- **Think together about other ways they can manage their difficult feelings.** You can use some of our ideas below as a starting point. Let your child know that it's okay if it takes time to figure out what helps, and you can keep trying together.

**“Remembering to explain why can help – so rather than just shouting ‘sit down’ at the table, I try to let them know that I’d like them to sit down so we can enjoy eating and that we can go and play when we’ve finished.”**

## What can I do about my child's challenging behaviour?

Alongside talking, there are things you can do to help improve the situation. You will probably have to try some different things until you find what works for you and your child. Here are some things you can try:

- **Set clear boundaries and routines, and stick to these as much as you can.** You could do this by creating a family agreement covering things like screen-time limits, family meals and times for getting up and going to bed.
- **Follow through on consequences.** Your child may respond better if you give a warning before

the consequence, so they have an opportunity to change their behaviour. After the consequence has been given, it's important to chat together about what happened and return to positive interactions.

- **Give your child positive praise.** Notice and encourage them when they demonstrate the kinds of behaviours you have asked for, and be specific about why you're praising them. You might, for example, say things like 'thank you for letting me know you were feeling angry without hitting' or 'thank you for coming to the table when I asked you to, now we can eat together'.
- **Talk together about activities that help them to express their feelings and calm down.** This might be drawing or painting, doing something active like running, jumping or their favourite sport, reading a book, writing a story, baking or making something out of playdough or Lego. Having a list of these will help them build up a bank of tools they can use when they need to.
- **Help your child understand their feelings.** When you are curious about your child's feelings, this helps them understand and find words to describe them. You can also help them think about the signs that let them know they might be about to 'blow their top' – such as feeling hot, muscles clenching or breathing more heavily. They can use these signs to alert them to the fact that they need to choose one of their strategies or ask you for help.
- **Try to stay calm.** You may feel frustrated, angry or overwhelmed when your child is behaving in challenging ways – and this is completely normal. Try not to react or argue back when things are like this, as it will escalate the situation. Give yourself and your child a chance to have some space before you talk – as well as calming things down, this is a positive strategy your child can learn from you when they see you doing it.
- **Spend quality time with your child.** Find things you can enjoy together – such as going to the park, playing a board game, cooking something or watching a favourite film. As a parent, you will often be juggling lots of things at once – but try to set aside some time when you can be really present and give them your full attention.
- **Talk to your child's school.** Share your concerns with their teacher and find out what their experience is. How does your child behave at school? Is it similar or different to the way they behave at home? If your child's teacher has found something that works, it may be helpful to try it at home to provide consistency.

While it's normal to feel upset when your child is behaving in challenging ways, try not to take their behaviour personally. Often it isn't about you – as children are likely to take things out on the people they feel closest to and safest with. Some of these strategies might not work straightaway and can take time to get the hang of – so don't be hard on yourself if things don't change immediately.

**“Reading stories together that talk about feelings has helped my child get used to the words – giving them a way to talk about positive and difficult things”**

**“Challenging behaviour is exhausting and demoralising. In our family it often leads to everyone feeling less positive and only picking out the negative behaviours, which is so hard not to do. When we notice that we have all gotten stuck in a negative rut, we make an effort to pick up on and name some positives, however small, and this helps us move through a difficult time”**

# Finding professional help

## Counselling and therapy

If your child needs some more emotional support to help them understand and manage their feelings, they may benefit from seeing a counsellor or therapist. Therapists working with younger children will usually use play and arts activities such as painting, drawing and making things to think with your child about what's going on.

You can ask for counselling support through your GP or your child's school – and lots of primary schools across the UK provide this service. There may also be other free or subsidised counselling services in your area, which you can search for online. If it's an affordable option for you, you can find a private counsellor, therapist or family therapist using the directories listed at the end of this guide.

## Getting support from your child's school

As well as counselling, there may be other services provided by your child's school that can help, such as mentoring, learning support, peer buddying and clubs and activities. Be open with the school about what's going on and ask what support they can provide. If something at school is triggering your child's challenging behaviour – such as bullying or struggling with schoolwork – ask them to work with you to address this.

## Speaking to your GP

If you're worried about your child's mental health or wellbeing, you can speak to your GP (with or without your child) about next steps and finding support. Together you can discuss whether referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and/or an assessment by a mental health specialist is needed.

## Identifying additional needs

Sometimes, challenging behaviour can be a sign of an additional need or developmental difficulty – such as autism or difficulties hearing or speaking – which your child may need specialist help with. If you think this could be the case, speak to your GP or your child's teacher to discuss whether your child needs a referral for further assessment. In these situations, it's useful to keep a log of your concerns so you can provide some evidence when communicating your worries to professionals.

## How can I look after myself?

Supporting a child who is behaving in challenging ways can be an exhausting task. Don't be hard on yourself or your abilities as a parent, and remember that lots of children demonstrate challenging behaviour at some point. In order to support your child, you need to keep looking after yourself by talking to friends, family and anyone else in your support network, taking time out and asking for help when you need it.

**“My favourite phrase when things are tough is ‘this too shall pass’”**

# Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

## Support for your child

### Childline

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

24/7 helpline: 0800 1111

Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor: [www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat](http://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat)

Email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at [www.childline.org.uk/registration](http://www.childline.org.uk/registration)

### Finding a private therapist or counsellor

If your child needs some more in-depth support and this is an affordable option for you, you can find accredited, private child therapists and counsellors living locally to you by searching the following directories:

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP):**

[www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists](http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists)

**UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP):**

[www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist)

**Counselling Directory:**

[www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)

It's generally a good idea to look for a therapist or counsellor who is specifically trained to work with children.

### Youth Access

[www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

Information about local advice and counselling services for young people aged 12-25.

### Youth Wellbeing Directory

[www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing)

Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Support for you

### YoungMinds

A parent's guide to specific mental health issues and issues that affect wellbeing: [www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z)

Advice on starting a conversation with your child:

[www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/starting-a-conversation-with-your-child/)

Parents survival guide: [www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-survival-guide](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-survival-guide)

Videos sharing top tips on anger, anxiety, difficult behaviour and other issues:

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-lounge)

Setting up a parent support group:

[www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/how-to-set-up-your-own-parents-support-group](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/how-to-set-up-your-own-parents-support-group)

### YoungMinds Parents Helpline

Our Parents Helpline is available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25.

Call us for free on 0808 802 5544.

We're open Monday-Friday from 9:30am-4.30pm.

### Family Line

[www.family-action.org.uk](http://www.family-action.org.uk)

Provides support with family issues via phone, text and email. You can also access longer-term support through Befrienders and Counsellors. Open Monday to Friday, 9am-3pm and 6-9pm.

Phone: 0808 802 6666

Text: 07537 404 282

Email: [familyline@family-action.org.uk](mailto:familyline@family-action.org.uk)

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<p><b>Gingerbread</b> <a href="http://www.gingerbread.org.uk">www.gingerbread.org.uk</a></p> <p>Support for single parents in England and Wales, including advice and information about child support, benefits, tax credits and your child's contact with their other parent.</p> <p>Open Mon: 10am-6pm, Tues, Thurs &amp; Fri: 10am-4pm, and Wed: 10am-1pm and 5-7pm.</p> <p>Freephone helpline: 0808 802 0925</p>	<p><b>Contact</b> <a href="http://www.contact.org.uk">www.contact.org.uk</a></p> <p>Contact is the national charity for families with children with disabilities. Provides guidance and information, and lists local and regional support services. Open Monday-Friday 9.30am-5pm.</p> <p>Freephone helpline: 0808 808 3555 Email: <a href="mailto:info@contact.org.uk">info@contact.org.uk</a></p> <p>Directory of local services: <a href="http://www.contact.org.uk/advice-and-support/local-support/local-advice-services">www.contact.org.uk/advice-and-support/local-support/local-advice-services</a></p>
<p><b>NSPCC Positive Parenting Guide</b></p> <p>Provides further information and advice around children's needs and behaviours at different ages, from babies to teenagers.</p> <p><a href="http://www.learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1195/positive-parenting.pdf">www.learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1195/positive-parenting.pdf</a></p>	<p> <a href="http://www.mindedforfamilies.org.uk">www.mindedforfamilies.org.uk</a></p> <p>MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.</p>