

How can I deal with difficult behavior?

Your child needs clear boundaries. All children can misbehave at times. Routines and rules help them learn what is expected. Having clear boundaries means you can deal with difficult behavior and reward good behavior.

Don't hit, shout or threaten

When your child behaves in ways you don't like, you need to tell them what you don't like and what they should do instead. Hitting, shouting, criticizing and making threats can all damage a child physically or emotionally, so it's important to find other ways to deal with behavior you don't want.

Smacking is not okay

Hitting damages children. It can hurt them physically and hurt their feelings. All children can be naughty and smacking might make them stop – but it's a very short-term solution. Smacking will not teach your child what they should be doing instead, and it can teach them that hitting is the way to sort out problems.

What can I do?

- Distract your child – often all you need to do is give your child something else to do.
- Criticize the behavior, not the child – make it clear it's their behavior you don't like, not your child. For example, say, "I don't like it when you hit me. It's not nice and it hurts" instead of "You're a bad boy for hitting me."
- Ignore behavior you don't like as long as it's not hurting anyone – behaving badly can be a way to get attention and taking notice makes it worse.
- Take away something your child enjoys – if distracting, talking or ignoring don't work, try taking away a treat, like a favorite TV program or toy. Tell your child why and how long for – and make sure you stick to it.
- Use time-out – this is not a punishment. It helps your child learn how to manage their feelings and behavior. In addition, it gives you both time to cool down.

Is my child being naughty?

Ask yourself if your child is really being naughty, or if you're expecting too much. Babies are never naughty – they don't have the thinking skills for it – and small children may just be doing what's normal for their age. Making noises, being active, exploring things and wanting attention are all very normal and healthy.

If your child is behaving badly, try to understand why. Are they hungry, tired or bored? Your own moods and things going on around them can also easily affect their behavior. If you're having a bad day, let your child know it's not their fault.

What if I'm about to lose my cool?

Every parent has times when they reach the end of their patience and feel they could hurt their child. Here are some ways to cope without harming your child.

Calm down

If you're angry and in danger of hurting your child, walk away and take time out until you cool down.

- Take several deep breaths or count to 10.
- Make sure your child is safe and go to another room.
- Walk away from your child – not towards him/her.
- Tell yourself to calm down – remember, you are a good parent.

Talk to someone

- Call a friend or family member and talk things over.
- Ask them to come over – or keep talking until you are calm.

Get help if you need it

Asking for help is a positive thing to do.

- Call a helpline or health professional
- Stay on the phone until your anger has gone.

Please get help urgently if:

- you hurt your child – or feel you will harm them.
- you lose control often – or your child is afraid of you.
- your partner hurts or threatens you or your child.
- you're miserable, tense or can't cope.
- you can't manage on the money you have.
- anyone in the house has a drug or alcohol problem.