

Avoiding trouble with young children

Many things can cause young children to show difficult behaviours. Though children's needs and behaviour are complex, normal healthy children actually want to be good and want to please. But they also need their basic needs to be met and the chance to learn to be capable and independent. If we can meet these basic needs with full awareness, they may, most of the time, be the good little people they want to be and not have to present us with difficult behaviours to get help and understanding. Here are some reminders of areas to think about. What is the child looking for? What could they be reacting to? What would help?

The brief checklist list for avoiding trouble!

Meet basic needs for

Sleep

Food

Movement

Individual attention/love/recognition

Safety/predictability/good routines/boundaries

Understanding temperament and age factors

Unhurried time/time for preparation, digestion and free play

Independence & autonomy

Other sources of trouble

Jealousy/competition

Frustration

Fears

Fears of separation

Stressed, sick, emotionally upset

School stress

Overstimulation

Unrealistic parent expectations

Parent reactions

The detailed checklist & what helps

Basic needs to be considered

Sleep

Most children today need more sleep than they are getting. Rough recommendations for sleep needs are 14 to 15 hours for the first year; 12 to 14 hours for 1 to 3 year olds; 10 to 12 hours for 3 to 6 year olds. Hyperactivity can be a sign of sleep deprivation when children are overtired. Some ages show more fear about going to sleep (being by themselves, in the dark) and delay this by requesting drinks, toilet etc.

What helps? More quality sleep, calm activities around regular bed times, quality time with a parent at bed time. Have little jobs to do at night nearby where the child is sleeping so that they feel (and hear) the safety of your presence without having to call out, come out etc. Singing quietly, humming while you work is reassuring. Respect their fear by being there. Avoid exposing children to inappropriate screen content or stories or emotions which can increase fears.

Food

Hunger causes low blood sugar which causes irritability, tiredness, and not coping. Sugar rich and refined carbohydrate foods create a spike then a drop in energy. Food intolerances can also be a trigger for bad behaviour in some children.

What helps? Whole foods and proteins provide more sustained energy. Regular meal

times allow the digestive system to prepare for food intake before food comes. Congenial family meals allow better digestion. If the child seems to behave badly for no apparent reason, especially after food, investigate the symptoms of food intolerance.

Movement

Healthy children, left to themselves, are naturally active and curious, exploring the world without the need for encouragement of movement. However, we are interfering with what is natural and healthy today in a number of ways. We give them entertainment which stops this natural healthy movement—too much screen time, electronic gadgets which limit movement and toys which do everything for the child.

We are also interfering with the natural progression of movement and strength development by holding babies upright too soon, rather than allow them to lie on their tummies or by putting them too long in bouncers, swings and walkers which confine the child and prevent natural development and movement practice. In addition many parents are fearful to let their children extend their skills by exploring in more adventurous ways. Safety of course is always something to

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be considered but we should be there to support this movement, not to prohibit it.

All this means many children are not developing their sense of movement and balance in normal ways any longer. They reach school age without basic development in place.

What helps? Children need time and the freedom to move and explore without our interference once the environment has been

made safe and appropriate for their age group. They need time in natural surroundings to climb and balance and run on uneven ground, to scramble over rocks and stones. To squat and dig holes in the ground, to bend and pull and reach and drag materials to build cubbies. To roll down grassy slopes and skip and dance for the joy of movement. What they do not need is screen time which freezes movement and gives young children so very little in return.

Safety, Predictability, Routines & Boundaries

Young children need to feel predictability in life to make them feel safe in their world which is so full of change and new experiences. Part of this is provided by regularity and routines, the same way of doing things each day with enough time to ensure that things don't have to be hurried. They also need very clear boundaries about the rules and guidelines for living in each family. All of these help children to feel more safe, more in control of themselves, more competent and less frustrated—and therefore less likely to be difficult.

What helps? Keep good daily routines, like consistent meal and bed times, and create clear rules surrounding these routines. E.g. "We wait till everyone is at the table before we begin eating, we speak nicely to each other at the table" etc. Knowledge of what is going to happen also

helps. Give warnings, tell them what is going to happen beforehand so they have time to inwardly prepare. If a parent has to go away for an extended time for work for example, use physical ways to count the days, little doors to open on a chart, a pebble a day from a little pot.

Clear boundaries, and firmness in having the children keep to them, are very important for young children because these boundaries create a safe place to live within both physically and emotionally. Wishy washy boundaries confuse children and require them to test just where the boundaries lie, time and again. Clear firm boundaries may be tested once or twice to see if you mean it, but then are more likely to be accepted, causing less trouble. Of course at boisterous, adventurous ages like Younger Four, the boundaries need to be held even more firmly.

Individual recognition & reassurance—Attention seeking

Children need not only love but real recognition as individuals. If they do not feel these they will seek them in attention-seeking behaviours. If they cannot get your attention with good behaviour they will try to get it with misbehaviour, for any attention is better than nothing for a small child. Even constant questions can be used to get

attention rather than being a real request for answers.

What helps? Give them attention and recognition before they have to seek it. Give them sacred time with you alone; show them you care enough about them to turn off your phone to listen to them! Find ways for the child to legitimately feel

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a part of what is going on in the family, to feel absolute acceptance of his individual specialness but also to feel capable and useful (the legitimate sense of his own power). Always remember that

Understanding temperament & age factors

Feeling misunderstood is a major source of anguish and frustration for young children, especially before they can express themselves in language to help you understand. But even when they can talk, they are often misunderstood for example when adults assume children have adult motives for behaviour. We have to understand children do not think like adults. They are still trying to make sense of the world in the best way they can. Children also have basic temperamental traits which may or may not fit with yours.

What helps? Try to understand your child's basic temperamental tendencies. These have been named in different ways over the ages. The four classic basic temperaments of choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic are useful. Introverted and extroverted can reveal what is a basic tendency in a child. The planetary types are particularly useful because they fit with the six repeating stages which Gesell Institute of Child

attention seeking in this way is not selfish or 'bad', it is the result of the child's earnest need to feel recognised.

Development described in child development. What is important is to recognise your child's tendencies and accept these, helping them to celebrate the gifts of these. If they are introverted and sensitive, give them more protection and time. If they are hardy and active, give them more physical challenges and clear boundaries. But don't try to make the one into the other.

Understand your child's developmental stage

Read the *Development Profile* for the child of this age, also keeping in mind your child's basic temperamental tendencies. Work with what the child of this age needs. It may be at this age they are fairly conservative and want to practice skills they already have, or they may be wanting adventure or more social activities. Fine tune your expectations and your support. They may need love or relationship, or more self empowerment, or more freedom. All these are useful pointers to how you can support them and avoid difficult behaviours.

Preparation & Time for digestion & free play

Children need unhurried time, to be able to do things in their own time, to take their time. Hurrying creates stress, stress brings difficult behaviours. Children need to feel "Here, there is time." Many difficult behaviours occur because we adults want to hurry them, organise them, get on with things, get them out the door. They may not be able to express their unhappiness with being hurried in any way but react with resistance, tantrums, and dawdling.

Over-scheduling of the time of young children. Increasingly parents, with the best of intentions, are providing scheduled activities for quite young children, like swimming and dance as well as playtimes with other children. While these may be enriching experiences for a few times a week, it overloads children when they happen often. All experience needs digestion in quiet times, where children can potter and play out their experiences in their own time in their own way.

What helps? Give them time to prepare inwardly for changes of activity by giving warnings ahead of time. They need help to bring an activity to a close for another to begin. Enter into the child's play and use your imagination here to help it along. We also need to prepare children better for what is to come in the day and in the week, for coming events. Make a story of it. Describe what happens... when you go to grandma's house,

Independence & autonomy

From babyhood on, at some stages more intensely than others, children are driven to be upright, independent, autonomous individuals. They are of course very dependent for a long time but their need to be independent in whatever ways are possible at their age needs acknowledgement and support from us. This can be frustrating for us at the time, because it makes things less efficient and creates more mess for us. However we want children who are independent ultimately, so we need to celebrate the fact that the children *drive* us to help them to be so.

Such demands for independence and freedom, which so often manifest as rebelliousness and are labelled as misbehaviour, are the beginning of personal autonomy, individuation and ultimately self-actualization—so this is about serious personal growth. Check the *Development profiles*

Other sources of trouble

Jealousy & Competition

When attention is put on others, like siblings, especially new babies, or when they compare themselves with others or how others are treated,

when the babysitter comes, on the first day of school. Help them to enter into new activities prepared.

Give them a lot of time for unscheduled pottering and play where they can learn independence and initiative and develop their imaginations. Free play is very important for both learning and well being, as well as the development of practical and interpersonal skills.

to be aware of just how much each age is likely to demand their independence, freedom or power, or to be treated as an individual.

What helps? Listen carefully for demands for independence and facilitate it where it is possible, teaching safety and good sense along the way. Let the baby feed him or herself finger food, let the toddler cut the banana with a blunt knife, let the Six year old attempt the difficult task after you have broken it into manageable bits, let the eleven year old have time shopping with his/her friends in the mall within agreed safety strategies. Use the demands for independence to remind you that it may be time to hand over a little more responsibility for themselves to the children. Bit by bit they become autonomous individuals, within the wisdom and support you offer.

children can fear loss of power, or inadequacy, even abandonment.

What helps? Unconditional love, emphasising the child's own worth, the special qualities that his or

her age brings, of each child having a very special place in this family. Help them to understand each of us is unique, we are not the same as others. We do not treat each person the same — we meet each one's needs as needs arise, in ways that are right for each person. Sometimes one person gets more of something or time,

Frustration

Children want to feel their own sense of power and competence but in their immaturity they do not always have the ability to succeed or do what they wish. When they fail they can react with frustration. Our role is to get to the source of the frustration and teach them how to achieve what they want eventually, be it in skill development or in a social interaction. Some times their frustration is that we do not understand what they are trying to tell us, verbally or non-verbally..

What helps? Show understanding at their frustration rather than reacting to the difficult behaviour caused by their frustration. Set up the situations for positive achievement by breaking down tasks to smaller more manageable units. Be a step ahead of your child and ready to step in to

Fears

When children are young, they try to make sense of the world in the best way they can but they are inexperienced so for them this involves a lot of guessing with a small amount of information. In addition they have very vivid imaginations which make the possibilities of threatening things vast. In addition they have difficulty distinguishing fantasy, imagination or the "truth" of images on video and T.V. from reality.

What helps? Understand that children's fears are real to them and that denial of that reality is often not sufficient. We need to understand the nature

sometimes another does. We value individual effort over comparative achievements. With new babies, make sure the older children get recognition and perhaps a special present too. Make sure they feel wanted and valued. Let them help you. See also *Sibling Rivalry*

help or distract sooner. Make what they want to do possible without you doing it for them. We also need to teach them how to release their frustration in healthy ways when it does arise but not through over-intellectualizing the feelings. With young children we mostly do this by our own example, for example, when we slow down our speech, breathe more deeply when helping them; they tend to imitate us. As they get older we can teach them to take a breath and let the frustration go, to gather themselves together and try to explain what the problem is. With time we can teach them ways to let angry feelings out, with a stamp of the foot, a gobbledygook word or using a punching bag. Try to understand their temperament and developmental age factors. See the *Profiles of Development*.

of the fear and work with that creatively. For example the young child's fear of the lion under the bed can be helped with a reality check, like checking under the bed for the lion, "Nope, no lions there! Too much love in here for a lion to stay!" or if need be for a persistent fear, use a 'magic formula' with which to protect the child. For example, you might make up a little poem or say a prayer of protection; one parent put a notice on the front door which said "No lions allowed in this house!" Her three year old was very happy with that. Therapeutic stories where the

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hero/heroine has the power over the scary thing can help too. This can help even a child who is not yet speaking. See *Healing Stories* and *The Little*

Fear of separation

Babies and young children experience times of very deep fear of separation from parents.

What helps? Learn to listen for this deep fear in anguished crying and respect this. Children can learn not to cry after a few days of such crying, but what they are learning is disempowerment, that crying does not bring help. Recent studies are showing that in some 'controlled crying' the stress chemicals in the blood do not drop, though their crying may lessen. Listen with your heart for real panic in your child's crying and behaviour and find a way to respect their need for your presence if it is possible, if you think they are really panicking. Some developmental stages are less secure and this is more likely. Check the developmental profile for the the age of your child.

Don't physically separate yourself from the toddlers at such times of fear... let their "quiet time" be physically near you, and therefore "safe", beside you, and more possible for them to gather themselves together again. "Time out" in a separate place at such times only exacerbates their fears. As they grow older you can teach them to use "time out" as a useful regathering time for themselves, not as a punishment. It is not appropriate if they are experiencing fear.

With children a little older who can talk, help them to problem solve ways to feel safer at times of separation from you. Ask "what would help?" For example going to a new place without you: "Would you feel safer ... if we go to see it first

Stressed, Sick, Emotionally Upset

Boy and the Fox which was written for a two year old not yet able to articulate his fear.

together?...if your friend James is there?... if James's mother is there?...if you only stay for the morning?..." This is all teaching your child that they have the right to feel safe—a foundation for effective Protective Behaviours.

Bed times, when the child is left alone, can create deep insecurities and fear at certain ages and result in ongoing requests for drinks and bathroom visits, to prolong the parent's presence. These fears are very real, but these times of need do not go on for ever. If at all possible, reassure the child of your presence by working nearby for a while, perhaps talking quietly or singing so they can hear that you are there. Leave the door ajar with a little light available. Sometimes children can find comfort in favourite toys being placed around their head, on the pillow, 'to love you all through the night', or a prayer about angels around the bed being said, or a poem about how the stars and the moon shine down from the heavens on the child to care for them all in the night when everyone is asleep.

What makes the fear worse is if you get angry with them because of their constant requests as this makes them feel even more rejected. Try to be quiet, calm and patient. Consciously surround them with your loving thoughts even as you work nearby—children sense this. Understand their deep fear and find ways to accommodate their new need for a while. These are not times to leave a child at the other end of a long house or upstairs, alone.

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Even adults present difficult, not so acceptable behaviours if they are stressed, sick, tired or emotionally upset. It is not surprising that children find it hard to hold themselves together at such times. They need help at such times, not admonitions, although reminders about boundaries are still important. "I know you are tired and upset, but remember in our house we don't hurt others... throw blocks..."

What helps? Acknowledge their problem gently so that they know you understand it is hard for them right now. You might have to remind them about what behaviours are not acceptable in your family, but your understanding will also show them you are on their side and want to help. Take

Overstimulation

Children today are very often overstimulated. Young children are very open in their whole nerve-sense system and need protection from excessive sensory input. Overstimulated children are often stressed children with the resultant misbehaviour. One sided stimulation as in screen time which inhibits movement can also cause difficult behaviours afterwards. Over-scheduling of activities also overloads children.

School stress

Many children are required to start school and do intellectual desk work before they are developmentally ready to sit still. Boys particularly, being often up to a year later in development (Biddulf), are not ready for the demands of the school room at five or six years. Dreamy children who are less awake, or sensitive children who need more protection also suffer from the demands of school both socially and intellectually. What these children need are play based early childhood programmes but they often do not get them.

the pressure off children at the times when you know they are vulnerable. Use quietening activities, gentle music, singing, water play, storytelling, drawing, painting, modelling, looking at a book, gentle rocking, swinging. Use massage to calm them... lavender oil is relaxing. Consider a relaxing herbal tea like chamomile. Cut down on all unnecessary interaction and sensory stimulation: consider sight, sound, movement etc. Plan ahead so that you can avoid hurrying children. Keep the daily routines strong. In sickness give their bodies time to heal properly, with an extra quiet day at home after a day with a temperature, for example.

What helps? It is helpful for parents to ask the question: Is this truly a *nourishing* activity/place/toy etc. for my child is it merely entertaining and stimulating. What sort of *quality* sensory stimulation is it giving my child? Is it too much? Too much stimulation of the wrong sort, literally "turns off" the learning possibilities in the brain itself. Remember that too much of what is essentially a good activity is still too much! Children must have digestion time.

What helps? Recognise when school is too much, and give them afternoons off when they need it. This is a complicated process because you also do not want them to feel they are missing out, or compromising social relationships. But stressed children's learning is compromised learning, and stressed children are unhappy and can react with difficult behaviours. They need extra support.

As much as possible minimise after school activities. Take them straight home from school for quiet time. Leave play mate times for

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weekends. Do shopping at other times without them. Protect them from the demands of smaller siblings. Give them quiet, play (not more screen

Unrealistic Parental Expectations

Much difficult behaviour occurs because children feel misunderstood, often because adults are expecting too much of them. Development in children is not incremental. Children may be capable and well-coordinated at one age and then be struggling again in the next age. Know what to expect at your child's age of development to adjust your expectations.

What helps? Read about what you can expect from your children at their age. See the *Development profiles*. With young children particularly try to understand the child's point of view. What do they understand of language and the world? Remember young children have difficulty understanding negatives (don't touch) so talk in positive terms (keep your hands well away from the heater like this...) How much willpower and self-control do they really have?

Parent's Reactions

It is not quite politically correct to blame parents for what their children do because there is already too much pressure on parents to be the 'perfect' parent. But as conscientious parents it is important that we look at our own as well as our children's behaviour when difficulties arise, because the reality is that what children do is often in reaction to what we as adults do or don't do. So much depends on us and our response to them.

What helps? We need to respond appropriately with what they need, not react emotionally to what they do. We need to be loving and strong, appreciative and honest, understanding and forgiving of ourselves and of them. Their needs

time) and good food and sleep. Keep the routines strong and your love around them.

They may be able to do some things out of their own initiative but have very little self-control or ability to carry through tasks requested by you (like cleaning up!) without your support. Adults often have trouble resisting chocolate in the cupboard so why do they get angry with small children when they can't resist touching the remote control? Is this not expecting too much?

Children need you to be their "inner strength" and "supporter" for a long time to come. They need you to make their environment a safe place to explore. They need your "consciousness" and your protection: they need you to be their "safety house" to come back to. They need you to set the boundaries clearly and firmly from a strong but loving inner authority. When they do not have these things, they can become stressed and this can result in misbehaviour.

should come first, for they depend on us, but our own needs also need to be met in order to be able to meet their needs calmly, without reactivity. It is not easy. It needs consciousness, creativity and courage.

A few things to remember when you are about to react: Consider what is really important and be very firm and clear about that but don't make mountains out of molehills. Remember, a confrontation you win purely by your superior strength is not always a real win at all! Find the gesture of bringing the child "with you", which gives a sense of belonging rather than confrontation. When the child misbehaves always ask yourself "What can I do that will help?" Try



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not to blame the child. Use music, songs, rhymes, imagination and humour to get out of

confrontation and into cooperation. And consider what behaviour you are modelling!

Finally, once again, remember, normal healthy children actually want to be good and want to please. But they also need their basic needs to be met and the chance to learn to be capable and independent. If we can meet these basic needs with full awareness, they will, most of the time, be the good little people they want to be and not have to present us with difficult behaviours to get help and attention. For an understanding of your child's more specific developmental needs check the Development Profiles for the child's age group.

Other articles of interest:

Strategies for healthy living with children

Building self-esteem

Sibling rivalry

Foundations for healthy living reminders (for troubled times)

Development Profiles