

Avoiding trouble with Sevens to Tens

Children's needs and behaviours are complex and many things can cause children to show troubled behaviour. Normal healthy children actually want to be good; they have a growing moral sense and want things to be fair. While they may do things they know you do not approve of, they are more likely not to do them if they themselves think they are wrong. However, children also need their basic needs to be met – to be recognised as individuals and to be given 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 people they really want to be and may not have to respond with difficult behaviours as a protest or cry for help. Of course, the longer they have not had their needs met, the more entrenched difficult behaviours will have become, and the longer it will take to change those behaviours. But it is never too late to start.

Here are some reminders of areas to think about in avoiding trouble or identifying the source of the trouble. What is the child looking for? What could they be reacting to? What would help?

A brief checklist list for avoiding trouble!

Basic needs

Sleep
Healthy food
Exercise
Individual attention/love/recognition
Independence & power
Safety/predictability/good routines/boundaries
Unhurried time/time for preparation/digestion
Understanding temperament and age factors

Other sources of trouble

Jealousy/competition
Frustration
Fears
Stress/sickness/emotional upset
School stress
Overstimulation
Unrealistic parent expectations
Parent reactions

Detailed checklist and what helps:

Basic needs

Sleep

Most children and adults today need more sleep than they are getting. The recommended sleep for children of seven to ten years is about 10 to 11 hours. Lack of sleep affects not only mood but also health and learning. Remember hyperactivity can be a sign of sleep deprivation when children are overtired.

What helps? More quality sleep, calm activities around regular bed times, quiet quality time with a parent at bed time. Screen time should be

avoided in the evenings before bed. Note that vigorous exercise before bed to “tire them out” does not help children to get to sleep more quickly; it wakes the body up. Teach them the value of sleep and to be more aware of the consequences of lack of sleep— not being able to get up in the mornings, crankiness, difficulty concentrating at school, getting sick more easily etc. so they are motivated to take more responsibility for themselves.

Food

Nutritious food is essential for health and well-being. Hunger is associated with low blood sugar which causes irritability, tiredness, and not coping. Sugar rich and refined carbohydrate foods create a spike, and then a drop, in energy. Low energy and tiredness results in irritability and aggravates squabbling.

What helps? Whole fresh foods and proteins provide more sustained energy. Make sure they have a good breakfast to support their learning and concentration at school. Regular meal times allow the digestive system to prepare for food

intake before food comes. Allowing time for congenial family meals together allows better digestion. Teach them to observe themselves and how they react to foods or lack of it so they can take responsibility for their health, their teeth and their energy levels. If you go through this behaviour checklist and you think you are doing most things right (as much as any of us can) and yet bad behaviours are continuing, you might consider looking into the possibility of your child having food intolerances as these can have a dramatic effect on behaviour.

Exercise

Physical exercise and movement enlivens all the systems in the body, improves mental clarity, provides a sense of wellbeing and promotes better sleep. Lack of exercise deprives the child of these things.

What helps? Teach your children that the body needs exercise and movement for well-being.

The main threat to this in children at this age, who are naturally very active, is screen time. If this has clear limits, preferably to less than an hour a day on a weekday, most children will be more active, out playing, moving, exploring, and developing.

Safety, Predictability and Routines

All of us, but particularly children, need predictability in life and the feeling of safety this can bring. Part of this is in the regularity of daily routines and having enough time so that life is not hurried. These reduce stress and support healthy growth and living.

What helps? Provide good daily routines and ways of doing things. Regular meal times and bed times support good health by improving digestion and sleep quality. Do less, to decrease

hurrying. Inform children about what is going to happen and give warnings regarding time to help children to prepare for changes in activities. This is being respectful of the child's own time and helps them to start to take responsibility for the organisation of their own things and time. Respect for their own projects and activities helps them to respect the activities of others, including the need for them to help with communal chores.

Clear boundaries and guidelines for living

Children need very clear boundaries about the rules and guidelines for living in each family and firmness in having everyone keep to these. Clear boundaries create a safe place to be within, both physically and emotionally, and help children to feel more in control of themselves, more competent and less frustrated—and less likely to be difficult.

What helps? It helps for the adults in the family to talk over what are the most important rules and guidelines you need and want. Rules may be 'negotiable' rules, which sometimes can be changed, like bedtimes, or 'non-negotiable', like safety rules, such as wearing a seatbelt in the car. Guidelines reflect our values and the way we want to live—in our family we try to be respectful of each other, helpful, compassionate, caring, considerate etc. The more conscious you are about these guidelines, the easier it is to guide and educate your children in their behaviours. "In our family, we help one another..."

Wishy washy unclear 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, if children think the rules are fair, ultimately causing less trouble. Of course at boisterous, adventurous ages like Eight, the boundaries may need to be held a little more firmly with more reminders. Gradually children can be given more say in negotiating the rules, and more responsibility in keeping to them. By Eleven this becomes a necessity! Arguments become increasingly verbal as the children grow and, for feelings of safety, families benefit from having a clear ban on put-downs and insults, even in 'fun', because at some level, they still hurt. Put-down humour is a common way of relating, especially between men and boys, but ultimately it is not helpful.

Being clear on your guidelines for living reinforces your family's values, for example that every human being (and sentient being) is worthy of respect and understanding, no matter what their race or religion or capabilities. You model this constantly in what you say. If a child complains of the behaviour of another child you can encourage empathy rather than condemnation with your response. "I wonder

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why he behaved that way? Do you think he is lonely? Scared?" It not only offers understanding to other children but also gives insight into their own behaviour when it is less than kind or respectful and so on. It models what you are trying to do with your own children, to understand rather than judge them.

Build clear guidelines about being a loving family, about respecting and supporting each other, about everyone having a part in helping around the house, because this is what a community is. Avoid making helping at home something that is paid for by pocket money/allowances, (or by default by deprivation of allowance.) Let allowances or pocket money be a free gift, not connected to household chores. The household chores need to be done as a free gift too, as part of living in a family. Of course special one off jobs can be used to earn money, but a healthy basic guideline can be that 'we are part of a family and everyone does their bit to help'. Here is a chance to teach negotiations skills, to work out what can be done, by whom and when, with least resistance. The reality is some people like stacking dishes, and some people don't. Be flexible.

Remember that children are less likely to do things that they themselves judge are wrong, so they need to understand why things are wrong,

Recognition & reassurance—Attention seeking

Children need unconditional love and real recognition as individuals. If they do not feel these they may seek them in attention-seeking behaviours or hit out in frustration. For when children feel unseen and misunderstood it creates a deep sadness which can be covered by anger and rebelliousness. They need to be taken seriously.

unsafe, preferred etc. They need to feel respect for your reasons, for your rules and guidelines. Better still, it helps if they feel ownership of them as our rules and guidelines. Make sure you respond with understanding when children do things 'wrong' because the rules have not been made clear enough— for example if they use Dad's wood saw to try to cut metal, or help themselves to something they were not told was 'not for children'.

In the area of protective behaviours and protecting children against sexual abuse, the lack of clarity about rules can be disastrous. If you are not clear about your rules about personal boundaries, that our bodies have private parts that other people don't touch, and we don't expose publicly, and if your child is not good at reading people's reactions and picking up the unspoken social rules, you may have a ten year old who then touches the genitals of a younger child and creates a storm amongst the families involved—all through the lack of a clear rule. And of course your child is also at increased risk of abuse by older people. See *Protecting young children against sexual abuse* and *Our family safety guidelines* for more information on this.

Healthy rules, boundaries and guidelines provide protection and support to children.

What helps? Children need absolute acceptance of who they are, unconditional love and recognition. That means you love their essential selves even if they do not live up to how you want them to behave, or hoped they would be. It means giving them loving 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

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phone to listen to them! Find ways for the child to legitimately feel a part of what is going on in the family, to feel absolute acceptance of his or her individual specialness but also to feel

Independence & power

Children have a deep need to feel independent, autonomous and powerful at times within the safety of clear order and guidelines provided by the parents. This is closely related to their need for individual recognition, especially at seven. At eight, the children are using their increasing power of thought in their recognition of adult foibles and mistakes, which can make them seem a little arrogant at times—we feel the challenge of their power more at eight. Fathers are becoming more needed and important from seven on as well.

What helps? Listen carefully for demands for independence and facilitate it where it is possible, teaching safety and good sense along the way. 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

Inappropriate parental power

If we use our own parental power in a tyrannical rigid way children can react by withdrawing (passive resistance) or by rebelling (e.g. with angry, revengeful, demanding or tyrannical behaviours). Similarly if we mis-use our potential parental power by being too weak, (too unclear about our values and boundaries, too lacking in our own inner authority and

Preparation & Time

All children need unhurried time, to be able to do things in their own time, to follow their own interests. Hurrying creates stress, stress brings

capable and useful (the legitimate sense of his or her own power). In this way you draw out the best in them, you draw out the good in them.

individuals, within the wisdom and support you offer. We need to allow them to experience their personal power in legitimate ways but also remember that they want to see our legitimate power too—they really want us to be authorities worthy of their respect. Despite their criticism, they do still love and respect us when we are worthy of it and they want our company! Check the *Development profiles* 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.

Try to keep the balance between giving the child a legitimate and healthy sense of their own power and competence, and helping them to feel safe to be themselves and to grow within *our* legitimate power and authority and the forms we give to that.

belief in ourselves as important guides for our children—Barbara Coloroso calls this the ‘jelly fish parent’) then despite our lovingness, children can become angry, revengeful, demanding or tyrannical in their behaviour. It is as if their difficult behaviour is the only way they can say: “Take notice of me! I do not feel safe with all this freedom! Stop me! Hold me!”

difficult behaviours. Overscheduling with too many organised activities adds to stress and can be self-defeating. Many resistant behaviours

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occur because we adults want to hurry them, organise them, get on with things, to get them out the door. Reluctance or resentment can occur as a result of being hurried. Having more time often helps family harmony.

What helps? Avoid too many scheduled activities. Give them time to prepare inwardly for changes of activity by giving warnings ahead of time to bring an activity to a close, ready for another to begin. Keep your child

informed about what is to come in the day and in the week, for coming events. This helps them to enter into new activities better prepared. Encourage earlier preparation and an order and place for things so that the times which are inevitably more hurried, like school mornings, can be less stressful. This means adults also have to think ahead and be better organised and to make children's need for time a priority.

Understanding temperament and age factors

Feeling misunderstood is a major source of sadness, anger, resentment and rebelliousness in children as they get older. Their temperamental tendencies and their developmental needs need to be understood and worked with in positive ways.

What helps?

Try to understand your child's basic temperamental tendencies. These have been named in different ways over the ages, but naming is not as important as observing. The four classic temperaments of choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic are useful. Introverted and extroverted can reveal what is a basic tendency in a child. Are they predominantly thinkers, or feelers or doers? The planetary types are particularly useful because they fit with the six repeating stages which Gesell Institute of Child Development described in child development. They are described in the *Development profiles* and in *Brief Descriptions of planetary qualities*. What is important is to recognise your child's tendencies and accept

these, helping them to celebrate the gifts this temperament offers. 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. If their basic temperamental traits are very different from yours, you may have to make an extra effort to understand and accept them.

Understand your child's developmental stage. Read the *Development Profile* for the age of your child, 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.

Other sources of trouble

Jealousy & Competition

When attention is put on others, like siblings, or when they compare themselves with others or how others are treated, children can fear loss of power, or inadequacy, even abandonment.

What helps? When giving unconditional love, emphasise the child's own worth, the specialness of what 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. "In our family 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 time, or more of something, sometimes another does." We value individual effort over comparative achievements. Make sure each one feels wanted and valued. Make sure you do not compare children with others or show favouritism. See also *Sibling Rivalry* for further thoughts on encouraging harmony, not rivalry, within the family.

Frustration

Children need 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.

What helps? Show understanding at their frustration rather than reacting to their difficult behaviour caused by their frustration. Set up the situations for positive achievement by breaking down tasks to smaller more manageable units.

Make what they want to do possible without you doing it for them. In relationship conflicts, help them to articulate their needs better and, especially in relation to siblings, respect their need for extra 'protection' at times from demands, interference and hassling from others. You can also teach them ways to let out the frustration when it does happen—maybe taking some deep breaths, counting to ten, or physically letting out the energy in hitting a punching bag, stamping or going for a short run for example, before coming back to give it another go.

Fears

Children of all ages have fears, though some ages are more fearful than others. Children can experience fear of new situations, threats to feeling safe, of being alone etc. They may not always be able to recognise this fear in themselves immediately, let alone articulate it. We may need to observe our children carefully to help them identify what is wrong. Children need adults who are supportive and sensitive to

what lies behind erratic behaviour at such times. Exposure to inappropriate images and stories can add to these fears. It is the stories from real life and which the children can most identify with personally which are most threatening to their sense of safety. When life presents tragic circumstances in their own environment, accidents, illness, death, fire, flood etc children need to be given additional support and

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protected from unnecessary media exposure and adult talk. Children feel most upset when they see their parents in shock or distressed themselves while trying to make sense of something that is happening – for these are the times when we ourselves are the least aware of our children's needs and least able to take care of them. It scares them to see us powerless.

What helps? Understand that children's fears are real to them, whether we as adults feel the fears are reasonable or not. They need adults who can listen and help them to problem solve and find strategies for dealing with fears or for finding new courage for dealing with new or anxiety producing challenges. We need to understand the nature of the fear and work to bring it into a new context of probabilities,

Stressed, Sick and Emotionally Upset

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 then, 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..."

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 also on their side and want

Overstimulation

Children today are very often overstimulated or stimulated in a very one sided way, e.g. by pop music, foods with high sugar content, and additives. Screen time, which inhibits

protective strategies, re-affirming support, or whatever will help. Therapeutic stories can sometimes help in this. See *Healing Stories*. In the moment however one of the most powerful things you can do to help is to just be with them, lovingly acknowledging that they are upset. Sit with them, hold them, make them feel that you understand, you care and you are there for them.

Children can still feel separation anxiety at these ages. It is important to also affirm that they have the right to feel safe – the foundation for effective Protective Behaviours. We need to work with what will help the children feel more safe, step by step adding to their degree of independence.

to help. Take the pressure off children at the times when you know they are vulnerable. Encourage them to find or give them quietening activities. Let them feel nurtured and cared for. Use massage to calm them... lavender oil is relaxing, especially at night. Consider a relaxing herbal tea like chamomile. Cut down on all unnecessary interaction and sensory stimulation. 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 after a day with a temperature, for example. Give them more sleep. Protect them from the interference of siblings.

movement, can also cause difficult behaviours afterwards.

What helps? Protect children from excessive sensory input especially at the times like Seven,

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when children are very open in their whole nerve-sense system. Overstimulated children are often stressed children with the resultant misbehaviour. It is helpful for parents to ask the question: Is this truly an *enriching* activity/place/etc. for my child, or is it merely entertaining and stimulating. What sort of *quality* sensory stimulation is it giving my child? Is it too much stimulation or just stimulation of

School stresses

In these years many stresses can come from school. Not only is a day at school exhausting for the younger ones but emotional life can be painful if friendships are not established quickly. As friendships become more and more important at nine and ten, difficulties with friendships can become more painful. Stress and unhappiness over this can overflow at home.

What helps? Make sure there are sufficient unscheduled quiet times after school. Arrange extra scheduled activities so they are spaced through the week, not every consecutive night after school. Drop activities if necessary. Remember too much can be self defeating.

The social interactions of the class are complicated, sometimes painful and are big life lessons. They are an opportunity to teach your child the power of love and care for others, a

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 more responsible at one age and then more rebellious in the the next age. If your children are behaving badly, often tired or sick, ask yourselves if you are asking too much of them.

the wrong sort? Both can literally "turn off" the learning possibilities in the brain itself. It can also interfere with children's centredness, which in turn effects their ability to control their impulses. Do there need to be firmer guidelines and boundaries for some things, especially screen time and noise, or less scheduled activities, more unhurried down time?

healthy base for self-empowerment. Encourage your children from from the start to be kind and friendly to everyone in the class, always, and to avoid being trapped in friendship cliques. Emphasise that a person can still have special friends but can learn to be friends with everyone else as well. This will ease their way if friends are absent or leave the class and will protect your children's social well-being. Teach them to have understanding and compassion for everyone, the isolated children and the bullies too. Help them to see that every child needs to be recognised and acknowledged, just as they do themselves and that this makes us better people. You may also have to help them to have clear personal boundaries and be able to say no diplomatically to others. Kind children can be pestered by rejected children.

What helps? Know what to expect at your child's age of development to adjust your expectations. They only gradually, through childhood, develop self control and the ability to carry through tasks requested by you (like cleaning up!) without your support. They need second chances. They need you to be their "inner strength" and "supporter" for a long time to come. They need you to make their environment a healthy place to live in. They

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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.

We also need to ask ourselves when *too much of good* things is also too much? Conscientious parents today want to give their children the best chance in life. But we need to consider just how much can we realistically ask of our children in extra curricula activities. How much are we overloading them with these, with the best of intentions, but also depriving them of quiet times to play and potter in their own time and to digest their experiences, by themselves. Many children are doing far too much in organized activities all at once, with sport,

Parent's Reactions

There is a reluctance today to blame parents for what their children do but 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 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: To think (count to 10?) before you

dance, music, gym, etc. and after school play with friends almost every night of the week. If we wear them out this way they may get demanding, stroppy and more often sick or burdened with conditions like asthma, which is aggravated at the times when there is too much to take in and to process. It is hard sometimes to let go of the idea that our children can have it all. We all imagine possible futures for our children, have hopes and dreams, but conflicts will arise if our expectations begin to drift too far from the true nature of our children and what they are really capable of doing at one time or even actually want for themselves. This needs honest consideration and the courage to do what is right for your individual child, not what might be frequently done by others. Remember what is 'normal' is not necessarily healthy.

speaking. To keep your sense of humour along with clarity about your values and boundaries. Consider what is really important and be very firm and clear about that but don't make mountains out of molehills. Remember, in a confrontation you can win either by your superior strength (not always a real win at all!) or your wisdom! Find the gesture of bringing quiet inner authority! Are you part of the problem because you are too tired, stressed, sick yourself? Do you need to turn your phone off and have 'sacred time' with your child? Do you need private regathering time for yourself? When you hold back on reacting and say "I need a bit of time to myself to gather myself together, just give me space for ten minutes", you to model self-care, self-control and self-empowerment.

Finally, once again, remember, normal healthy children actually want be good and live up to their own moral standards. 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 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.

Further reading

Payne, Kim John, with Lisa M. Ross *Simplicity Parenting Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure kids.* (Ballantine Books Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2009)

Other articles of interest:

Strategies for healthy living in the family

Building self-esteem

Sibling rivalry

Strategies for stressful times checklist

Family Safety Guidelines

Development Profiles