Tips for parenting children with challenging behaviour

Parenting a child with challenging behaviour is, well, challenging—but it is a challenge that parents can meet, using appropriate strategies and resources.

Challenging behaviour is any behaviour that interferes with children's learning, development and success at play; is harmful to the child, other children or adults; or puts a child at high risk for later social problems or school failure.

The information below offers ideas that have been proven to work—and which can benefit all children, not just those with challenging behaviour:

Offer unconditional love. Be sure your child knows that you love them, even if you don't always like their behaviour. Every day—perhaps at bath time, perhaps when you're walking home from child care—set aside time to have fun together. Give them your undivided attention, let them choose the activity, and make sure they know you like playing with them. These positive moments nourish your child's self-esteem and point the way to more positive moments.

Make your home safe. By providing an environment where your child can succeed, you can reduce or eliminate many potential flare-ups. Remove fragile objects, create comfortable play areas, select toys that interest them, and keep them well organized and within reach.

Plan activities around your child's needs. If your child has tantrums when their hungry, prepare a snack before you go shopping. If you serve lunch on the kitchen table, suggest doing puzzles on the coffee table so you won't have to put them away when it's time to eat.

Set clear limits and enforce them consistently. Your child needs to know what you expect. But be sure that you have the time and energy to carry through. If you are already late for work, it's okay if they leave toys on the floor.

Create routines and stick to them. Children feel more comfortable when they know what's coming next. For this reason, it helps to give advance notice of changes in activity ("You can slide down three more times, and then it's time to go home").

Offer a limited choice when you see trouble coming. For example, if choice of drinking glass has been an issue in the past, ask: "Do you want your milk in the red cup or the blue one?" and guide your child's behaviour by telling them what to do instead of what not to do: "Ask Paul if you can play," not "Don't grab". Be patient if they need exactly the same directions an hour later—they are young and forget they need to practice.

Put yourself in your child's shoes. From there, try to figure out what they get from their challenging behaviour. Do they get your attention (positive or negative)? Do they avoid something they dislike or aren't good at? Does the atmosphere become calmer (or more exciting)? Once you know what the challenging behaviour brings them, you can help your child get it in a more acceptable way.

Stay calm. When things don't go smoothly, take a deep breath and count to five. By showing your child that you can handle the situation with a cool head, you become his best role model.

When Your Child is Out of Control

When nothing seems to work and your child loses control, give him or her space to collect them self.

- Stand between him or her and the rest of the world—but at a safe distance. Don't try to move them.

- Don't confront your child. To keep them from feeling trapped, stand sideways, compose your face, and don't look them in the eye.
- Don't talk. They aren’t ready to listen yet.
- When they calm down, talk quietly. Help them to name their feelings: "You were pretty angry," and to distinguish between feelings and actions: "It's okay to feel angry, but it's not okay to throw chairs." Let them know that you love them, and help your child to think about how to solve the problem next time.

With a bit more routine, clarity around rules and expectations and focused attention, many challenging behaviours can be worked through. If behaviour problems persist, it may be time to seek outside help. You may also want to talk to your child’s guidance counsellor at school to see if the problems are also happening at school, and/or you may want to talk to your child’s doctor about possible next steps along the path to a calmer family dynamic.