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## The Nurture Programme

# Managing Challenging Behaviour

A Short Practical Guide for Parents

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I have to say from the outset, as a parents of two boys, one 14 and the other 12 years old, I don't really buy into the idea that people are looking for a list of do's and don'ts when it comes to managing difficult behaviour. There is no 'holy grail' containing the secrets of how to be a perfect parent. I believe the mundane truth of the matter is that we all are simply making the best of what we have by doing our best under the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

That said, sometimes a shift in the way we look at things can dramatically improve how we interact with others, particularly our children. We are all well aware of just how busy and stressful life has become and how difficult it can be to carve out genuine uninterrupted family time. All the more reason why when we do have family time together, the last thing we want, as parents, is to spend it giving out.

This reality of modern day parenting makes it all the more important to figure out how you're going to manage the behavioural challenges that your children present ahead of time (before they actually happen) so that you can maximise everyone's enjoyment of family life rather than reacting out of frustration and anger to difficult behaviour.

# Changing the Way We Think

The first principle I want to share with you involves a shift in how you think about behaviour in the first instance. It involves becoming very clear about how you want your child to behave, as opposed to thinking constantly about what behaviour you disapprove of. Most people see behavioural problems as the 'enemy', as something to be stopped or eliminated. Often I'll ask a parent I'm working with what they want to see happen and they'll respond by saying that they want the temper tantrums to stop. The only problem with this answer is that as long as we stay focused on the problem, be it a temper tantrum or nail biting, the problem will grow. That's the funny thing about behaviour, the more direct force we apply to it, the stronger it becomes. Therefore, the first step in dealing with difficult behaviour involves us working from 'inside out' (inside ourselves) in order to rethink our picture/understanding of the behaviour. Instead of trying to stop the fighting, we need to put our energy into figuring out how to encourage safe and cooperative behaviour. Instead of trying to stop temper tantrums (remember tantrums are an important part of a child's development), we need to support children to learn new ways of expressing feelings like frustration.

By simply reframing (changing the shape of the picture) the way we think about a child's behaviour, we hand ourselves back a huge amount of power. An example of this reframing approach would be:

'Why does Joe always fight with Mary?' becomes 'How can I help Joe and Mary build a stronger connection (relationship), and work better together?'

All too often, we focus on the behavioural problems and miss the real issue that secretly lurks behind the behaviour. Often challenging behaviour causes us to become distracted from what is important; the reality is that behind every behaviour lies the child's need to learn how to do something in a better way; that may be a better way of mixing, of expressing feelings or of working with other people.

The vast majority of behavioural problems that I encounter are underpinned by a struggle on the part of the child to learn one of the following skills: turn-taking, waiting, expression of feelings, making connections to people, things or information and making choices. Managing difficult behaviour when it is thought of in these terms is less about dealing with the behavioural problems than it is about teaching new skills. With their new skills in relation to turn-taking, waiting etc. the child no longer needs to rely on negative behaviour to cope or get attention.

# The Golden Rules

The second principle I want to offer as a peg for reflection within this article revolves around rules, not for our children but for us. As a parent and professional in the field of challenging behaviour management, I have four golden rules which help me to stay on track. They help by ensuring that I don't focus on the behavioural problems as discussed above, and also (usually) stop me doing or saying something on impulse. It works most of the time!

- 1.** When I discipline (set boundaries, limits or hold expectations) a child, I will never do or say anything to harm their self-esteem, no matter how challenging they become.
- 2.** When I set boundaries, limits or hold expectations of children, I need to make sure they are reasonable. In other words, they need to be age, stage and culturally appropriate. For example, there is no point getting angry when a 6 month old throws her food on the floor. If I get angry, it's because I'm expecting something of her that she's simply not old enough to achieve.
- 3.** Children need boundaries and leadership. They need to know when they get out of control that limits will be placed around them until they regain control. That's my job as a parent, I may not always be thanked for it but it is part of what I signed up for.
- 4.** When I'm with children, they should know that I'm on their side and that I'm not trying to catch them out, or trip them up. Instead my main job is to help them discover their successes; I do this by noticing the moments when they naturally achieve, when they do things that show effort or positive intent.

These rules are like my inner compass. I believe we all need such rules if we are to be the kind of parents that we dream of being. Over the last fourteen years as a parent and as a professional, I have endeavoured to take the principles as outlined above, and to include them in clear and useful training packages on managing challenging behaviour for parents and professionals. Based on the feedback from hundreds of parents and professionals up and down the country, I am pleased to say the six step approach I have developed really works. The steps are contained in a programme called the Nurture Programme a summary of which follows:



# The Six Step Approach

## 1. Values

When in doubt about where to start, begin by identifying your own values as a parent. You can begin to get a clear picture of your values by asking:

- What would you like your children to say about your behaviour toward them when they were at their most challenging?
- What do you stand for as a person and as a parent?
- What would you like your children to stand for when they grow up?

Most parents, when they think about it, would like to parent in a way that is caring, fair, respectful and understanding (four clear values), while still making sure that their children are well behaved. Having four clear values like this gives you a compass, as they provide direction even when you're lost and unsure what to do next.



## 2. Feelings

One of the main reasons that children are challenging is because they are struggling to express inner feelings. Therefore, after getting clear about our values, it is important that we do some thinking about how we express our own feelings and how we help our children express theirs.

Feelings are neither good or bad, nor right or wrong. It is what we do with our feelings in our actions/behaviour that matters and it is our behaviour therefore that becomes either right or wrong. For example, it's ok to be angry (feeling) but it's not ok to throw a chair (behaviour) at someone when you're angry.

We need therefore to come up with ways of helping our children handle uncomfortable feelings like anger, by for example working with them to identify three things that they can do when they are really angry that won't get them in trouble, or cause them to hurt themselves or someone else.

### 3. Thinking about Difficult Behaviour in a Different Way



As we said earlier, how you think about your child's behaviour affects how you deal with them when they misbehave. If you think they are doing something (misbehaving) to get at or to annoy you, you will react differently than if you see the behaviour as them being confused about the rules, or looking for guidance. Yes they may be testing you, but you can think about that as 'a child trying to drive you mad' or a 'child needing to learn the limits, like every other child has to'. There are ways of thinking about difficult behaviour that can rob you of your power and make you feel tired, frustrated and confused, and ways that can make you feel powerful, strong and loving. The good news is that you can choose the way you think, and doing so will change everything!

Begin by thinking more about the needs behind a child's behaviour instead of just seeing the behaviour itself. When all we see is the behaviour, it's like only hearing a baby's cry and not getting that the cry is telling us something: I'm hungry, thirsty, in pain or just in need of a hug. Bad behaviour is sort of the same; it sends us a coded message about something the child needs. It could be something they need to learn, or a need for love.

That's why I suggest that difficult behaviour is best understood as 'a need not yet met, or a skill not yet learned'. If behaviour is a way of expressing needs, then a lot of what we are trying to do as parents is to help our children to express themselves in better ways.

It's a really good idea, therefore, to think a lot about the behaviour you want to see in your child after they have learned better ways of expressing themselves e.g. instead of thinking: 'how can I get Daniel to stop having temper tantrums, or Jade to stop being a moody teenager', try asking: 'how can I help them get those feelings out in a different way?'

These days everything has a label, and kids love labels like 'Nike', 'Adidas' etc., but giving a child a negative label like 'stupid' or 'bold' is to be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately these labels can be like the words of a fortune teller, they all too often come true. Comparing children with a brother or sister can have a similar result. We all know how it goes, we probably heard it ourselves in our own childhood: 'why can't you be more like Jake, he never gives cheek, or gets in trouble?'

## 4. Five Root Causes

There are five main reasons why children display difficult behaviour:

### **a. Inappropriate expression of feelings**

This is where a child who feels frustrated, angry or any other feeling, including excited, ends up doing something that they shouldn't. It's important to understand, that some behaviours, even if they are annoying, are actually fine for certain ages e.g. temper tantrums between 1.5 and 2.5 years and 3.5 and 5 years or teenage grumpiness. These are part of the package and more often than not are best ignored.

### **b. Developmental delay**

This is where a child is operating in some areas at an earlier stage than you would expect for their age. Think of it like this: imagine we all have an invisible toolbox and as we grow older, different tools for life go into the box. These tools are sometimes called life skills e.g. being able to mix with others. As we get older, life has a way of challenging us. By the age of four or five, life says 'right, time for school, and when you're there, you have to listen, sit still, take turns, share, and make friends'. Not surprisingly as children face these life challenges, sometimes they reach into their invisible toolbox for the skill to cope with the situation, only to find the skill has not yet been learned. Often when this happens they misbehave.

### **c. Perceptual Difficulties**

This is where a child has hearing or seeing challenges, and or where they may also have difficulties understanding or making sense of things. Hyper-sensitive hearing and dyslexia would be two examples that people are familiar with, but there are many others. Where a child is displaying ongoing challenging behaviour, it's important to rule out the possibility of a perceptual difficulty. You can begin that process by consulting with your GP. If you have any worries in this area, listen to your gut instincts, and if in doubt, speak to your doctor and look for an expert opinion. Where a perceptual difficulty goes undiagnosed, it can be a source of huge frustration for a child, and can also be the cause of adult misunderstandings around the child's behaviour.

### **d. Separation and Loss**

This is where a child is suddenly separated from someone with whom they are really close. When this happens and emotions are high, like in the case of a death, divorce or separation, where there has been little or no time to prepare or explain, a child can often feel responsible, guilty, angry and confused, as well as fearful of forming new relationships.

### **e. Control Battles**

This is where the child doesn't get that you're the leader, and constantly tests and challenges you. Testing behaviour is more often than not down to confusion around boundaries/limits.

## 5. Discipline is a gentle thing done wisely

As parents, it is helpful to become aware that within us there are many different definitions of discipline which are buried within our subconscious minds. Why not decide to become conscious, in a value-focused way, of what you would like discipline to mean to you in your role as a parent?

Here are some ideas on discipline:

- It should always raise self-esteem, never the opposite.
- It is very much the opposite of punishment.
- Its very clear message is: 'we're your parents, and we're on your side'
- It establishes structure, predictability, routine and most of all reasonable developmentally appropriate expectations/boundaries.
- Discipline aims to promote positive behaviour and to generate positive alternatives. Its intention therefore, contrary to popular opinion, is not to make a young person behave one way or another, but to offer choices.

## 6. 8 Strategies for Managing Challenging Behaviour

### **Active Listening**

As well as listening carefully for what's really going on, focus on what you feel about the behaviour: 'I feel really unhappy when you behave like that; you're better than that, next time you're feeling angry (then tell them what behaviour you expect the next time)...

### **Pacing**

Start with where the child is at and build from there. Build the relationship. This is more important than being right or being in control.

### **Leading**

Once you have paced, then you can lead the child to a positive outcome. Often we try leading first, before we've taken account of where the child is at.

### **Two Good Choices**

Instead of threats or bribes, use two positive options to focus the child on a successful outcome. Instead of saying 'you can have a dessert if you come to the table for your dinner', try 'you can either sit on this chair or this chair, you chose'.



### **Behavioural Modification**

Offer a positive alternative which automatically stops the unwanted behaviour by promoting a more positive alternative. Instead of telling them to stop picking their nose, tell them to use a tissue. Children are much more likely to respond to being told what they can do, as against what they can't...adults are exactly the same.

### **Open ended discipline**

Use the when/then approach here. For example 'When you've finished cleaning your room then you can watch television.' This is a great alternative to the more traditional approach of saying 'you didn't clean your room when I asked you, so now you can't watch TV.'

### **Logical consequences**

Make sure when you use sanctions that they are logical, positive and educational. If a child dawdles getting ready for swimming even though he loves to go, you can scream at him as a consequence, or you can give him fair warning and if he continues to dawdle, you can step back and allow him to face the logical consequence: miss swimming that night. He'll think twice next time you tell him to hurry!

### **Elevating the positive**

Focus on the positive behaviour underlying the apparent negative. Some call this catching your child being good. Notice and praise the good stuff, especially if it is the opposite of the behaviour you would like to see change.

## Conclusion

Parenting is a skill set that none of us are born with: it's learned over time, and more often than not through trial and error. Over the last decade it has been my great fortune to have had the opportunity to train thousands of parents and professionals in the principles and steps of The Nurture Programme-Managing Challenging Behaviour. I can honestly say I have learned far more than I have taught, and one of the most important lessons for me has been around the importance of a creating safe learning environments within which parents can speak about their experiences and gain practical insights in to dealing with the challenges.

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Cormac is Managing Director of Nurture Development, one of Ireland's foremost research, training and facilitation organisations. He is also an international faculty member of the Asset Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, Chicago. Cormac developed The Nurture Programme-Managing Challenging Behaviour in 1996 in response to a growing need among parents and professionals for a practical step by step workable approach. The Nurture Programme can be delivered in a one or two day workshop format, or in a weekly sessional format. Cormac also delivers inspirational and entertaining evening seminars to schools and interested groups throughout the country.

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