

POSITIVE PARENTING

Bringing Up
Responsible, Well-Behaved
& Happy Children

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To Grainne,
The Greatest Parent I Know

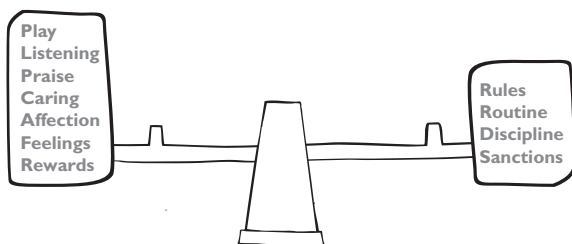
Introduction

LOVING AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTING

Getting The Balance Right

POSITIVE PARENTING

POSITIVE DISCIPLINE



It can be hard being a parent these days. Parents are busier than ever and many of the traditional supports that we relied upon are no longer there. There is increased pressure on parents to ‘get it right’. There are pressures to be positive and encouraging, while also being good disciplinarians, teaching our children right from wrong. We are also expected to be there for our children, supportively involved in their lives, while also holding down employment and providing for our families.

Good parenting is essentially about achieving balance. The key is to achieve balance between the needs of our children and our own needs as parents; between the need to encourage and love children and the need to provide them with rules and discipline.

In this book we argue that effective parenting involves achieving balance between Positive Parenting – providing your children with positive attention (through play/special time, listening, praise and encouragement etc.) – and also Positive Discipline – teaching children how to be responsible by setting clear rules and being firm about

them. Both are essential in bringing up children well, teaching them how to behave responsibly and helping them be happy and emotionally secure adults.

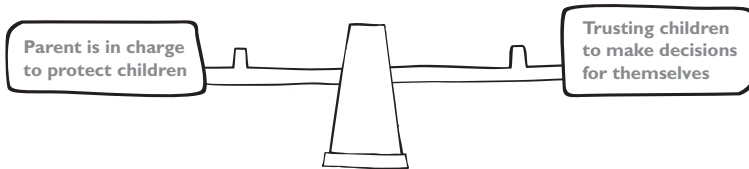
Sometimes the problems in society are blamed on children not being cared for properly or suffering neglect as children (e.g. not experiencing positive parenting). Other times these problems are blamed on a lack of discipline in the child's upbringing – parents letting their children get out of control or failing to set proper rules. The truth lies somewhere in the middle: children need both loving and caring parenting as well as clear discipline and rules. The secret is getting the balance right.

Problems occur when the balance is out of kilter; when children do not receive enough encouragement, support and understanding and when they do not receive firm, authoritative parenting. This book is all about helping parents get that balance right.

Empowering Parenting

PARENT DECISIONS

CHILD DECISIONS



Parenting is also a balance between supporting children in making decisions for themselves and making decisions for them as parents; between allowing them to learn for themselves and protecting and teaching them. This is a challenging balance you have to get right as children grow up and one that you have to constantly renegotiate as they become increasingly independent. It is important as a parent to remember the long-term goal – to empower children to grow up into secure, happy adults who can make responsible decisions for themselves.

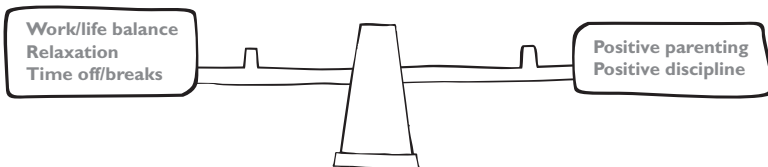
Many writers describe family life as like embarking on a plane journey together: you start the journey with a destination in mind and a navigation plan, but throughout the journey you can get thrown off course by other factors, such as wind or rain or other air traffic. Being off-course is in fact quite normal. As Stephen Covey says: ‘Good families – even great families – are off track 90 per cent of the time!’ What matters most is that you keep returning to your original course and you keep the destination in mind. Don’t let events throw you off-course permanently – keep returning to the flight plan.

The metaphor of a plane journey also describes the long-term aim of parenting. When a child is born, the parent is in the pilot’s seat, very much in charge of the controls. Parents make all the decisions about infants and young children’s lives, about what they wear and where they go etc. As a child begins to get older, a good parent allows the child into the cockpit and begins to teach them how to operate the controls. The child begins to make some decisions for themselves and learns how to do some flying under the supervision of the parent. As the child becomes a teenager, they begin to fly their own plane, with the parent still present as a teacher/supporter, before proceeding to fly their plane as an adult.

Start With Caring For Yourself As A Parent

CARING FOR PARENTS

CARING FOR CHILDREN



As well as caring for their children, it is also important for parents to prioritise their own welfare and personal development. This is another crucial balance that is important to achieve. Unfortunately, it is easy to get this balance out of kilter and many parents are stressed and 'burnt out'. They have put all their energies into caring for and attending to their children, so much so that there is little time and attention for themselves. While their intentions are admirable, the long-term results are bad for themselves and their children. If you are burnt out and stressed, you can no longer be there for your children; you can even become negative, inconsistent and resentful in your parenting. So you really have to turn this around and start with yourself.

The first suggestion we give to stressed parents is that they try to turn some of the care and attention that they have lavished on their children towards themselves. We suggest that they take time to identify and think about their own needs and wants, and then decide to prioritise and care for themselves as well as their children. The irony is that such a switch to self-care benefits their children as much as themselves, as the children will have access to more content, positive and resourced parents than before. Most of this book is about ways of providing positive attention and care to children and teenagers, whether this is by praise, encouragement, rewards or respectful listening and communication. The first step, however, is to make sure we treat ourselves the same way!

Build On Your Strengths As A Parent

You will notice that throughout this book we encourage you to build on your children's strengths and abilities. We also encourage you to apply the same principles to yourself. Too often parents give themselves a hard time, criticising their own behaviour and putting themselves down. Too often they focus on what they do wrong in every situation: 'I wish I hadn't lost my patience like that' or 'I should have more time for my children'. Similarly, parents can relate

negatively to each other, focusing on what the other has done wrong: 'I don't like the way you interrupted me talking to the kids' or 'You shouldn't have lost your temper'.

We encourage you to break this negative pattern and reverse it. Start looking for what you and your partner are doing right as parents. Be on the lookout for the small steps of improvement you make each day, the times you manage successfully. Begin to notice what you like about yourself as a parent. Don't be afraid to praise yourself: 'I'm pleased at how I was firm in that instance' or 'I'm glad that at least I tried my best'. Equally, if you are part of a couple, be on the lookout for examples of behaviour you like in your partner: 'Thanks for supporting me like that' or 'I'm really pleased that you came home early and we have some time to ourselves'.

It is in your children's interests for you to identify your own strengths and successes. Children learn a powerful lesson from you when you model self-encouragement. They learn how to be confident and successful and how to relate positively to other people.

Often parents go through difficult periods when it is hard for them to be consistent or to give their children all the time they deserve. At times like these, the worst thing parents can do is excessively blame themselves or be over-defensive. It is better to try to learn from the experience, acknowledge what needs to be done differently and move on. Self-compassion is as important as compassion towards others. It is powerful modelling for children to see their parents being honest about their mistakes and not dwelling on them but moving on to make a fresh start. This helps children learn how to move on from misbehaviour in the same way.

Remember, the goal is not to be a perfect parent or to have a perfect child. Such people do not exist (and if they did they would be unbearable to be around!). Rather, the goal is to be a 'good enough' parent – someone who accepts themselves as good enough, appreciates their own strengths as well as their weaknesses, tries their best and learns from experience.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is for all parents who want to learn how to help their children grow up into happy, secure, well-adjusted and responsible adults. It is particularly for parents who are dealing with challenging behaviour problems and other childhood difficulties, who want a toolkit of well-researched ideas on how to solve childhood problems and encourage good behaviour in children. The ideas are drawn from the Parents Plus Children's Programme – a video-based parenting course on managing behaviour problems and promoting learning in children aged six to eleven, developed in the Mater Hospital Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in Dublin. The book particularly focuses on the needs and issues facing parents of school-age children (six–eleven), though the ideas are relevant for younger and older children. There are corresponding books that particularly focus on the needs and issues of preschoolers (*Parenting Preschoolers and Young Children*, Veritas, 2005) and adolescents (*Bringing up Responsible Teenagers*, Veritas, 2001).

How To Use This Book

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 outlines nine basic principles that provide a step-by-step guide to solving childhood problems. The principles are both preventative and positive and together they build one by one into a comprehensive toolkit that helps form good habits of positive parenting, which can be drawn upon when faced by any childhood problem.

Part 2 considers fifteen typical childhood problems and issues that frequently occur for children aged approximately six to eleven. Each chapter considers one of these problems in turn and shows how the basic principles from Part 1 can be applied to solve them.

There are a number of ways to read this book. You can systematically start at the beginning and read through each chapter from beginning to end, or you can start with a problem in Part 2 that most concerns you, and then work your way backwards to the principles and steps in Part 1. It is also possible to read one principle at a time and to apply this at home, before returning to the book for the next principle. The key to making the ideas work is to test them out at home.

Part I

NINE STEPS TO POSITIVE PARENTING AND POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

Step 1

PRESSING THE PAUSE BUTTON

Paula found the morning routine with her children, Suzie, 8, and Robert, 6, really pressured and stressful. It would start with the children refusing to get out of bed and Paula having to shout at them and literally drag them out of the bed. Robert would then dawdle getting dressed and Suzie would refuse to have breakfast. Robert would then try to watch TV, getting really annoyed when Paula would turn it off. Paula found herself having to cajole and coax the children along every step of the way, and it would always end up in a row with everyone being late.

When faced by a conflict or a difficult situation, we can find ourselves immediately reacting in a certain way, without too much thought or deliberation. Sometimes our immediate reactions are helpful; for example, when we naturally respond to soothe a child who is crying in distress. But other times they can be unhelpful; for example, if we overreact to a minor challenge from one of our children or if we say something damaging in the heat of a row. Many different things determine how we react to other people and our children. It can be simply a habit (good or bad) that we have developed over the years or it can be a repetition of how we were treated by our own parents in the past, or it can be to do with how stressed or strongly we feel about what is currently happening. In addition, we all have our specific weaknesses; we all have our 'buttons' that, when pressed by others, make us fly off the handle. Problems can occur, however, when we get stuck in our reactions or when they become over-rigid and negative. Most problems in families are maintained by patterns of reactions between parents and children that have become fixed over time. The problems continue to happen with parents and children reacting the same way with the same negative result for both of them.

STEP 1 PRESSING THE PAUSE BUTTON

In the example above, each morning is stressful for the family. But each morning the parent reacts the same way (cajoling and arguing with her children to get up) and each morning the children react the same way (dragging their feet) and each morning ends with the same result (a row and a stressful start to the day).

So how can you break these patterns of reacting? What can you do to stop the problem from happening over and over again? The first thing you can do is to pause and think about what is going on. Rather than reacting the same way each time (and letting your children ‘press your fast-forward button’!) you decide to press pause so you can understand what is going on and then choose a more constructive way to respond. Consider now how Paula paused and thought through how she wanted to respond to the problem she was facing:

When taking time to think about the ongoing problem with the morning routine, Paula realised that she had become hooked into a pattern of cajoling, arguing and taking too much responsibility for the children getting ready. She realised that the routine was not clear in the morning and that many of the problems started the night before with a late bedtime, resulting in the children (and herself) waking up tired and cranky. She realised that much of Suzie’s refusal to eat breakfast was her looking for attention from Paula, who was too busy arguing with Robert.

To address the problem, Paula resolved to do a number of things:

- First, she would sit down with the children and talk through the importance of getting up on time and in a positive frame of mind, and then do up a morning routine chart with the children (starting with them going to bed at the correct time each night), which listed all the morning steps of getting ready and which included them sitting down together to have breakfast.

- Both children were given an alarm clock and it was explained that it would be their responsibility to get out of the bed in the morning. (Paula made sure the clock was placed at the other side of the room so they would have to get out of the bed!)
- Paula resolved that she was not going to shout at them to get up. Instead she decided she would open the curtains and remind them once and, if they did not get up in five minutes, then she would calmly remove the duvet (after first giving them the option of getting up).
- To assist Robert in getting dressed, she decided that she would help him get started and check how he was getting on (making sure to focus on progress) but that it would be his responsibility to complete it. If he was not dressed by a certain time, she would still leave at the necessary time and he would have to get dressed in the car.
- Paula also made sure to sit down with Suzie and eat breakfast with her, even if Robert was still getting dressed. She tried to make this time relaxing and to involve a chat in their time spent eating together.
- To help motivate the children to work as a team and get ready, Paula said they would get a point on the chart each day everyone was ready on time (and five points would mean a big family treat).
- Paula also reminded the children that if there was a day that they were not ready on time, then this must be because they were tired and the result would mean that bedtime the next night would be ten minutes earlier.

What is important in the above example is that the mother took time to think through how she wanted to respond and resolved not to react to the situation by shouting or cajoling the children. You may also have noticed that some of the solutions that the mother

undertook were about what she could do when the children misbehaved (remaining calm, backing off, giving the children choices) – and others were about avoiding the problem in the first place and teaching them how to behave well (setting an earlier bedtime and doing up the routine chart with the children).

When solving childhood problems it is always important to have both a Discipline plan (how you will respond when the problem happens or the children misbehave) and a Prevention plan (to stop the problem from happening in the first place and to teach the children how to behave well). We will explore creating these plans in more detail in Part 2 of the book, when we examine several common problems.

Choosing a different response

Pressing the pause button is essentially about allowing you as the parent to remain in charge – you remain in control and you choose how you will respond. This is different than reacting in the same way and letting circumstances or your children's behaviour control you (pressing your buttons to get a reaction!).

Pressing the pause the button is about not being stuck and repeating the same way of reacting every time, but instead breaking a pattern and being able to choose a different, more constructive way of responding. See the table on the next page for some specific examples.

Problem	Negative Reaction	Result	Alternative Positive Reaction
Child always says 'No' when asked to do something	<i>Parent reacts angrily and argues with child</i>	Child digs heels in Battle of wills ensues	<i>Parent pauses and does not react to confrontation Offers child a choice of doing what asked and a consequence</i>
Child badgers parent for sweets at the supermarket	<i>Parent gets frustrated and shouts at child for constantly asking</i>	Parent feels bad, gives in and child gets extra sweet	<i>Parent calmly gives child a choice – if you ask me again you will lose your treat – but keeps rule</i>
Getting homework done is a real battle every evening	<i>Parent sits over child to do homework</i>	Ends up in a row each day	<i>Parent backs off and gives child space, and periodically checks progress – focusing on what child has done well Lets school deal with undone homework</i>
Child constantly worried and anxious about non-specific things	<i>Parent gets sucked into listening to and talking about child's worries all day</i>	Both parent and child exhausted by the worries	<i>Parent sets aside a specific 'worry time' each day when she listens to child about the worries At other times encourages child to talk about other positive things</i>

Pressing the pause button gives you a chance to 'pause' and reflect about your parenting and to decide what type of parent you want to be. It gives you the opportunity to decide to be a constructive and positive parent who is both loving and firm, patient and fair (as well as self-forgiving and compassionate).

Finding what works for you

By pausing and taking time to think through what was really going on during a problem situation, you can come up with a respectful response that has a good chance of working. Often this is simply a case of remembering principles that you know already and remembering what has worked for you in the past. While you can't control how your children will react, what you can do is change your own responses. And you will find that when you choose respectful and empowering responses, taking into account your own and your child's needs, you will begin to positively influence your children. In simple terms, your children will begin to change as you begin to change. It is important to remember, however, that nothing works all the time or for everybody or in every situation. For example, in some situations, ignoring a child's tantrum can cause too much distress and it can be better to adopt a more soothing or listening approach. What counts is that you take time to think through what works for you and that you are flexible enough to adapt and change if something is not working. You may have to 'press the pause button' several times before you finally work out how best to manage a problem!

Tips for Going Forward

- 1. Think of a particular problem that occurs in your family. Take some time to think through to understand what is going on. Have you become sucked into a negative way of responding?*
- 2. What might be a more constructive way of responding that could make a difference? What has worked better in the past?*