

# **POSITIVE PARENTING**

Bringing Up  
Responsible, Well-Behaved  
& Happy Children

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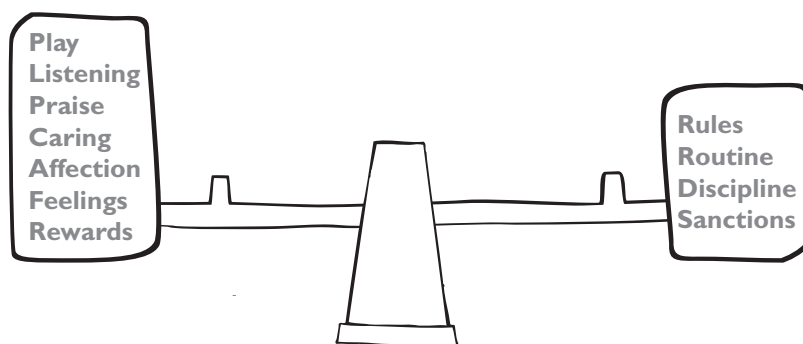
## Introduction

### 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.

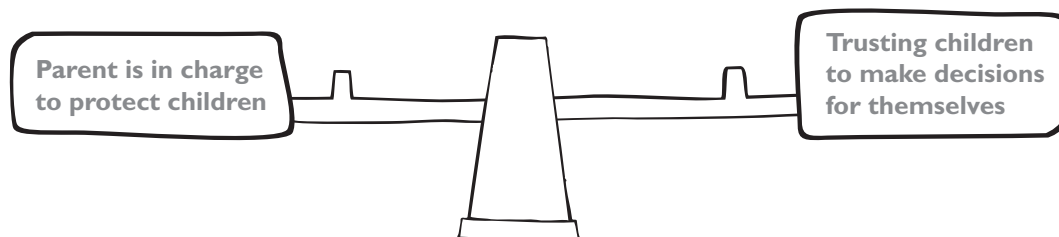
Sometimes the problems in society are blamed on children not being cared for properly or suffering neglect as children (e.g. not experiencing positive parenting). Other times these problems are blamed on a lack of discipline in the child's upbringing – parents letting their children get out of control 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.

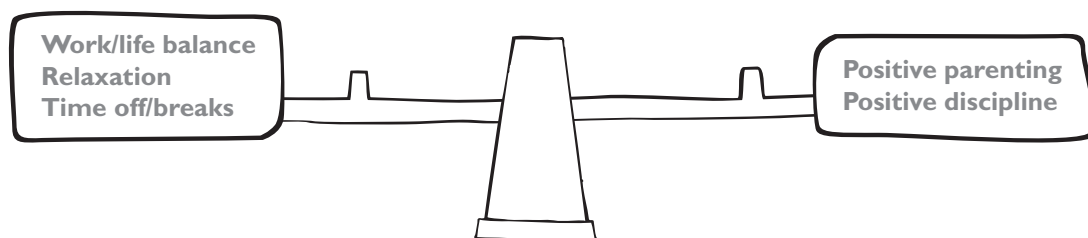
Many writers describe family life as like embarking on a plane journey together: you start the journey with a destination in mind and a navigation plan, but throughout the journey you can get thrown off course by other factors, such as wind or rain or other air traffic. Being off-course is in fact quite 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 I

### 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.

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Negative Reaction</b>	<b>Result</b>	<b>Alternative Positive Reaction</b>
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?*

## Step 2

### THE POWER OF POSITIVE ATTENTION

*Homework was a daily battle with seven-year-old Paul. He would dawdle and take ages to get started, and only when his father had been nagging at him. Then it became a major task in itself – he would complain that he couldn't do it (when his father knew he could) and call his father over (interrupting him getting the dinner ready) and he would have to constantly make sure that Paul did it properly. Most days he had to sit over him the whole time to make sure it got done. During this time, Paul's father could become really angry with him. Sometimes homework could take two hours, after which both of them would be exhausted. Quite often things would end up in a row.*

There is an important rule in psychology –whatever we attend to or concentrate on tends to increase in frequency and significance. Whatever we notice, highlight and comment upon our children doing, they will tend to do more of it and the behaviour will become more significant for both parent and child. The strange thing is that it works the same way whether this attention is positive or negative. Any behaviour you praise and encourage will tend to increase, but so will any behaviour you criticise, give out about and punish!

In the homework example above, the father has become trapped in the pattern of providing negative attention during homework. Most likely, he is hooked into noticing what his son hasn't done, or focusing on the homework he has done incorrectly. His child has learnt that the way to get father's attention is to complain and to say he can't do it, or to dawdle. If he takes a long time to do it, he gains his father's attention for these hours (even though this is negative attention).

So how could the father break this pattern and instead turn it into a positive pattern. The key is to shift his attention and to make sure he mainly provides positive attention when his son is behaving well and doing his homework. Consider the following steps he could take:

## STEP 2 THE POWER OF POSITIVE ATTENTION

- Rather than waiting to be called over when there was a problem, the father would go over periodically and comment upon what his son had done well, even if it was only something small: ‘You made a good start on that writing’ or ‘Great, you’ve got your book out on the right page’.
- If his son called him over with a problem, rather than telling him what to do, his father could always ask, ‘What have you done so far?’ and praise his ideas. He would then encourage him to identify the next step and give him space to complete this.
- He could invite his son to call him over when he has completed something (not just when he has a problem): ‘Ok, so you are now going to try one or more of the sums, call me over when you have tried one’ or ‘So you are now going to look for all the new words in the section – call me over when you have some’.
- At the end of each section of homework, he could praise all his ideas and ask encouraging questions such as, ‘What have you learnt?’ or ‘What did you enjoy most about your homework?’
- Finally, the father could make sure that something that is a ‘natural’ reward for finishing follows the homework (e.g. play time).

### **Catch Your Child Being Good**

The best way to break a negative pattern is to shift your perspective and to go out of your way to make sure your children get lots of positive attention and encouragement whenever they behave well – this means catching your child being good.

There is no one right way to provide positive attention. What is most important is that it is personal and experienced as genuine by both parent and child. With young children, a simple pat on the head or a warm smile can be enough. For older children, you may want to specifically comment on the behaviour you like. For example, you could say, ‘I see you’ve started your homework. That’s good’ or ‘I’m really pleased to see that you’ve come in on time’.

It can be difficult to make this switch to positive attention, especially when you are not used to it, or if you have experienced a lot of difficult behaviour in the past. However, it can make a real difference if you give it a try and let go of any resentment from past misbehaviour. Consider the example of Robin below:

*Robin had been involved in a lot of conflict with her ten-year-old son, more often than not on a daily basis. This usually started with him refusing to get out of bed in the morning, while she repeatedly called him, with increasing irritation. This normally ended in a screaming match, thus setting the scene for the rest of the day. Almost every interaction between them until the end of the day was hostile and negative.*

*When Robin first started a parenting course, desperate to change things, she couldn't imagine being able to find anything good about her son's behaviour to which she could pay positive attention. However, when she stood back a bit from the situation and observed her son, she quickly saw that there were many previously unnoticed aspects of his behaviour that she could acknowledge with positive attention. When he brought his cup over to the sink after breakfast she smiled and thanked him. When he let his younger brother play a computer game with him she said, 'It's very nice that you are being kind to your brother'. When he sat down to do his homework, she was able to comment positively on this.*

*Over time she began to see more and more things that she could praise and encourage, and she began to enjoy the change of approach and how it made her feel different. Her son's behaviour changed positively over a number of months and the relationship between them markedly improved.*

If you are used to a lot of difficult behaviour from your child and feel there is little you can notice that is positive, a good way to get started is to spend some time thinking about the things you like about your child. You might want to recall the times they behaved well in the past

(however long ago!) or times you enjoyed together and felt close. When you have pictured some of these things, write down one or two of them. When you've made a list, keep it in a safe place, and over the next few days look for further things your child does that you like and begin to note these down also. As you collect more and more examples of good behaviour, your attitude towards your child will change. Then, when you're ready, you can share some of your observations with your child. By now you are giving some really good, positive attention to them.

### **Focus On What You Want**

Catching children being good is essentially about switching your focus to attending to what you want rather than what you don't want. Often parents are very clear about the behaviour they don't want in their children – fighting, whinging, staying out late, etc. – but are less clear about what they do want from them. Instead of your two older children squabbling and fighting all day, what behaviour would you like to see? Perhaps you would like to see them getting along better, or sharing, or playing quietly together. Catching children being good is about thinking in advance about what you want and going out of your way to notice this behaviour and make a big deal when it occurs. Remember also to catch yourself being a good parent. As I have said earlier, it is important to apply these positive principles to yourself as well as to your children.

Making a shift to consistently focus on what you want, rather than what you don't want, can make a real difference in your life, transforming your own sense of self, your relationship with your children and with your partner.

### **Positive Attention Can Divert Misbehaviour**

Psychologists have found that much of children's misbehaviour is rewarded by the attention it receives. They have also found that a bout of misbehaviour often happens just after a period of good behaviour that has gone unnoticed. By attending to the good behaviour first you

can give children the attention they are looking for and divert them from seeking the attention negatively. A good example of this comes from a time I was working with a mother and her seven-year-old son and four-year-old daughter. The mother was describing how her son was often aggressive toward his little sister, and this concerned her greatly. As she was speaking I could observe the children out of the corner of my eye and I saw how the girl was beginning to annoy her brother. She was trying to take the figures he was playing with and he was beginning to get upset, taking them back from her. It struck me that he was on the point of hitting out, so, rather than let this escalate, I went over to him and said, 'It can be hard playing with your little sister, but you're doing a good job, letting her have some of your toys'. He enjoyed the compliment, relaxed, and then said, 'Look Tina, you can play with these figures and I'll play with these ones'. In this way, a bout of misbehaviour was avoided, and the child was reinforced for sharing with his sister. Of course this tactic does not work every time, but it can be very powerful in diverting misbehaviour to notice the good (or slightly good) behaviour that precedes it.

### **Can Children Be Given Too Much Attention?**

Children can certainly be given too much negative attention for troublesome behaviour. Children who are constantly pestering their parents – pulling out of them and whining – have learned that this way of behaving is guaranteed to get a response. Instead, providing attention to children when they are not behaving in this way, for example, when they are quiet, pleasant and doing what is asked of them, will, over time, bring about positive changes in their behaviour.

Some parents may be reluctant to praise ordinary behaviour or give a lot of positive attention, fearing it will make their children big-headed or that they might become dependent on the praise they receive. Research shows that children who receive much praise and encouragement – especially for ordinary and simple things – turn out

to be the most successful, confident and securely independent adults. When positive attention is genuine and sincere, it is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to provide too much.

### **Building Your Relationship With Your Child**

Providing positive attention is the best way to build your relationship with your child. Positive attention can come in many different forms, such as:

- Setting aside time to play
- Praise and encouragement
- Special chats
- Going on a walk together
- Setting aside time to do an activity your child really enjoys
- Teaching your child something
- Letting your child teach you something
- Reading together at bedtime
- Affections and cuddles
- Caring
- Expressing positive feelings
- Listening to your child's news
- Keeping a promise to your child
- Soothing your child when they are upset.

What works for one child may not work for another. For example, it is important to have a daily chat with your child where you can listen to their news and what is going on for them. However, different times work for different children, such as just after school, during mealtimes, before bedtime, when doing an activity such as walking, or in the car on a journey. Find what works best for your child.

## **Putting Money In The Bank!**

Your relationship with your child is a bit like a bank account. Any time you provide positive attention you make a deposit in the bank account and any time you do anything negative you make a withdrawal. The key is to make sure you are always making deposits in the bank account so that you never run out – you want to make sure that on a daily basis you have lots of positive time and attention so that during the hard times there is enough money in the bank for when you need to make a withdrawal!

### ***Tips for Going Forward***

- 1. Make sure that the 'special' time you spend next week with your children is enjoyable (it may be having a good chat with them or simply enjoying each others' company).*
- 2. Be on the lookout for good behaviour and make a note of it when you see it.*

## Step 3

### PLAY AND SPECIAL TIME WITH CHILDREN

*One of the biggest things that has made a difference in improving things at home has been setting aside a daily time to play with my daughter. She has really responded to the positive attention and her behaviour has calmed down completely. It has also been great for me to see another side to her and to really enjoy her company. I have to say that we both benefit.*

*My five year old was very jealous when his brother was born and this made things really difficult for a while. What made a difference was simply setting aside 'our special time' each day, just before bedtime, when we'd read or have a chat. The important thing was, my husband would look after the baby and this was our time together uninterrupted. This really helped my five year old. He'd look forward to it and so would I.*

### **The Value Of Play and Special Time For Children**

One of the most important ways to provide positive attention to children and to build your relationship with them is to set aside regular times to play with them on a one-to-one basis. Spending time with children in this way has many benefits:

- Play promotes physical, educational, emotional and social development in young children. Through play (aside from having fun), they learn new skills and abilities, express feelings and learn how to get along with other children. It is extremely important for parents to take special time to play with their children.
- Playtime can be a relaxing and enjoyable experience for parents as well as for children. In fact, many parents describe these times as among their happiest. Good playtime is a reward in itself to

parents, providing an often-missed opportunity to enjoy their child's company away from stress and conflict.

- Playtime brings parent and child closer. Children are more likely to open up to parents before and after playtime. With older children it is often during shared activities that they will reveal concerns or special interests they have. Parents can really get to know their children by spending special time with them.
- Child-centred play allows children to take the lead and make decisions. Children who experience their parents giving them control in play situations are more likely to have a sufficient sense of security to allow their parents to take control in discipline situations. When parents respect children's rules in play, children are more likely in turn to respect parents' rules in other situations.
- Child-centred play is the best way to bring on a child's development and to help them learn new things. When adults play with children in a responsive way, they help them learn new language, how to take turns and how to communicate appropriately.

### **How Best To Play With Children**

*When I first started to play with my seven-year-old son, it didn't go so well. I realised that I had certain ideas about what we should play together, such as football or the more physical games. When I stepped back and let him lead, I realised he had more of an interest in crafts and making things. This was all new to me but I let go of my own agenda of how play should go and sat down with my son. I remember how delighted he was when I took an interest in what he was doing. I also learnt so much about him and his talent for crafts, and it brought us closer together.*

While there is no one right way to play with children, there are a number of guidelines, which can be helpful:

### **Set aside a special time**

Perhaps the most important thing to do is to set aside a special time to play with your children. In a busy parent's schedule, this may need to be planned in advance and prioritised as something important and not to be missed. Play sessions don't have to be long to be effective. With young children (up to eight years of age) short, daily play sessions of fifteen minutes can make a real difference. With slightly older children, you might want to have longer times less frequently (two one-hour sessions weekly) based around an activity or hobby.

### **Spend one-to-one time with children**

Special time works best if it only involves one child at a time. While this can put extra demands on parents with many children, there is no replacement for one-to-one time with another person, in terms of getting to know them deeply and building an enduring bond with them. Even if it means slightly shorter or less frequent special times, it is still best to have quality one-to-one times with your children. These are the foundations of good family life.

### **Follow the child's lead**

In good playtime, children should be encouraged to take charge and make most of the decisions. Children have many other arenas in life where parents are in charge, so playtime is their chance to try out decision-making and to develop confidence. Parents can sit back and follow the child's lead, valuing and affirming their imagination and initiative. With young children this simply means letting the child choose the game or activity and how to play it. With older children it means involving them in the planning of activities and future special time. In both cases it is useful to take time to get to know what your children are interested in and to value and affirm their ideas first. With young children, this can be simply watching carefully what the child is doing and then naming or imitating it.

### **Encourage children in play**

It's easy to fall into the trap of correcting children when they play. Out of a desire to teach children, parents can find themselves being critical, saying, 'Oh, that doesn't go there' or 'It should be done like this'. I suggest that for special playtime, you go out of your way to encourage children, looking for things they are doing right and showing great interest in their activities. For example, you can use lots of positive comments such as:

*I like that colour you have chosen.*

*It was a good idea to turn it around that way.*

*You're really persistent in finishing this puzzle.*

Essentially it is about being a good audience to children in their play, taking a great interest in what they are doing, getting down to their level, providing lots of eye contact and good body language. Using encouraging statements and kind comments helps children continue in their play and promotes a rewarding experience for both parent and child.

### **Choose interactive, imaginative activities**

The best toys and play materials are those which stimulate a child's imagination and creativity. They don't have to be expensive 'educational' toys. We all see children who turn away from the expensive toy only to transform the box and wrapper into an imaginative castle!

The best toys allow children to be active and creative rather than passive (as with television viewing) and which allow parent and child to do things together. It is important to have toys that match a child's age and ability level as well as their personality. For older children, choose activities which emphasise cooperation and which allow you to interact with them. For example, going fishing is often a better choice than the cinema as it gives you more of an opportunity to talk and relate together. What follows are some suggestions for play and special time:

### Good Toys and Play Materials

Younger Children	Older Children
Playdough, plasticine	Jigsaws
Blocks/Lego (any building or construction kits)	Construction kits/ models (boats, planes etc.)
Jigsaws (for appropriate age level)	Paints/colours
Dolls/ figures/ puppets Tea set, tool set	Creative activities such as making a collage
Farmhouse, doll's house	Board games
Soft toys	Football
Dress-up box	Outdoor games
Paints, crayons, colours	Special activities (fishing)

### Good activities for spending time with children

Essentially you are trying to find activities and regular hobbies that you can share with your children as a means of building your relationship and staying connected. Below are some ideas:

Watching favourite TV programme	Following a football team
Doing homework	Making something (e.g. a craft)
Shopping together	Walking, cycling
Playing cards	Camping
Playing sport	Doing a course together
Baking/ Cooking	Fishing
House chores (fixing a bike etc.)	Working on the computer
Walking the dog	Caring for a pet together

## **Playing With More Than One Child**

As well as setting up one-to-one time with your children, there are many benefits to playing with two or more children at the same time:

- It helps children learn to share and get on with each other
- It enables children to feel close and connected to one another
- It gives you a chance to guide and support a child in shared play
- It is good for family bonding.

In busy families with many children, it may be more practical to set aside joint play times (though we still recommend planning for some one-to-one time with each child, even if it is less frequent).

### **How to play with two or more children**

#### **1. Sit in the middle of the children**

(or directly opposite them) In this way you can give both attention and take control if need be.

#### **2. Ensure each child has an activity that they want to do**

This can be *Parallel play* (suitable for children of different ages or interests), whereby each child has chosen a different activity and you are in the middle supporting them OR *Shared play* (usually suitable for children of similar ages), whereby the children play the same game together, taking turns.

#### **3. Share your attention**

Make sure to switch attention frequently between the children, supporting them in their play and ensuring each of them gets plenty of attention.

#### **4. Be a good audience/commentator**

Take turns commenting and noticing each child e.g. 'Pete has the blue block, and Julie has the green block'. This helps guide the play and

keep children focused on what is happening. It is a good way to teach children turn-taking e.g. 'Julie is now taking a turn, Pete is waiting (good waiting, Pete!) ... now it's Pete's turn ...'

**5. Look for any times the children notice and connect with one another and comment on this**

e.g. 'Oh, David is looking at Jean's colourful picture', 'You gave Pete a brick; that was kind'. This is the beginning of teaching them the skills of playing with one another.

**Have family special time**

As well as individual special time between parent and child, special time for the whole family together is important. Like playtime, this can get lost in the busy weekly schedule and often needs to be prioritised and planned in advance. Families can set aside a special Sunday meal, or family trip at the weekends as a way of spending relaxed, fun time together.

*I'd been worried for a long time about my ten-year-old daughter who seemed increasingly unconfident. I realised that I was very distant from her and she was growing up so quickly. So I made time to take up a hobby with her and to help her learn something new. She chose to learn how to play the flute (which was completely new to me). The two of us went to classes together. Funnily enough, she proved to be a better player than me, and much of the time she would be helping me with how to play. Ironically, the fact that she was teaching her Dad rather than the other way round proved to be real boost to her confidence. I learnt that I didn't have to 'teach' her anything but just be with her.*

**Listening To Children**

Listening is probably the most important way of giving children positive attention. Setting aside regular times to listen to children,

encouraging them to talk about their news, their feelings and concerns has lots of benefits. Listening is important because it:

- Builds children's confidence
- Helps children express themselves and understand their own feelings
- Helps children understand the feelings of other people
- Allows parents to get to know their children and to really get close to them
- Is the basis for helping children solve problems.

### **Active listening**

Active listening involves paying full attention to what the child has to say, how they say it and the feeling behind it. It means the parent stops what they are doing, looks at the child and allows them to speak without rushing in with solutions, blame or sympathy. When the child has finished speaking, the parent repeats what they think the child has said and names the feeling the child seems to be showing.

### **The time for active listening**

Active listening is valuable at any time, but it is not always practical for busy parents to abandon what they are doing so that they can actively listen to their children. It is particularly effective if used when the child has something exciting or upsetting they want to tell. Some parents find that by making a particular effort to actively listen to their children for maybe only ten or fifteen minutes each day they notice a big improvement in their children's behaviour and in their relationship with them.

### **Skills of active listening**

#### **Give your child your full attention**

It is important to set aside a time when you won't be distracted and you can sit down and really listen to your child.

### **Go at the child's pace**

Helping a child speak and express themselves may take time and patience.

### **Reflect back what the child has said**

Simply by repeating what a child has just said or even just nodding can be sufficient in helping them go on and express themselves more fully.

### **Pick up on feelings**

What distinguishes active listening from ordinary conversation is the concentration on feelings. Helping a child express feelings is crucial to helping them understand themselves and other people.

#### ***Tips for Going Forward***

- 1. Set aside a regular special time to play or spend special time with your children individually. For young children, this could be short, daily sessions of fifteen to twenty minutes. For older children, this could be less frequently but for a longer period of time, for example in the form of a weekly planned activity.*
- 2. During special time make sure to follow the child's lead, use lots of encouragement and, above all, have fun.*
- 3. Establish a regular routine to have a chat with your child (e.g. bedtime, mealtimes), when you have time to listen to them.*