



**CHALLENGE**  
Community Services

**Foster Care**

# 10 Ways to Help Children With Challenging Behaviour



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WITH A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT  
AND THE RIGHT GUIDANCE, YOU CAN  
HELP A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON  
LEARN HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS.



# Caring for a child in need

## The challenge and the reward

As a parent or carer of a child with challenging behaviours, you may at times feel helpless and as if you have lost control. You may even worry that there's nothing you can do to help your child.

Helping a child or young person suffering from psychological trauma is not an easy task. With the right environment and the right help, even extreme behaviours can often be turned around. When this happens, it's hugely rewarding.

## The effects of psychological trauma

If a child or young person in your care has experienced an extremely distressing event that has threatened their safety, such as domestic violence, alcohol and other drug abuse or prolonged neglect, they may carry distressing feelings inside them.

When these traumatic experiences exceed their ability to cope, a child or young person may behave in unexpected or extreme ways. They may become angry, lash out verbally or damage things around them.

## Making a difference

Learning positive ways to respond to challenging behaviours, will better prepare you for these emotionally-charged situations. This e-book gives you practical ways to manage challenging behaviours if or when they do occur, and support a child in your care who has experienced trauma.

With these skills in your carer tool kit, you'll feel more in control of the situation and your journey as a parent or foster carer will be smoother.

# Managing challenging behaviours

## 1. Make your home a calm and safe space

The physical environment in your home can add to your child's stress level. Stimulating lights, chaotic mess, overcrowding and excessive noise can contribute to your child becoming anxious and overwhelmed.

Creating a calm, quiet and ordered yet flexible environment will help your child feel safe rather than overwhelmed or threatened. If a child in your care is prone to temper tantrums, always pack away after use any objects that could potentially cause harm if used as a weapon (such as totem tennis, cricket bats, work tools and metal toys).

## 2. Create consistency

Children or young people who have experienced trauma have often come from unpredictable environments. They may have experienced loss of loved ones, multiple changes in carers and schools or other aspects of their life.

Even with the best of intentions, daily life does not always go to plan. But it's important to create predictable routines as much as possible and to consistently honour your promises. For example if you tell a child you'll watch them at a sporting event it's very important that you attend. If you promise to take them somewhere special, fulfil the promise even if their behaviour hasn't been perfect.

Be aware that changes of teacher at school, a change of timetable, change of seating plans or other routine can unsettle a child or young person who has experienced trauma. Prepare your child as much as possible by giving them information about any impending changes.





*RESPONDING TO A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON IN A WAY THAT SHOWS YOU CARE ABOUT THEM AND UNDERSTAND THEIR FEELINGS WILL HELP YOUR CHILD FEEL NURTURED AND SAFE.*

### **3. Provide the right amount of stimulation**

Children and young people who are bored or find activities too difficult can become angry and frustrated. For example, giving a child a complicated Lego set to play with when they have never played with Lego before could make them lash out in frustration. Provide stimulating activities that are within the capabilities of the child or young person and make sure you allow enough physical space for these activities.

### **4. Praise and give positive encouragement**

Give your child plenty of genuine praise and positive reinforcement every day and throughout the day. Build on their strengths by helping them to engage in positive activities, such as living skills, music or sports.

*GIVE YOUR CHILD PLENTY OF GENUINE PRAISE AND POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT EVERY DAY.*





Showing your appreciation is a powerful way to encourage positive behaviours. For example, 'Thanks for putting the washing up away. I really appreciate it.' Be sure not to follow positive praise with a negative comment, such as 'I wish you would do that more often.'

## 5. Pick your battles

Don't try to manage all the behaviours the child or young person is displaying. Your goal is to limit the number of times you react – the more you react the less effect you will have.

It can be helpful to make a list of behaviours you are not willing to budge on (such as showing respect) and those that are not essential (such as making the bed). Tell your child what you expect of them and what they can expect of you. Stay firm about important issues, but let the little things slip by without paying them attention.

Sometimes natural consequences are more powerful than what we tell our child to do. For example, rather than battling every night with a young person refusing to do their homework it may be more effective to allow them to experience the natural consequences.



## 6. Remain unaffected

If the child or young person in your care is behaving in a challenging way or has raised their voice, remaining calm and not allowing your own reaction to escalate will defuse the challenging behaviour much faster.

Use a calm voice and neutral body language at all times, particularly if your child is angry. Your child is relying on you to teach them how to regulate their own feelings. You can do this by modelling ways to cope with emotions. For example, 'I'm feeling mad. I'm going to take a deep breath.'



*BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR OWN BEHAVIOUR. IF YOU BREAK A RULE, YOUR CHILD WILL THINK THEY CAN BREAK THAT RULE IN FUTURE TOO.*

## 7. Avoid the conflict cycle

If a child or young person's behaviour is escalating, our natural response is often to take control and make requests through threats that demand compliance or give consequences. Demands for compliance will often end in a power struggle, damage the relationship and result in a conflict cycle.

To prevent or break a conflict cycle, the key is to actively listen. Show acceptance by trying to understand the child or young person's painful feelings behind the behaviour, rather than focusing on the negative behaviour or judging the child or young person. Modelling positive control by giving choices and asking for suggestions to resolve the situation can also help you reach a positive outcome.



**STRONG FEELINGS  
CAN MAKE A CHILD  
OR YOUNG PERSON'S  
BEHAVIOUR ESCALATE.**

## 8. Focus on feelings

Children and young people often have difficulty recognising or expressing their feelings. You can help a child or young person in your care enormously by taking the time to listen to them with your full attention, by validating what they tell you and by helping them identify a feeling (for example, 'That must have been scary for you' or 'You seem sad today'). Strong feelings can make a child or young person's behaviour escalate. If this happens, draw their attention to the signals in a non-critical way.

**Step 1.** In a calm voice, acknowledge the feelings behind the behaviour (such as anger, anxiety, sadness): **'I can see you are feeling mad.'**

**Step 2.** Name the negative behaviour: 'I can see you're feeling mad **because you're yelling at me.'**

**Step 3.** Name a more appropriate behaviour: 'I can see you're feeling mad because you're yelling at me. **Take a deep breath.'**

**Step 4.** Show a willingness to engage with your child once the behaviour stops: 'I can see you're feeling mad because you're yelling at me. Take a deep breath **and once you can talk to me in a calm voice, we can talk about what's going on.'**

Using this 4-step method will not only help defuse the situation it will guide your child to notice the signals themselves in future.



## 9. Set limits

In some situations, the most helpful option is to set limits and redirect the child or young person to an alternative activity. Setting limits will help your child regulate their emotions and decrease their feelings of distress.

**Step 1.** In a calm voice, acknowledge the feelings behind the behaviour: *'I can see that you're feeling really angry.'*

**Step 2.** Name the unacceptable behaviour: *'I can see that you're feeling really angry, but hitting me is not okay.'*

**Step 3.** Name the limit: *'I can see that you're feeling really angry, but hitting is not okay. You're showing me that you can't calm down right now.'*

**Step 4.** Redirect to an alternative behaviour for current or future use: *'I can see that you're feeling really angry, but hitting is not okay. You're showing me that you can't calm down right now. How about you take some deep breaths and go and jump on the trampoline or spend some time outside. This usually helps you feel less upset. I will come back in 5 minutes and see how you are. Perhaps if you're feeling less angry we can spend some time playing together.'*



## 10. Calm down and debrief

After an incident, your child will need time to calm down on their own. Stay close so that they know you're there for support if they want it. Once they have calmed down, approach them in an accepting and non-blaming way. Use a quiet and accepting tone of voice and ask non-blaming questions, such as, 'I'm just wondering what was going on for you before you broke your toy.'

*HELPING YOUR CHILD IDENTIFY BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS WILL HELP THEM LEARN TO EXPRESS THE GOOD AS WELL AS THE TROUBLING PARTS OF THEIR LIVES.*



# Need support?



If a child or young person in your care is behaving in a challenging way as a result of past trauma, don't go it alone.

**For support and information, contact Challenge Community Services on 1800 084 954 or enquire now.**

**Therapeutic Services link:**

<https://www.challengecommunity.org.au/therapeutic-services/contact-us/>

**SMART training:** Learn about how children experience trauma

<https://professionals.childhood.org.au/smart-online-training>.

**Reference:** Therapeutic Crisis Intervention: Student Workbook, 6th edition, Residential Child Care Project, Cornell University.