

Parenting tips for dealing with difficult behaviour in preschoolers

Parenting kids with difficult behaviours can be hard work. But there are some simple strategies you can try at home to manage your kids' behaviour. It's easy to overlook these simple things as you increasingly focus on the hard-to-control behaviour.

Quality time

Kids need regular one-on-one time with their parents. Quality time should be fun, doing things that your child chooses and enjoys. Try to spend quality time with them every day, even if it is only for 5 or 10 minutes. SKIP Tiny Adventures (whanau.skip.org.nz/having-fun/tiny-adventures) has great ideas for spending time with preschoolers. It has downloadable cards and a smartphone app.



Lifestyle stuff

It is easy to get the basics out of kilter. But too little sleep or exercise, or too much screen time can have a bigger effect on our kids' behaviour than we realise.

Sleep

Kids need plenty of sleep and may get grumpy if they don't get it. Most preschoolers will still be sleeping during the day, and usually give up daytime sleeps as they get towards school age. This varies from child to child, but on average, preschoolers should be getting the following amount of sleep over a 24 hour period:

- 11 to 14 hours for a 1 to 2-year-old
- 10 to 13 hours for a 3 to 5-year-old

Make sure they have a regular bedtime and go to bed at a reasonable hour. Discourage them from getting up through the night as this will affect the quality of their sleep. A bedtime story and a hug can make going to bed more pleasurable. Screens should not be used in their bedrooms, or as an aid to falling asleep. Using screens before bed may reduce your child's sleepiness and make it harder for them to sleep.

Activity

Healthy preschoolers need to spend at least three hours a day being physical.

They should be as active as possible throughout the day, doing things like playing, dancing, taking part in sport or cultural activities, and just going from place to place. This helps them to



let off steam and divert energy into activities that don't cause friction. Children who aren't active enough may develop destructive or annoying behaviour.

To get ideas for ways to have fun with little children and help them to learn through movement, go to www.sportnz.org.nz and search for "Active movement videos".

Screen time

The time kids spend in front of TV, or using computers, gaming devices, and mobile phones is time they're not spending being active, playing creatively, socialising and possibly sleeping.

The Ministry of Health recommends that children under 2 should have no screen time. It also recommends that preschoolers (age 2 to 5) should spend less than one hour per day in front of a screen (and less is better). Screen time should also only happen as a reward for good behaviour, not in response to demanding or difficult behaviour. Limit how much screen time your children can have, and stick to it.

Also, be involved in their media choices, making sure you are deciding what they should watch, not them. Using the recommended age ratings for sites or games is a good start. Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) has some excellent advice for parents about this.

Strategies that work

The following strategies can make a big difference, if you follow them consistently. If they are new for you and your family, your child's behaviour is likely to get a bit worse for a time, as they get used to the new rules. Don't give up, but keep at it, and you are likely to see some improvements.

Be firm, fair, and friendly

Set some house rules, for example, using words not physical fighting. Be consistent and make sure the consequences for breaking them are appropriate and fair. Stay calm – model how you want your kids to behave.

Be consistent

Caregivers need to work together – if the message isn't consistent it won't work.

Use distraction

When your child's behaviour starts getting worse, distract them on to something else so the bad behaviour doesn't occur (and need to be dealt with).





Reinforce desirable behaviours

Catch your child doing a good job and reward them for it. Reward cooperation and getting on without conflict. Consider creating a reward chart to motivate them to behave well. Rewards such as smiles, hugs, high fives and specific praise are simple yet can be quite effective. At the end of each day remind yourself and your child of their good points and strengths.

Avoid encouraging bad behaviour

Don't give attention in response to bad behaviour. Kids love attention; each time you tell your child off or punish them you are giving it to them. If it doesn't hurt anyone, or destroy anything, it may be better to ignore it. Making a fuss over undesirable behaviour can actually encourage it.

Avoid negotiating with your child

Once you have made a decision about how to deal with a behaviour, "act, don't yack". Entering into an argument about your decision with your child will tell them that your decisions can be changed and you don't really mean what you say.

Use punishment as a last resort

Some difficult behaviours need to be dealt with and can't be ignored (like injuring siblings or destroying things). For these behaviours remove privileges or use timeout. When you do this stay calm, keep interactions brief and don't back down on the consequences you choose. Make sure you are fair when choosing a punishment – it should match the behaviour and be age appropriate.

More information

- You can find more information on HealthInfo by searching for "child behaviour".
- whanau.skip.org.nz has information about specific preschool behaviours and how to manage them.
- raisingchildren.net.au has some great articles and topics such as *Encouraging good behaviour: 15 tips, Preschool behaviour, and Toddlers behaviour*.
- theparentingplace.com/stage/early-years also has some excellent articles on behaviour in preschoolers and toddlers.

Compiled by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Updated July 2017.

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