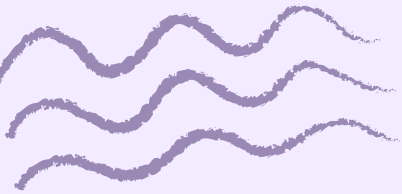


# Understanding Your Young Child's Behaviour

TIPS & IDEAS FOR 2-5 YEAR OLDS



MY FAMILY COACH



# About My Family Coach

We all have times when we need some support as a parent or carer. That's why I created [My Family Coach](#), a free website giving you all the ideas you need for every stage of your child's development, from these first years, right through to leaving school, and everything in between. We'll support you through the tough times, inspire you with new ideas, and share practical tips to make parenting that little bit easier.

This book covers some of the most popular topics parents and carers of very young children ask about and I do hope you'll find it helpful to understand your child's behaviour and grow together as a family.



*Jonathan*

Jonathan Newport is an internationally recognised behaviour specialist with over 30 years of experience. He started his career in a mainstream primary school and it was here that he developed a passion for puzzle solving with children who were struggling to 'fit' in their own classes. This led him to work across a range of primary and secondary schools, including 17 years leading Barnardo's largest residential special school. He is now the Global Director of Team Teach.



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CHAPTER ONE

# Understanding Distressed Behaviours



Just like us, children feel upset, sad, angry, frustrated and every other kind of emotion in between.

These emotions are heightened when they feel tired, hungry, thirsty, ill, or worried. And when they feel these strong emotions, young children in particular can show distressed behaviours, like having a tantrum, shouting, throwing and kicking.

Young children often don't have the words to explain their emotions. They probably won't even know why they are behaving this way. These behaviours are their way of communicating their needs to you. It's important to think about the reasons why your child is showing these distressed behaviours instead of focusing on the behaviour itself.



**Young children probably won't know why they are behaving this way.**

Play the detective and ask yourself:

- What is this behaviour telling me?
- Why might they be behaving this way?
- Have they got an unmet physical need, like being hungry or tired?
- Also think about the environment around them: is it too noisy, busy or bright?
- Does the behaviour often happen at a certain time or place?
- What do they need?

By thinking about the reasons behind the behaviours, you can understand how your child is feeling and decide the best way to respond to it. It also helps you recognise when your child is feeling distressed and make a change before they become overwhelmed to avoid a crisis.





# How to help your child calm down when they feel distressed

## 1: Give them time to calm down

Wait until they are fully calm before you discuss how they were feeling, how they behaved, and what they could do next time when they feel this way. This can take much longer than you might expect.

Label the emotion they were experiencing so they can learn what it feels like. Keep this simple and avoid long lectures or complicated strategies. Together you could come up with a plan for the future, such as, "When I feel like XXX, I can XXX."

## 2. Try re-focusing their attention on something else

If you can see signs your child is becoming distressed, try redirecting their attention to a different task or activity before it all becomes too much for them. Sometimes, simply moving to a different room or going outside is enough of a change.

Calming down time can take much longer than you expect.

## 3. Use descriptive praise

Praise is a great way to encourage your child to do something, but "well done" and "great job" doesn't tell your child what it is they are doing well. Instead, be specific and descriptive. For example, "I can see you are having a drink because you are feeling upset. That's a great idea to help you calm down."



#### 4. Be positive

Ask your child for the behaviour you would like to see rather than telling them what you don't want them to do. For example, if your child is angry, instead of saying, "Stop throwing your toys!" you could say, "Pick up your favourite toy and give it a cuddle."

#### 5. Stay calm

You may feel frustrated, angry, or embarrassed by your child's behaviour when they are distressed. Try not to react or argue back when things are challenging to avoid escalating the situation. Give yourself and your child a chance to calm down before you talk with them.

If you can feel yourself losing your temper, and it's safe to leave them, try walking away for a few moments to gather yourself. Alternatively, you can swap with a partner or family member to see if a change of face helps everyone calm down. If that's not possible, just a few slow deep breaths before you speak can help you get in control of your own emotions.

If you're worried about your child's behaviour, share your concerns with their nursery or preschool and find out if they see the same behaviours. They may have found strategies that work well that you can try at home.

All children show distressed behaviour at times, but they are also individuals. Some children rarely get angry, whilst other always seem to lose their temper. There isn't one 'right' way for a child to be. Try to avoid comparing your child to others. However, if they often seem distressed, you're finding their behaviour very challenging, or you have a feeling that something isn't right, it's important to get professional support. Book an appointment with your GP to discuss your worries and get their advice.





## CHAPTER TWO

# Making Mealtimes Enjoyable For Everyone





Although this is a normal phase many children go through, it can be stressful for you as parents and carers and hard to know what to do for the best.

One day, they might enjoy a meal, then the next, they hate it!

Children form good eating habits early in their life. Introducing your children to a variety of foods will help them get used to lots of different flavours and textures and make sure they are getting all the nutrients and vitamins they need for healthy development.

However, that can be easier said than done. Many children are fussy about foods. They may not like the texture, shape, or colour of certain ingredients. One day, they might enjoy a meal, then the next, they hate it! Or they may refuse food altogether now and then. Mealtimes can easily turn into a battle with your toddler.

Let's look at three key areas of mealtimes:

**1: Tackling picky eating**

**2: Making mealtimes fun**

**3: Table manners & social skills**

We've got lots of practical advice to make mealtimes something the whole family looks forward to.





## Tackling Picky Eating

Lots of children will struggle with an enormous pile of healthy vegetables to eat. Too much food on the plate can seem overwhelming to them and it may be why they refuse to eat it.

Make their food attractive and fun. Offer them a variety of different colours, shapes and sizes and let them choose what they eat from their plate, and in which order.

Alternatively, give them control by letting them choose between two or three options, for example deciding whether they want peas or sweetcorn.

You can make healthy foods fun by cutting them into interesting shapes and being creative about how you arrange them on the plate.

Get your child involved in preparing family meals, such as helping to wash the fruit or vegetables and let them cook with you to give them a sense of ownership.



Never force your child to try foods. This can reinforce negative feelings about them. They will have lots of other opportunities to try the new foods again and forcing them isn't likely to make them want to try again soon.

Take the pressure off and show them trying new foods is an enjoyable experience. Keep putting new dishes alongside familiar favourites and let them try them when they feel ready.

**They might need to see food multiple times before they try it.**



Your child will probably try them and eventually like them, but they might need to see the food on the plate multiple times before they even try a taste of it.

When they do take a bite, praise them for doing so. Be specific and tell them what they've done to make you feel proud of them.





## Making Mealtimes Fun

Mealtimes are a great opportunity to spend time together, learn to talk and listen to each other, and enjoy each other's company. If possible, try to eat as many meals as possible at a table. Put down phones and devices so you can concentrate on what everyone is saying. Turning off any screens will stop your child from getting distracted and help them focus on eating.

Take the time to sit down and eat with your child rather than trying to catch up on household chores.

Share the experience together as a family. That doesn't mean meals have to be long or formal, though. Create a relaxed atmosphere. Have fun, play games, and ask questions.

Make mealtimes something everyone gets involved in. They are more fun when everyone is part of the process. Your child could lay the table or put out the plates, for example. This is a great way to build their independence and teach them how to look after themselves.





Keep things positive by telling your child what you do want them to do, instead of what you don't. For example, you might want them to stop running around during a meal. Instead of saying, "Stop running!" remind them, "We sit down at the table to eat."

When you see your child doing as you've asked, praise them, and tell them what they did well to make sure they understand.

## Table Manners & Social Skills

Mealtimes are a wonderful way to teach young children the skills they will need in their life, like turn taking and sharing. They can see how to hold a conversation by listening and speaking to each other, and how to say please and thank you.

Remember to be consistent in your instructions and patient with them when they are learning. Eventually, your child will get the hang of things. It just takes time.

**Tell your child what you do want them to do, instead of what you don't.**

Young children learn other table manners, like washing hands before eating, using cutlery, and chewing with their mouths closed over time.

Don't assume they will naturally know what is expected of them. Explain the rule in a simple sentence and avoid trying to teach them everything at once. Pick one thing you'd like to work on at a time and have fun helping them to learn how to do it.





CHAPTER THREE

# Building Your Child's Self Esteem



Self-esteem is how we see ourselves. It's our sense of personal value and self-worth. It's based on our own opinions and beliefs about ourselves. Everybody has self-esteem, whether it's low or high.

As your child grows, they're able to do more by themselves, try new things, and learn skills. They feel good about themselves and independent when they can successfully do things, and so their self-esteem grows.

**Self-esteem gives your child the confidence to cope with mistakes.**



Self-esteem gives your child the confidence to:

- Try new things
- Try again when things don't go as planned
- Do things they might not enjoy or normally be good at
- Cope with mistakes





Every child is different and the things that might affect self-esteem can be different for each child, too. Some children have a lower sense of self-esteem than others.

If your child is struggling with low self-esteem, you may notice them feeling unsure, not joining in activities, and

avoiding new situations. When something is difficult, they will give up easily, or not try at all.

They may also find it hard to cope when they make a mistake or don't win at an activity, or cheat and lie in games to try and stop them from losing.

Low self-esteem can also make them feel that other children won't accept them or want to play with them. It can lead to them letting others treat them poorly and have a hard time standing up for themselves.





## How to help build your child's self-esteem

There are plenty of things you can do to build a healthy sense of self-esteem in your child.

Let's focus on four key areas:

- 1: Letting them make mistakes**
- 2: Encouraging new things**
- 3: Praising effort**
- 4: Reframing any negative statements**

### **1: Start by letting them make mistakes**

When you teach your child how to do something new, make sure they get a chance to try it themselves. Resist the temptation to take over or do it for them to save time. Help them see that everyone makes mistakes, and the important thing is to learn from them, not dwell on them.

Allowing them to get things wrong lets them experience the feeling of making a mistake. Not always succeeding in everything they do will let them know it's not the end of the world if they don't. You can talk to them about the times that you make mistakes, too. Normalise the experience, laugh about it with them, and show them how you manage when things don't go to plan.

**The important thing is to learn from mistakes, not dwell on them.**



## 2: Encourage them to try new things

Learning new skills can make your child feel more capable and confident in themselves. They also might find a new hobby that they end up loving! Exploring their own interests can help your child develop a sense of identity, which helps to build their confidence and self-esteem.

## 3: Praise their efforts

It's easy to praise your child for the things they're naturally good at, but it's far more important to celebrate their efforts regardless of the outcome.

Let your child know you're proud of what they are doing especially if they're finding it difficult. Make your praise specific by telling them exactly what they did well, for example, "You tried so hard to zip up your coat," or "Great job putting out the cups for dinner."



## 4: Reframe any negative comments they make about themselves

If your child starts to speak negatively about themselves, like saying "I'm stupid," or, "I can't do this," challenge what they are saying. Help them to see that learning is a process by using the word 'yet.' You can say, "That's right. You can't do that yet, but you're nearly there." Help them recognise how much they've already learnt and praise their perseverance.

Let them know you're proud of them, especially if they're finding it difficult.





CHAPTER FOUR

# Supporting Your Child's Language Development



Children learn how to communicate from their earliest days. Within the first few years of their lives, they begin to talk, and this communication provides the foundation needed for language development in later life.



When a young child's language is developing, they might not always have the words to explain how they are feeling. Instead, they express themselves in other ways, such as through their behaviour. Some children may hit out or bite when they feel frustrated because we don't understand what they're trying to tell us.

When children are learning to speak, understand and communicate, they follow an expected series of milestones that happen at certain ages.

As a parent or carer, you play a crucial role in this language development. Learning to talk happens naturally, but how you respond to your child's attempts to communicate can help strengthen their communication skills.

Every child develops at their own rate and these should be seen as a rough guide rather than a strict list to work through. However, if you're worried that your child is not reaching these developmental milestones, it's important to seek professional help from your GP.

**Some children may feel frustrated because we don't understand what they're trying to tell us.**



### **Up to 3 months**

Your child learns the sound of your voice and smiles when you talk. They can make sounds and their cry changes for different needs.

### **3-6 months**

At this stage, your child makes speech-like babbling sounds and pays attention to music. They giggle and laugh, and move their eyes towards sounds.

### **6-12 months**

Now your child can understand words for common items and people, like 'cup' and 'daddy'. They turn when you call their name and respond to simple phrases, like, "Come here." You spot them using gestures, like waving and shaking their head, to communicate.

### **1-2 years**

Your child's language development really takes off at this point. They can understand simple questions, follow short instructions, and use lots of new words. You'll spot them putting two words together and asking simple questions like, "What's that?"

### **2-3 years**

Now your child has a word for almost everything! They can use two or three words in a sentence and understand new words quickly. They also understand opposites such as 'big' and 'little' and begin to ask the question, "Why?"

### **3-4 years**

At this age, most people can understand what your child is saying. They can answer simple who, what and where questions and create sentences of four to six words, such as, "I want to play with cars."

### **4-5 years**

At this stage, your child understands most of what they hear, and they speak in full sentences. They can take turns in conversations and understand spoken instructions without stopping what they are doing to look at the speaker.





## Activities to help language development

There are many things you can do to support your child's language development. Talk about what you're doing, speak in full sentences, and chat to your child when you are out and about. Practice counting how many steps it takes to get from A to B.

You can also make up stories with characters, adventures, and happy endings. Have different voices for characters and use your voice to show changes in their emotions. Have fun, be silly, and enjoy talking together.

Reading is another great way to boost your child's language development. Reading aloud together helps teach them new words, boosts their overall vocabulary, and exposes them to sounds and correct pronunciation of words. Make-believe stories, such as fairy tales or stories from outer space, foster their imagination and creativity. This also helps them be imaginative when they're playing, too.

You can also enjoy music together. Young children love music and movement. Sing songs and nursery rhymes as these help teach your child about the rhythm and sounds of language.



# Ways to boost language development

## 1: Listen to them

Ask your child questions and be attentive and patient with their replies. Make sure you're not half listening while trying to do chores, or flicking through your phone, as children are quick to pick up when we're not really focused on the conversation.

Try not to interrupt and hurry them to get their words out. Let them work it out themselves with no pressure.

## 2: Show and tell

Learning words and objects at the same time helps your child make a connection between the two.

Name objects you see and touch, point out family members in photographs, and talk about colours and shapes. Point to the object you are talking about and let your child feel or see it and say its name.



## 3: Repeat words lots of times

Children need to hear a new word lots of times before they learn it.

## 4: Ask open questions

Encourage your child to try new words by giving choices. For example, try asking, "Would you like an apple or a banana?" instead of simply "Would you like a banana?"

Try not to interrupt your child or hurry them to get their words out.





### **5: Build sentences up**

Start by giving your child a word and let them practise it. Then add more words on to help them build sentences using it.

### **6: Praise**

Never criticise your child's speech as this is likely to knock their confidence. Instead, repeat what they have said back to them with the correct pronunciation. For example, if they said, "I like eating nannas," you could say, "Yes, I like eating bananas, too." Give your child lots of praise for their efforts when they do try to use a new word.

### **7: Limit screen time**

The World Health Organisation recommends that children under 2 should have no screen time and children between 2 and 4 year's old should have up to 1 hour per day.

While many programmes can be educational, children don't get the interaction they need with screens. These interactions are ones that help them develop the skills they need to communicate. Try turning TVs and devices off during the day and planning a short screen time session as a part of their usual routine.

Speech and language problems are relatively common in childhood.

According to I CAN, the children's communication charity, one in ten children in the UK struggle to speak and understand language.

If you are worried about your child's language development, speak to your GP for further support.





CHAPTER FIVE

# Making Those First Friendships





Many children form their first real friendships when they start nursery and school. These early friendships are important because they help them practice the skills they'll need as an adult.

Some children seem to make friends easily, but others can find it overwhelming. Some might be a bit shy and need time to watch what happens before joining in.

Before your child starts forming these relationships, they need to have the social skills in place to make the first steps. They will keep developing these as they grow up and it takes practise. So, what can you do to help get your little one started?

### **1. Talk about what friendships look like**

Talk with your child about what they think makes someone a good friend. Give them hints about what a friend should do, like sharing a toy, personality traits such as kindness, and shared interests, "Does Sam like playing with cars too?"



## 2. Practice saying hello

Practicing social skills teaches your child social cues, like smiling and waving, and saying hello to someone.

You can encourage your child to address a new child by saying hello and asking for their name, or joining in a game with them. Try role playing social situations with toys and puppets or family members so they can practise.

Avoid forcing them to cuddle or kiss people if they don't want to. Instead, suggest other ways they can greet someone like a high-five or fist bump.

## 3. Practice playdate skills

Skills like sharing and knowing how to talk to another child don't come automatically. It takes time and practise to get there.

Find fun ways to practise these skills by inviting children over for a playdate. If your child is easily overwhelmed, try having just one child at a time visit for a limited time. Your child may like to put away any particularly special toys and choose games they are happy to share with a friend.

## 4. Read, watch and talk about friendship

Look for books and TV shows that feature friendships, compassion, and sharing. Talking about the characters, their feelings, and the story's outcomes will help your children learn how to be a friend.

**If your child is easily overwhelmed, try having just one child to play at a time**

## 5. Play together

Playing with your child is also a great way to help them learn how to interact with others, share, and to take turns. All of which are essential for being a great friend.

## 6. Provide play opportunities

As well as structured playdates, choose activities that allow for creative, open-ended play, such as going to the playground or visiting a woodland.





## 8. Show off your own social skills

Children learn by watching what others do and modelling this behaviour themselves. By showing positive and friendly behaviours, you encourage your child to do the same.

When you see them being friendly, praise them by telling them what they did well.

## 7. Keep a presence

When your child is first learning how to be a friend, it might be useful to stick around for the first few playdates or activities just to see how they are getting on. This way, if you see something is not quite right, you can talk to your child and explain how they can do it differently.

But do keep building their independence and look for opportunities for them to play without you around.

## 9. Use Specific Praise

When you see your children displaying friendly behaviours, such as sharing and taking turns, praise them by telling them what they did well. This encourages your child to repeat positive behaviours.



# What if my child is struggling to make friends?

Some children have a harder time making those first friendships. Do be patient as it can take time for them to find and make friends.

However, if you're worried your child seems isolated from other children, struggles with social skills, or you think they're being bullied, talk to their teacher or nursery leader about your concerns and speak to your doctor for advice.



**Some children seem to make friends easily, but others can find it overwhelming**



Being a parent is the hardest job in the world. But we've found information available online is often confusing, misleading, or just downright wrong. We're here to fix that.

My Family Coach is a free website full of expert support brought to you by Team Teach. We have over 20 years' experience helping schools, families, and health and social care sectors. We've transformed 5,000 schools and train 100,000 people each year.

We've even won awards for our training courses. Now we're here to support parents and carers, too.

Our website is full of helpful Quick Reads, podcast episodes and Video Talks with more added all the time. Come and see how we can support your family.

**[myfamilycoach.com](https://myfamilycoach.com)**

