

## Questions and Answers to Behavioural Problems in Preschoolers

From Parenting to Self-Discipline

3 more steps of parenting

Clinical Psychology Service Branch  
Central Psychological Support Service  
(Pre-school Service)

## **Is parenting enough?**

Effective parenting depends on whether parents can give direct and feasible instructions to children. There are two ways to do so:

### **1. Guide children to do the right behaviour**

Don't just say "No"! Remember to tell children what they should do.

OR

### **2. Give children clear instructions in advance**

Allow children to know what actions they need to do to get what they want, or when they could get what they want.

However, is this good enough? The answer is "No", because children still have not learnt to be "self-disciplined".

**Self-discipline is the ability to manage yourself and be responsible for your own actions.**

Self-discipline is related to many aspects of children's development, including "**Independence**", "**Self-Care**", "**Autonomy**", "**Self-confidence**", "**Decision-making**", "**Responsibility**", "**Social interaction**" and "**Stress coping**", etc.

Let's first have a quick revision on the [3 steps of parenting]. For example, a child throws his schoolbag on the floor and sits on the sofa to watch TV after he gets back home from school.

Using the [3 steps of parenting], parents could say:

1. Acknowledge emotions  
"I know you want to watch TV straight away!" (**Show understanding**)
2. Point out mistakes  
"But you cannot throw your schoolbag on the floor!" (**Correction**)
3. **Guide correct behaviours/ Give notices in advance**  
"Put away your schoolbag and then you can watch TV!" (**Set expectation**)

Since these 3 steps are all directed by adults, children are unable to learn how to be self-disciplined. Have you noticed that children often rely on adult's commands, and only do things after they are asked to do so? Without adults by their sides, children would revert to their "old selves" and would not behave well on their own.

### **3 more steps of parenting**

Parents can use the following [3 more steps of parenting] to train children's self-discipline.

- 1. Ask**
- 2. Answer**
- 3. Take action**

**"Ask" is the adult's responsibility, while "Answer" and "Take action" are the child's responsibilities.**

In the previous example, parents used [3 steps of parenting] to help the child understand that he should “first put away his schoolbag, then watch TV”. To train children's self-discipline, parents can also use [3 more steps of parenting] afterwards.

For example, when the child want to watch TV but forget to put away his schoolbag again, parents can switch *off* the TV to stop the child, and:

1. Ask

Ask the child: "What should you do with your schoolbag /What have you forgotten to do?"

2. Answer

Wait for the child to respond, "I have to put away my schoolbag".

3. Take action

Encourage the child to take action after he responded, "That's right! Go do it now!"

When the child has corrected his behaviour, parents should **give praises and affirmation** to the child, and let the child watch TV. [3 more steps of parenting] is to **allow children to take action based on their reminders to themselves (2."Answer")**.

Being aware of your own reminders and actions is the first step of achieving self-discipline.

Hit a snag/ (Encounter an obstacle)

After using [3 more steps of parenting], if the child were still uncooperative, and has even talked back saying, "I know that already/ I'll do it later!", how should parents respond?

Let children hit a snag, and face the consequences of their behaviours.

What are the consequences of not tidying up your personal belongings? You may need more time to search for things, or even fail to find them. If children do not put away their schoolbag, they have to face the consequence of "not finding" their schoolbag. Hide the schoolbag. When children come up to you for their schoolbag to do homework or go to school, parents can teach children a lesson, "You cannot find your schoolbag because you didn't put it away before!".

"Where's my schoolbag?"

"The schoolbag is lost because you didn't put it away before!"

Parents should not just scold children, they should allow children to actually not hand in homework or not bring a schoolbag to school, and face the consequences of being told by teachers.

**Remember, it is better for children to hit a snag once, than to keep reminding them a thousand times.**

After children learnt their lessons, parents can put the schoolbag back to the original location, and use the [1. Ask, 2. Answer, 3. Take action] steps again to ask for children's positive behaviours. Children will likely cooperate and parents can then have a chance to praise their good behaviours.

## **Parent's responsibility**

Parents always prefer to minimise problems in order to protect their children. However, for children's benefits when growing up, parents' responsibility would be:

“Walk with children along their developmental path, instead of carrying them and walking for them on their behaves.



Problems that arose when taking care of children in this generation are not related to "not doing enough". On the contrary, it is related to "doing too much for the child without realising it". No matter how much we want, parents simply cannot help children handle everything. Parents may help children put their clothes on, feed them, carry their schoolbag for them, and even do homework for them, but parents cannot get a shot or take medicine for the child, or take their exams for them. Parents have to accept the reality that children have to walk their own paths. Here's a story:

"There was a grandfather who would bring his 4-year-old grandson for a walk every early morning. The grandfather would hold his grandson's hand and take care of him, but the grandson refused to have his hand held. The grandfather reminded the child, "It is very easy to trip on these rocky roads and hurt yourself if you don't let me hold your hand". The grandson responded, "You're right, I might fall down and get hurt, but after I have fallen down, I would learn to walk steadier and know how to avoid danger. Grandpa, when I fall, I just want you to be by my side to help me stand up again. In the future when I am alone, I will still know how to take care of myself". The grandfather thought his grandson's words were very wise, so from that day on, he allowed his grandson to walk on his own.

Parents need to let children experience challenges at an early age. If children have very few experiences facing difficulties when they were young, they would have an even harder time handling problems when they grow up. The negative consequences of mistakes a 3-year-old face would likely be much easier to handle and much less severe than the consequences of mistakes a 13, or 23-year-old would face.

## **The courage of letting go**

Parents who cannot let go of their children would often feel their children's distress as their own. If this were the case, it would be hard for children to grow up no matter how hard they tried. On the contrary, parents who know that children's troubles should be handled by children themselves, could let children learn ways to solve problems on their own, and thus, become more independent. Please remember, the goal of letting go is not to torture children, but to help them learn to face and accept consequences of their actions.

**When children encounter problems, is the DISTRESS experienced by parents? Or experienced by children?**

Throughout the process of letting go, parents have to muster up the courage to tolerate and accompany children through difficult times of failure and problems. Here are some examples of letting go:

### **The child is not willing to eat on his own**

The natural consequence of not eating is getting hungry. Parents have to set a designated meal-time and let go of feeding the child. Before eating, parents could give the child instructions and expectations, and after the time period is up, parents could put away the food immediately. Even when the child complains that he is hungry later on, parents should not give any food to the child, and instead should tell the child that he has to wait for the next meal-time to eat.

### **The child keeps running about wildly in the park**

There is always a risk of falling down when running about wildly, and the natural consequence is getting hurt. Parents can remind the child to be careful, but when the child refuses to listen even after parents have tried to stop him, parents can let go and allow the child to get hurt once. The child would clearly remember his lesson after hurting himself.

### **The child does a sloppy job on his homework**

The consequence of doing homework in a sloppy manner is making many mistakes, getting poor grades, or getting told off by teachers. Parents need to let go and let the child finish his homework by himself. Afterwards, parents can guide the child to check his homework on his own. If the child did a sloppy job, parents should let it be and allow the child hand in his homework and bear his own consequences.

## **Choice**

Allowing children to make choices helps them learn to be self-disciplined, and even helps build a closer parent-child relationship.

Children will be happier and less likely to resist against parents if they have more chances to be “in charge”. Parents can give opportunities for children to make choices, for example:

- **Choosing which shirt to wear**
- **Choosing which toothbrush and toothpaste to buy**
- **Choosing whether to take the bus or the train**
- **Choosing what to eat for tea**
- **Choosing whether to wash dishes or wash clothes**
- **Choosing to revise which part of his homework**

Parents have to remember to be genuine about giving children a choice. For example, when you asked your child "Do you want to take the train or the bus to grandma's house?". If the child chose to take the bus, you must follow through with the child's choice, and should not say, "We don't have enough time to take the bus, let's take the train instead!". This is a "fake democracy", which may anger the child or make him resist even more. If parents were really tight on schedule, you should not give the child choices and should simply instruct him, "We don't have time today so we will take the train to grandma's house". Parents should never give false hopes to children or break promises, because these would only destroy your trustful relationship with them.

## Children's responsibility

When allowing children to make their own choices, parents should have the **mental preparation that children may choose an option that you believe is undesirable**. Parents must remember **not to intervene, but to let go and allow children to experience the consequences of their choices**.

For example, you allowed your child to choose a cup cake at a cake shop. If the child chose a coffee cake, no matter how much you disagree with his choice, you should still let him try it once. You can tell the child your concerns, for example say, "This cake is coffee-flavoured, you might not like it", but in the end, you have to respect the child's decision.

Parents might think that coffee is not good for children because it might cause children to have difficulty sleeping; or parents might worry that children would throw a tantrum after they realised the cake was not tasty. No matter what happens, parents should let children own up to their own choices and accept the consequences. If the child could not fall asleep that night, he would learn his lesson and will not choose the same cake next time; if he realised that the cake did not taste good, he would have to accept that he made a bad choice, and should not ask parents to buy another cake. Parents could comfort the child and tell him, "You can choose again next time".

**Children cannot develop the mindset of "Heads I win, tails you lose" and act like sore losers. They have to learn to accept any consequences of their choices, so that they become responsible to themselves!**

## **Praising and evaluating yourself**

Being praised is a "nutrient" that helps children's growth and development, but ideally, children should learn to evaluate and praise themselves. Children with good mental health know how to objectively evaluate their own performances, **feel proud of their good work, and at the same time, understand and accept their own weaknesses.**



**Parents should praise children according to the principles below:**

- **"Praise good work" - Pay attention to children**
- **"Praise when the child is good" - Be honest with children**
- **"Lots of praises for excellent work, some praises for great work, a few praises for good work" - Praise in different levels**
- **"No praise for bad work" - Do not deceive or avoid it when children do bad work, let them know what they did poorly**

**Other than praise, parents could guide children to evaluate themselves, for example:**

**1. Set goals for himself**

**- e.g., "I have to finish my dinner before 8pm"**

**2. Review progress by himself**

**- e.g., "I was busy playing and could not finish my dinner before 8pm"**

**3. Praise himself**

**- e.g., "I did a good job because I did not watch TV and could finish my dinner quickly"**

**When faced with children's failures, parents could:**

- **Acknowledge emotions and comfort**  
**"It's ok if you can't do it/ These homework assignments are quite difficult!"**
- **Guide children to evaluate their work, and think of a way to improve,**  
**"You weren't successful this time, what can you do better next time/ what can you change next time to make it better?"**

## **Growing up and having confidence**

"Mum ... this slice of orange has a seed inside!" How would you handle this problem? By now, I trust that you understand, helping the child remove the seed is not the right solution!

Parents only have to respond by saying, "Yes, oranges have seeds", and remain silent to wait for the child to solve his own problem. The child might spit the seed out, or swallow the seed, or use his own way to remove the seed, or he might even throw a temper tantrum. No matter what the case is, just let the child deal with that seed, either he accepts the reality and eats the orange with a seed, or he finds a way to solve problems. Parents do not have to do much in this situation because no matter what you do, you would still be taking away a great chance for the child to learn independence.

Children who only complain but never solve problems on their own cannot secure their own happiness because they completely rely on adults to give them happiness; children who know how to face and solve their own problems will have more control over their own happiness, and this independence is a wonderful part of growing up. Hope that you could raise a confident and independent child.

Hope you find the advice in this booklet helpful for you in improving your child's behavioural problems, and put the advice into action.

Nevertheless, children's behaviours are affected by developmental challenges and other factors. If you think it is necessary, you are welcome to contact a clinical psychologist through Integrated Programme teachers at your child's school, so as to provide you with appropriate advice and support.