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Information from Your Family Doctor

Tips for Better Parenting

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► See related article on [prevention of child abuse](https://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0315/p1577.html) (<https://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0315/p1577.html>).

I love my children, but being a parent can be so hard!

Being a parent can be a joy, but it's also a tough job. No parent is perfect. We all make mistakes. Even loving parents sometimes do things they don't mean to do, like slap a child or call a child a bad name. But if you think you're having trouble controlling yourself, get help so a pattern of abuse doesn't start.

I get so frustrated sometimes. Is this normal?

Yes. All parents get frustrated. Children take a lot of time and energy. Parenting is even harder when you have problems in your life, such as worries about your job, your bills or your relationships, or problems with alcohol or drugs. To be a good parent, you have to take care of yourself. That means getting help for your problems.

What can I do when I feel frustrated?

Take a break. Everyone needs a break from being a parent once in a while. If you have another adult in your family, take turns getting away. For example, have your partner stay with the children so you can visit friends. Take turns sleeping late on the weekends. If you're a single parent, ask friends and relatives to help by running some errands for you. Maybe they could watch your child while you go out.

I sometimes lose my temper. Does that mean I'm a bad parent?

No. Many parents lose their temper with their children. It's OK to feel angry, but it's not OK to take it out on your children. When you're really angry, take a break. For example, take your children for a walk or call a friend to come help you. If you feel angry with your child almost every day or have trouble controlling your temper, get some help. You might talk to your family doctor. There are groups that can help parents, too. One group is listed at the end of this handout.

Is it OK to spank my child?

Spanking isn't the best way to discipline children. The goal of discipline is to teach children self-control. Spanking just teaches children to stop doing something out of fear. There are better ways to discipline children.

One good way for infants and toddlers is called "redirecting." When you redirect a child, you replace an unwanted (bad) behavior with an acceptable (good) behavior. For example, if throwing a ball inside the house isn't allowed, take your child outside to throw the ball.

With older children, try to get them to see the consequences of their actions and to take responsibility for them. For example, you can explain to your son that everyone had to wait for dinner because he didn't set the table like he was supposed to. Explain that he has to wash the dishes after dinner because he didn't set the table before dinner.

How can I be a good parent?

There's not just one right way to raise children. And there's no such thing as a perfect parent—or a perfect child. But here are some guidelines to help your children grow up healthy and happy:

- Show your love. Every day, tell your children: "I love you. You're special to me." Give lots of hugs and kisses.
- Listen when your children talk. Listening to your children tells them that you think they're important and that you're interested in what they have to say.
- Make your children feel safe. Comfort them when they're scared. Show them you've taken steps to protect them.
- Provide order in their lives. Keep a regular schedule of meals, naps and bedtimes. If you have to change the schedule, tell them about the changes ahead of time.

- Praise your children. When your children learn something new or behave well, tell them you're proud of them.
- Criticize the behavior, not the child. When your child makes a mistake, don't say, "You were bad." Instead, explain what the child did wrong. For example, say: "Running into the street without looking isn't safe." Then tell the child what to do instead: "First, look both ways for cars."
- Be consistent. Your rules don't have to be the same ones other parents have, but they do need to be clear and consistent. (Consistent means the rules are the same all the time.) If two parents are raising a child, both need to use the same rules. Also, make sure baby sitters and relatives know, and follow, your family rules.
- Spend time with your children. Do things together, like reading, walking, playing and cleaning house. What children want most is your attention. Bad behavior is usually their way of getting your attention.

What can I do if I need help raising my child?

There are many ways to get good parenting advice. Sign up for parenting classes offered by hospitals, community centers or schools. Read parenting books or magazines. Talk to your family doctor, a minister, a priest or a counselor.

You can also ask your family doctor for parenting help. Don't be embarrassed to ask. Raising children is hard, and no one can do it alone. Your doctor can help you with issues like discipline, potty training, eating problems and bedtime. Your doctor can also help you find local groups that can help you learn better parenting skills. Here is a national group that can help you. (You can also check your local phone book for parenting groups.)

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse

telephone: 1-800-CHILDREN

Website: <http://www.childabuse.org> (<http://www.childabuse.org>)

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org> (<http://www.familydoctor.org>).

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.

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