



How to handle children's disruptive behaviours?

Parenting will be easy and joyful when children readily comply with the parent's instructions. However, some parents are distressed by their children's uncooperative and disruptive behaviours. This factsheet aims at helping parents understand the intentions or reasons behind children's misbehaviours, analyse them, and look for pertinent measures.

How do Disruptive Behaviours affect children and their family?

Disruptive behaviours of children can take place in various settings, for instance, being uncooperative or demonstrating difficulties in controlling themselves at home or at school. Children with disruptive behaviours show ongoing patterns of uncooperative and defiant behaviour to authority figures. Not only do they often act aggressively, but also violate the rights of others actively and intentionally. Their behaviours tend to interrupt class activities and lead to classroom disruption, for example, yelling in class and being verbally or physically aggressive to other students; meanwhile, they may ignore instructions, refuse to follow rules, and behave in angry, resentful, spiteful and vindictive ways. These behaviours cause frustration and resentment to teachers and parents. In addition, these children are likely to experience an unpleasant time at school, as well as tension in parent-child relationship.





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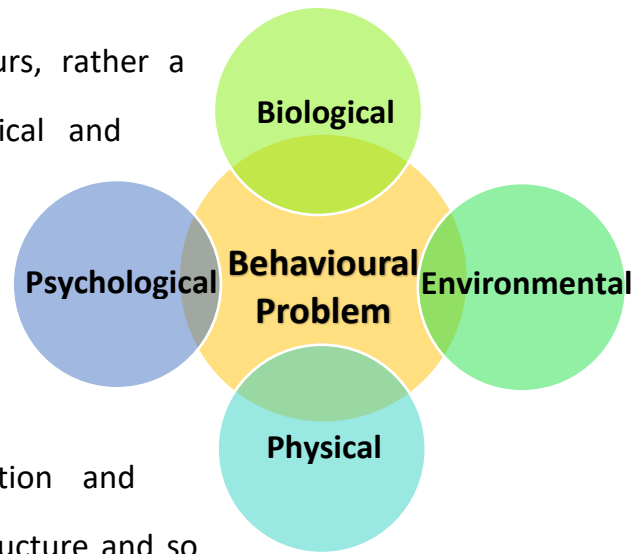
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What causes Disruptive Behaviours?

There is no single cause of disruptive behaviours, rather a combination of biological, environmental, physical and psychological reasons intertwining with each other.

Parenting is considered to be one of the key elements.



Parenting factors include parents' own emotion and temperament, parent-child relationship, family structure and so on. Examples such as parents' marriage distress, patterns of parenting, or physical or emotional abuse or neglect to children, play crucial roles in increasing children's disruptive behaviours. Besides, children who were rejected by their mothers during infancy, separated from their parents and lack of proper foster care show an increased risk for disruptive behaviours.

Children's manifested behavioural problems can be learned from daily experience. For example, being blamed by his/her mother, a child threw a tantrum, and the father offered ice-cream with the aim to soothe the child. In this scenario, the child might learn that by throwing a tantrum, he/she could get something he/she liked in return (e.g. ice cream and father's attention). In addition, inconsistent parenting styles adopted by father and mother can confuse children, making them unsure of which standard to follow. For instance, a child did not want to finish his/her meal and eventually threw a tantrum. The parents then took away his/her meals with an attempt to treat this as a "punishment". In this situation, some children actually get what they





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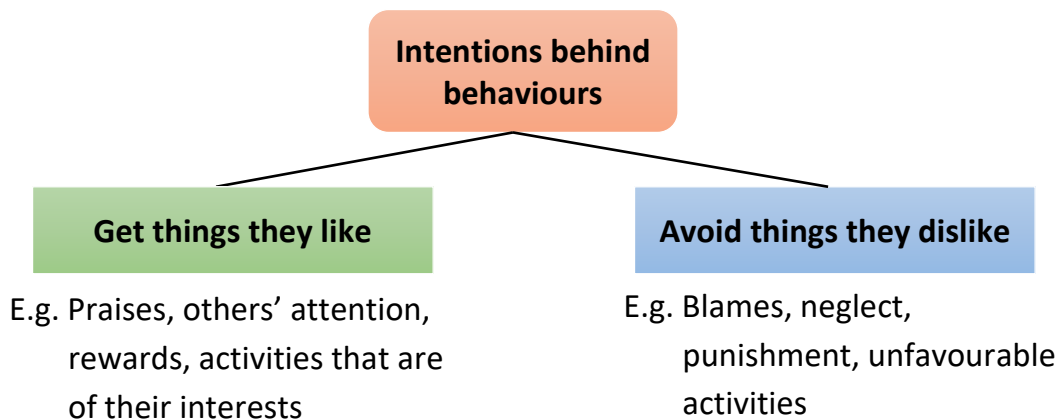
want – need not finish their meals. Thus, this is not a punishment to them but indeed the consequence they exactly have been looking for. The above-mentioned examples show how the consequences are reinforcing children's disruptive behaviours.

Parenting is one of the key elements for handling children's behavioural problems. Behavioural problems can be learned from daily experience.

What can parents do?

There are usually a variety of reasons behind children's behaviours, among which some are based on observations and learning in daily life. To tackle those disruptive behaviours, we will first need to understand the intentions or reasons behind children's misbehaviours, analyse them, and finally look for pertinent measures. Here are some steps that parents may take:

1. Understand the intentions behind children's behaviours





2. Observe the causes and consequences of those behaviours and identify the patterns

- Identify the patterns and antecedents of disruptive behaviours:
 - Who is the target? Any companion? At where? Any specific time?
 - Were those disruptive behaviours always directed to a particular person(s)? Only happened when they were with some particular people? Always took place after something? Happened before/after some activities? Any specific time or place when those disruptive behaviours happened?
 - For example:
 - The child cried and yelled whenever he/she was told to leave the park or when he/she was bored in the environment?
 - Every time when the child was out with the grandparents, he/she wanted to buy toys or else he/she threw tantrum?
 - When the child did not get what he/she wanted?
 - When the child did not have enough sleep?
- Be aware of the consequences of disruptive behaviours:
 - Did they successfully get what they want from temper outburst or disruptive behaviours?
 - What did they gain or lose?
 - How did the surrounding people react to those behaviours?
 - Parents have to bear in mind that the consequences will affect children's future behaviours. If disruptive behaviours can aid them in getting what they want, very likely the children will use them again.





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- Some negative examples:

- The child threw a tantrum and was offered an ice-cream by his/her parents who hoped to calm him/her down and stop crying. Then, the child would learn that throwing tantrums can bring him/her ice-creams.
- The elder sister was doing her homework quietly but no attention/praise was given, whereas the younger brother was inattentive yet earned mother's attention and company. Then, the elder sister would learn that working inattentively can earn mother's attention and company.

Sometimes, when we understand the patterns of the children's disruptive behaviours and pertinently change the causes and effects (consequences) of the behaviours, we can make disruptive behaviours less frequent, and at the same time increase good behaviours of the children.

3. Handle disruptive behaviours pertinently

Change the causes

Set rules
Give clear instructions
Use visual cues
Mind the needs & environmental factors

Develop new skills

Problem solving skills
Social skills
Organization skills

Change the consequence

Use praise
Reward system
Logical consequence
Planned ignoring





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Change the causes:

Be aware of environments or situations in which children tend to show disruptive behaviours, so that parents can get prepared in advance to lessen the occurrence of those behaviours.

(i) Set rules and give clear instructions

- Draw their attention and ensure they are attentive before giving instructions
- Make rules/instructions clear and specific
 - For example, “Speak quietly in the library”
- Use positive wordings
- Use statements instead of questions when giving commands
 - For example, instead of saying “Can you stop running?”, we could say “Walk slowly.”
- One instruction at a time and be consistent so they can follow easily
- Give instructions in a firm but calm tone instead of in a playful manner
- Make children understand that rules and standards differ across situations and environments
- Some negative examples:
 - “Can you behave yourself?”

First of all, this is a question and not a command. The child can simply answer “no” as this is a binary question and there are choices. Secondly, it is hard for the child to understand your expectations from this question. What is meant by “well-behaved”? What should I do to “behave myself”? Therefore, we should clearly convey what we hope the child to do, for instance, we can say “Please sit still.”





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(ii) Use visual cues to remind children

- Parents may consider using visual cues to remind children of their expected behaviours.
 - For example, a sticky note on the dining table to remind them to remain seated until they finish their meals
 - Draw the cues with the children while setting the rules so as to motivate them to follow them
 - Use children's favourite characters (if appropriate) as a role model for them to follow
 - Print out pictures of target behaviours and stick them out for them to observe and learn

(iii) Mind the needs of children and environmental factors

- Parents should observe whether disruptive behaviours are more prevalent when children are tired or hungry. Parents are suggested to set a timetable to structure daily tasks and routines of their child. This can help lower the occurrence of disruptive behaviours resulted from unsatisfied physiological needs.
- Some environmental factors may distract children from following parents' commands. For instance, a noisy environment (such as noises from television) can distract children from homework or meals. Parents should be aware of the environment and make appropriate arrangements.





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Change the consequences:

When children demonstrate good behaviours, encouraging responses, like praises and rewards, are positive consequences to children that can reinforce their good behaviours. In contrast, when disruptive behaviours are demonstrated, through negative consequences (i.e., negative responses such as blames and neglect), children have lower tendency to commit these behaviours again.

To ease children understand the consequences of different behaviours, parents may consider the following suggestions:

- (i) A praise/reward system for target behaviours
 - Praising your children immediately when the expected behaviours are met
 - Promptly and specifically
 - Good example: “Thanks for tidying up your toys, good boy/girl.”
 - Bad example: “Well done.”
 - Explain concretely to your children on your appreciation so that they can understand what exactly you are expecting from them.
 - Do not mention previous unwanted behaviours or compare them with good behaviours. It is inappropriate to say things like “I would appreciate more if you had always been well-behaved like now.” This will discourage children to commit the good behaviour.
 - Parents may also develop a reward system for children to maintain their good behaviours. However, it is important to start from small, specific and achievable goals.





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- This is to create a system for parents to reinforce children's appropriate behaviours and transform them into habits with children's favourite rewards.
 - Those rewards can be giving your children a hug, some quality time, children's favourite snacks, some freedom of choices, or a token system that encourages accumulation of small rewards for obtaining a bigger reward.
- (ii) Children to bear appropriate consequences
- When children demonstrate inappropriate behaviours, parents can make them bear the consequences and responsibilities according to the situation.
 - Example: A child played with the orange juice and eventually spilled the juice all around. By refusing to give a new glass of juice to the child and asking the child to help clean up, parents could make the child learn to bear the consequences of having spilled the juice (i.e., no juice to drink and need to help clean up).
- (iii) Planned ignoring
- Parents can ignore some mild attention seeking behaviours, such as making silly faces, complaining, and continuously producing noises. However, this is not applicable to aggressive or harmful behaviours
 - For example: A child screamed to draw your attention. Parents should give no attention, facial expression or eye contact to the child. The child might scream even louder to test your limits but eventually he/she would learn that this behaviour will not help get what he/she wants.





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Coaching children in acquiring new skills:

Researches showed that some children who demonstrate disruptive behaviours are attributable to their inadequate skills, such as weak problem solving skills, social skills and organization skills. These skills deficit affect their performances and behaviours. If parents noted these are the underlying causes, you should first adjust your expectations and then try help your children develop those skills.

Other useful tips:

- Take good care of yourself before trying any parenting strategies.
- Maintain good relationship with your children. Chat with them and express your love and care.
- Adjust your expectations according to your children's abilities. Do not aim too high. It is always good to start from simple things in dealing with children's behaviours.
- Make parenting styles consistent between parents and caregivers. Children will find it easier to align with your expectations and are likely to perform better.

What can we do if children's disruptive behaviours become more serious and difficult to handle?

Parents should seek professional help. Various non-governmental organizations offer evidence-based trainings on parenting and handling strategies. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services under the Hospital Authority also provide further assessments and treatments for children with disruptive behaviours.





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