

What are some best practices in caring for my child?

SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health has worked with lots of families who are interested in finding new tools to add to their parenting toolkit. Many families who have worked with staff at SickKids CCMH have found these suggestions helpful. Keep in mind your child's age and abilities when applying these strategies. Give them a try and feel free to add your own!

Brush up on your communication skills. Communication is one of the most important parts of positive caregiving. Being clear, open and positive in your communication with your child will help them know what your expectations are. Try out some of these communication tips.

- Present rules positively. Rules are often set up to tell your child what not to do. Try to limit negative rules like “Don’t yell” and replace them with what they can do, such as “Speak in a quiet voice.” This will help set a more positive tone while communicating what behaviour you expect. Your child will complete tasks better when they are specific. Instead of saying “Clean your room,” try saying “You need to clean your room which means making your bed, putting your toys away and putting your dirty clothes in the hamper.”
- When giving praise, try to avoid the criticism trap. Instead of saying “I like the way you’ve dressed yourself, why can’t you do that every day?” simply say “I like the way you’ve dressed yourself today.” If your child constantly receives criticism along with praise, they may stop the behaviour you actually want.
- Disapprove of the behaviour, not the child. When you need to disapprove of something your child is doing, try to disapprove of the behaviour itself and not your child overall. Instead of saying “You’re a bad girl!” try “I don’t like when you colour on the table.” This will help your child understand that they made a mistake and should do better, but that they themselves are not bad.
- Listen to your child. Try to set aside time to listen and talk to your child each day. Listen to your child without judgment. This will help your child feel like you respect their emotions and opinions and they will be more likely to share in the future.



Offer rewards and praise. Rewarding and praising your child is an important part of caregiving. Rewards and praise make your child more likely to behave than punishment, so it's important that you notice and respond when your child is doing a behaviour well.

- Reward behaviours immediately. When your child does the desired behaviour or a behaviour very close to the desired behaviour, let them know right away, before another behaviour occurs. If they do something else in between the behaviour and the reward, they may not know what behaviour you're praising.
- Make praise specific. Instead of saying “Good job!” try saying “Good job picking up your toys!” This will help your child to understand what exactly they're doing well.
- Use non-verbal encouragement. Smiling at or hugging your child can mean just as much as a verbal encouragement. These encouragements might not be as clear, so try to use verbal praise along with a hug or smile.

Be consistent. Try to be consistent in discipline and routines. Most children do best when they can predict what's coming next and know what they're expected to do. Try these tips to develop predictable discipline and consistent routines in your house.

- Discipline and praise consistently. It's easier for your child to know what to do if they know exactly what will happen if they behave appropriately or inappropriately. If your child lives in two or more homes, try to make sure discipline and praise are consistent across both houses. This will help everybody get on the same page about what happens when your child behaves well or poorly.
- Create consistent routines. Obviously, you can't make every day follow the same schedule but try to have a consistent routine. For example, breakfast, school, after-school activity, homework, dinner, bath, bed. This will help reduce stress and confusion for everyone.

Create positive experiences. Provide children with frequent experiences that are happy, playful and joyful. Making sure that your child has as many positive experiences as possible is just as important as reducing their negative experiences. Try these tips to provide positive experiences for you and your child.



- Set aside time each day or every few days to spend individually with your child. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, even playing a game or colouring together for five minutes a day can help your child's development and self-esteem. Although this might not be possible every day, try your best to ensure your child knows that you think they're worth your attention.
- Give your child responsibilities that are within their ability level. These can be simple chores like setting the table for dinner or bringing in the mail. Your child will feel a sense of accomplishment when they can complete these tasks successfully and independently.
- Ask your child to teach you a skill they have learned or join in on an activity they like. This will help demonstrate that you value and admire their activities and accomplishments.

Further resources

Check out these links for more helpful tips on positive caregiving.

1. PBS Parents: Seven Tips for Practicing Positive Discipline <https://to.pbs.org/1bf8cPd>
 2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Positive Parenting Tips <https://bit.ly/2mn51ps>
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