



## **"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Parenting Challenges**

### **Parents play the most important role in children's development**

Psychological research and practice show us that parents are the most important influence on their children. As rewarding as it can be to be a parent, it can also be a difficult job at times. To be a good parent takes knowledge, a great deal of practice, a lot of flexibility and openness to keep learning. Just as our children grow and learn so must our parenting. Whether parenting with a partner, in one or two homes, or as a single parent, parents need support from family, friends, and their community. Parenting some children poses additional challenges that can tax the patience and the skills of even the most devoted parent.

### **Two basic ingredients - love and structure**

The formula is simple: children need both love and structure to grow and thrive. Putting this into practice is not always easy. A loving relationship is essential for children to develop confidence and self-esteem. Parents show love in different ways according to their personal style and cultural background. Love is shown by smiles, hugs, compliments, interest in the child and by being available to spend time with them.

Regular time devoted entirely to the child (without distraction from phones, TV, or the computer) is the foundation of a good relationship. It also helps children to learn that they can turn to their parents when they are troubled. As children reach adolescence they still need special time with parents, but it may look different from when they were younger. Without a warm and loving relationship with their parents, children and youth are at risk for low self-esteem and lack of confidence. They may try to find other, more negative ways to get attention and to feel good about themselves such as, acting-out, risky behaviour to impress their peers, or using drugs and alcohol.

A loving relationship is necessary, but is not enough to ensure healthy development. Children also need structure, consistency and an appropriate level of monitoring. From an early age, children benefit from routines that help them know what to expect each day. Parents show children the limits of acceptable behaviour by setting clear rules and expectations. Parents help children to learn that their actions have consequences. By noticing and commenting on appropriate behaviour, parents strengthen good habits.

Physical punishment, yelling and humiliation hurt children. There are other and much more effective ways to address child's misbehaviour. When parents routinely attend to the child's behaviour they want to encourage, mild logical consequences (such as temporary loss of privileges) or brief time-outs are effective alternatives to physical punishment and yelling. By using suitable positive and negative consequences parents can help their children learn to set their own limits and make good choices. Without structure, children may have difficulty learning self-control and the ability to follow rules independently.



Parents should never underestimate how much children learn from watching their behaviour. We can provide an example of either positive or negative behaviours to our children. Through our own behaviour we can teach problem solving, impulse control, the healthy expression of feelings (both positive and negative), patience and tolerance. Of course we have to be just as aware of how we may teach them poor coping skills, substance misuse, violent or bullying behaviour, or unhealthy ways of engaging in conflict. Parents are teachers in everyday life and this is a huge responsibility as the impact that we have is tremendous.

### **Always the same, but constantly changing...**

Children of all ages need love and structure. As children get older, parents need to change the ways they show love and provide guidance. A baby thrives on rocking, broad smiles, and singing. A teenager is likely to feel cared for by a parent who is a good listener while driving to an activity. In helping a toddler to learn that it is not acceptable to pull the cat's tail, the parent may say "No" firmly. Because teenagers need to develop responsibility and the ability to make healthy independent decisions, parents should negotiate with them about issues such as curfews and appropriate dress. Parents have to learn when to step back. So for example, they might give choice to a young teenager over hairstyle, which is a temporary outcome, but be firm when it comes to tattoos which have more long term outcomes. Successful parents promote growing independence in their children and help them to make good decisions. At times that means that we have to allow enough space for our children to make mistakes so that they can learn from these situations as well and become more resilient to future challenges.

Parenting can be especially tough at times...

Adults may find parenting especially challenging when they are having a hard time making ends meet, feeling stressed at work, dealing with separation or divorce, or when a child or adult in the family suffers from a mental or physical illness. Children present a variety of challenges depending on their temperament, developmental level, learning style and cognitive abilities.

There are supports to help parents as they strive to help their kids. Sometimes these supports focus on fine tuning a parent's skills to address specific situations or difficulties that their child might be experiencing. Sometimes parents can benefit from more formalized supports. Parents of children with, for example, mood, anxiety, acting-out or learning disorders are likely to benefit from evidence-based psychological services.

### **How can psychology help?**

Research has helped psychologists to learn about parenting that works and to develop a range of services for families. Parent support provides information about normal child and adolescent development as well as problem behaviours. It helps parents use positive approaches to parenting that help the child to learn and develop. Parent support is offered face-to-face, via workbooks, and on-line to groups, couples, and individuals, to help parents learn and practice strategies that research has shown to be effective in promoting positive relationships and in reducing misbehaviour.



Parents learn how to notice and pay attention to behaviour they want to encourage, how to set clear routines and expectations, and how to effectively deal with problem behaviour. Parent support is most effective when parents have opportunities to observe and practice the techniques they are learning. Following this type of parent support, parents increase their use of positive strategies and the majority of children show significant improvements in their behaviour, both in the short and long term.

Parents can also notice signs and symptoms that suggest there is a problem. It is ideal to address problems early on, before they become much harder to handle.

Parents who have their own problems such as feeling depressed, anxious, or in an unhappy relationship, may require help with their own problems as well as getting parenting support. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is effective in helping parents deal with their own problems such as depression, anxiety, chronic pain, or marital distress.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy is effective in improving communication, anger management, and problem solving in the family.

## Where do I go for more information?

For more information visit <http://www.ementalhealth.ca/>

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, click <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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