

PSYCHOLOGY WORKS Fact Sheet: Parenting Challenges

What Role Do Parents Play in Children's Development?

Psychological research and practice show us that parents are the most important influence on their children's development. The parent role brings intense rewards and challenges. Parenting takes practice, 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. It really does take a village!

How Can Parents Help Children Grow and Thrive?

Children need both **love** and **structure** to grow and thrive. Although this formula sounds simple, putting this into practice can be tough. A loving relationship provides the foundation for children to regulate their emotion and develop both confidence and self-esteem. Parents show love in different ways according to their personal style and cultural background. It always involves being available to spend time with children and show interest in what they're doing. Physical affection includes smiles, touch, hugs, and cuddles.

Regular frequent moments focusing on the child (without distraction from phones, TV, or the computer) is the foundation of a good relationship. It helps them build confidence and learn that they can turn to their parents when they face difficulty. As children reach adolescence, time with parents may look different from when they were younger. Without a warm and loving relationship with their parents throughout their development, children and youth are at risk for low self-esteem and low confidence. They may seek more negative ways to get attention and to feel good about themselves such as acting-out, risky behaviour to impress their peers, or self-medicating using drugs and alcohol.

A loving relationship is necessary, but is not enough to ensure healthy development. Children also need structure, consistency, and appropriate 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 having some simple rules and expectations. Parents help children to learn that their actions have consequences. By noticing and commenting on behaviour they want to encourage, parents strengthen good habits.

Physical punishment, yelling, and humiliation hurt children. Fortunately, there are far more effective methods to address a child's challenging behaviour. These include paying attention to the behaviours you wish to encourage and calmly addressing mild misbehaviour. Parents can guide their children to set limits and make good choices by using appropriate rewards and consequences. Without structure, children may have difficulty learning self-control and the ability to follow rules independently.

We cannot underestimate how much children learn from watching adult behaviour. In everyday life, there are lots of opportunities to show problem-solving, impulse control, the healthy expression of



feelings (both positive and negative), patience, and tolerance. We must also be mindful to avoid inappropriate coping mechanisms, excessive use of digital devices, substance abuse, violent or bullying behaviour, or unproductive methods of handling conflicts. Life is full of teachable moments.

How Does Parenting Change as Children Age?

Children of all ages need love and structure. As children get older, there are subtle changes in how we show love and provide guidance. A baby thrives on rocking, broad smiles, and singing. Teens may appreciate a response to a text or good listening 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 provide guidance on how to stroke the cat gently. Parents help teenagers develop responsibility and make healthy decisions by negotiating curfews and appropriate behaviour. Parents promote growing independence in their children and help them to make good decisions and learn from their mistakes.

What Can Parents Do When They Need Support?

Parenting presents additional challenges when financial difficulties, work-related stress, separation or divorce, or mental or physical illness affect a family member. Parents adapt to the child's temperament, developmental level, learning style, and cognitive abilities.

All parents need support from time to time. There is no one-size fits all approach to getting help. Some ways parents might find support include:

- Consulting reliable, evidence-based websites or online programs
- Attending presentations or discussion sessions with a trained practitioner on a topic they are struggling with
- Consulting a trained professional to address specific situations or difficulties that their child might be experiencing
- Completing a comprehensive parenting course

Parents of children with mood, anxiety, behavioural, or learning disorders are likely to benefit from evidence-based psychological services.

Social media has changed the landscape for parents. It is easy to access vivid videos and testimonials proposing parenting strategies. It can be overwhelming to sift through conflicting messages and know which ones have a solid foundation. Parent confidence may be undermined by contradictory claims of the usefulness of different approaches.

How Can Psychology Help?

Research has helped psychologists to learn about parenting that works and to develop a range of services for families. Evidence-based parent support provides information about the myriad issues that emerge in child and adolescent development. Parents learn to use positive approaches to parenting that help the child to learn and develop. Parent support can be 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.

In evidence-based parent support programs, parents learn how to notice and pay attention to behaviour they want to encourage; how to set clear routines and expectations; how to help children recognize, label, and express their emotions; and how to respond to challenging behaviour. Parent support is most effective when parents have opportunities to observe and practice the techniques they are learning.

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

Where Can I Go for More Information?

For more information, visit:

- **The Incredible Years – Parents & Teachers.** A series of interlocking evidence-based programs for parents, children, and teachers, supported by over 30 years of research: www.incredibleyears.com
- **Triple P Parenting.** Positive Parenting Program works for babies, toddlers, and teens. Get parenting tips and classes in Canada; face-to-face or online: www.triplep-parenting.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 may make available a referral list of practicing psychologists that can be searched for appropriate services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://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

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