



# Helping your child

## Challenging behaviour

When a child experiences a traumatic medical event or hospital admission, they may express their stress through disobedience, tantrums and emotional meltdowns or aggressive behaviour. Usually this settles in a few weeks but it's important to manage challenging behaviours sensitively and consistently to prevent them from persisting.

### Why have these behaviours started or increased?

All behaviour is communication. Children's behaviours that appear naughty or difficult (frustrated, demanding, aggressive etc) are often signs of emotional distress. Your child may be overwhelmed and needs your help to manage their feelings.

- Did something remind your child of their medical event or admission? It might be a certain sound or smell you weren't aware of in hospital. Understanding the triggers may help you see any early warning signs and intervene before problems increase.
- Routines or expectations may have changed. It's very common for parents who have seen their child go through a difficult experience to become more lenient in their parenting, be more protective of their child, or respond to unacceptable behaviours in a different way.
- Your child may not be getting enough sleep or may be hungry. They may also be in pain or discomfort. Their needs may have changed due to their medical condition, and it may take some time for them (and you) to adjust.

### Five key support areas

There are five key areas you can focus on to support your child to overcome challenging behaviour.



**Connection:** Strengthen relationships to help your child feel safe, secure and loved

This is the most important area that caregivers can focus on to protect their child's mental health and wellbeing. A positive, consistent, nurturing connection supports children's emotional resilience, helps them cope during stressful times, and will reduce the likelihood that challenging behaviours will continue over time. You can strengthen relationships by:

- responding warmly and consistently when your child seeks your attention or expresses a need.
- finding chances to connect throughout the day, even if you only have 5 minutes.
- giving lots of physical comfort in the way your child enjoys and feels comfortable (e.g. hugs, kisses, hand holding, massage, pat on the back, high five).
- spending special time together including exploration, play and quiet time (e.g. reading books, singing nursery rhymes, doing craft, watching a movie).

- incorporating special time into your routine helps your child know what to expect and gives them something to look forward to.
- engaging in fun family activities regularly (e.g. exploring nature, board games, walking the dog).
- providing extra support and connection at bedtime, before and after time apart, and during times of stress.



Resource ID: BKO09. Reviewed: November 2024.

Disclaimer: This information has been produced by healthcare professionals as a guideline only and is intended to support, not replace, discussion with your child's doctor or healthcare professionals. Information is updated regularly, so please check you are referring to the most recent version. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child's health.



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## Routine: Maintain or create family routines and clear expectations

'Soft routines' (not rigid, but reasonably predictable) are particularly important for children and adults during stressful times. Children feel safer, more secure and cope best when:

- caregivers encourage regular healthy routines that include good-quality sleep, eating well, physical activity, play and family rituals.
- the order of daily activities is fairly consistent.
- there are clear rules and expectations for behaviour.
- routines are flexible when circumstances change.
- children are prepared for transitions or separations.

When children are in hospital or recovering from sickness or injury, it can be hard to stick with established routines or set up new ones.

It's okay to adjust or simplify the usual routine during this time. Return to normal routines when possible.

See recommended resources (via the QR code) for more information about creating routines for different ages.



## Identify emotions: Help your child name their feelings

Often, difficult behaviours in children are signs of emotional distress and a way of communicating that they need more support. Consider what big feeling might be leading to the challenging behaviour and what your child might be needing in this moment.

Remain calm, clear but firm when responding to challenging behaviours. Observe and name the likely feeling. Remind your child they are not alone and you will stay with them until they are feeling calmer (e.g. "I can see you are feeling really upset at the moment – let's sit together until you feel calm and then work it out together", or "I can see you have some big feelings right now – I'm here with you, we will get through it together").

When your child is calm, try books or feelings cards to help your child name and express different emotions and coping strategies. See our recommended list of books about [Anxiety and other emotions](#), [Relaxation and mindfulness strategies for children](#) tipsheet or try the free [Frankie's feelings cards](#) and [poster](#). Teaching children how to recognise and name feelings can help them build emotional literacy skills, identify body cues, communicate their feelings and needs to others, and learn how to remain calm.

Talk with your child about how to notice angry feelings in their body (e.g. feeling hot, heart racing, tense muscles). If they are old enough, encourage them to talk with you if they notice these body cues.

Young children also learn how to manage big emotions by observing adults around them. Be aware of what you are modelling to your child when you feel emotions like stress, anger, fear or disappointment. Talk with and show your child what coping strategies work for you when you have angry feelings. Show them in words and actions (e.g. "I feel angry right now. I'm going to go for a walk to help me calm down!")





## Targeted strategies: Teach your child skills to help them cope with emotional distress and encourage positive behaviour

### Encourage positive behaviour

Help your child regain a sense of control by supporting decision-making (e.g. choosing their clothes, type of fruit to eat, or which book to read at bedtime).

Make eye contact with your child (if they feel comfortable with this) and give clear, specific instructions appropriate for their age. Give them time to comply and repeat if needed.

Help your child express anger and other big feelings in other ways (e.g. mashing clay, squeezing a pillow, running around outside, dance).

Praise and reward positive behaviours. You may like to introduce a rewards chart to help motivate positive behaviours that your child might find difficult.



### Use effective parenting strategies to manage problem behaviour

Look out for early warning signs and try to react before the behaviour escalates (e.g. distract with another activity, help your child with the thing they're finding frustrating).

Sometimes it's best not to react to minor misbehaviour (e.g. whining, interrupting conversations). Look for ways to increase quality time and connection with your child when they're behaving appropriately. That way, the child doesn't accidentally learn that misbehaving is the most reliable way to get your attention.

Use appropriate consequences for unacceptable behaviour:

- Respond immediately and consistently. Immediate consequences are much more effective for young children than delayed consequences.
- Use a sensible consequence (e.g. if children are fighting over a toy, remove the toy, and only return it once the children are behaving appropriately).
- Respond to aggressive acts calmly but firmly (e.g. unclamp their hand), and let your child know it is not ok (e.g. "I can see why you might feel angry, but it is not okay to grab your sister. Let's see if we can put the big angry feelings into words or a drawing. Or we can go outside and jump on the trampoline. What would you like to do?").
- If the behaviour doesn't stop, briefly remove your child from the situation. It may help to give them something else to do (e.g. sensory play, such as water play).







## Seek extra support: Sometimes no matter how well parents support their child, professional advice is needed to help

Sometimes no matter how well parents support their child, professional advice is needed to help children manage their 'big feelings' and learn to behave in ways that meet their needs and are appropriate for their age. Illness, health conditions and neurodevelopmental disorders can also contribute to specific behaviour-related issues in children (e.g. obstructive sleep apnoea, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, diabetes).

You know your child best. If you're concerned, you can seek advice from your child's health care team, early childcare educator or teacher, GP or paediatrician, child health nurse or community health centre, local community mental health service, or a specialist mental health professional (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists).

You might need to seek extra support if your child's behaviours are:

- increasing or getting worse
- different to normal or uncommon for their age
- impacting their medical care
- affecting their relationship with you or others (upsetting siblings, family, friends etc)
- impacting their daily activities (e.g. siblings or friends don't want to play with them, they get in trouble at early learning or school etc)
- causing conflict about dealing with the behaviour
- causing you to worry that you might become angry, lose control or hurt your child.

For further support, visit [Frankie's Clubhouse](#) website or scan the QR code for our recommended list of resources for behaviour management.



Here you will find up-to-date evidence-based information, contact details and websites for the following support options and resources:

- Helplines
- Frankie specific resources (e.g. *Frankie feelings* and *coping cards*)
- Websites with information and parenting strategies for behaviour management
- Online parenting programs
- Information about how to access support from mental health professionals.

