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Parent's Guide to Challenging Behaviours

What is challenging behaviour?

Most children and young people will behave in challenging ways at some point. Feeling upset, angry, stressed or disappointed is a normal part of life. Because we develop our ability to manage our emotions as we grow up, children and young people do sometimes act out when they're going through big feelings. In response to their emotions, they may display a range of behaviours. It's normal for younger children to hit or 'have a tantrum' sometimes. And it's normal for teenagers to shout, lash out or storm out sometimes. Most children and teenagers will also push boundaries as they test their independence.

But sometimes, challenging behaviour can become more frequent and difficult to deal with. It may start to have an impact on someone's day-to-day quality of life, on relationships and learning at school, and on other family members.

Examples of challenging behaviour include:

- having lots of angry outbursts or 'tantrums'
- regularly shouting, swearing, hitting, biting or kicking
- kicking, hitting, smashing or damaging things in the home
- regularly refusing boundaries and routines, including not wanting to respond to reasonable requests
- being impulsive and taking physical risks
- blaming others for their behaviour
- bullying or being unkind towards others
- persistently getting into trouble at school
- refusing to engage in conversations about what's going on
- Why do children and young people behave in challenging ways?



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The way your child behaves is a communication about how they're feeling.

When your child is acting out, it can be helpful to think about the image of an iceberg. We only see the top of an iceberg because most of it is underwater. Similarly, when your child is behaving in challenging ways, there will be feelings going on under the surface that you cannot see. Your child may not be aware of these feelings and may need your help to talk about them.

Underneath their behaviour, a child or young person may be feeling angry, tired, stressed, anxious, confused, hurt, jealous, bored or something else. Whatever's going on, try to remember that the behaviour you see on the surface is not the whole story.

Talking to your child about their behaviour

If your child is acting out, starting a conversation about what's going on can often feel like the hardest bit. Your child might not want to talk, or they might find it hard to recognise that there is a problem.

Starting a conversation while doing an activity together is a good strategy to try. This can help your child to relax by making it feel like less of a 'big chat'. Depending on your child's age, you could go for a walk, cook or bake together, or do something creative like colouring. Or you could start a conversation while travelling somewhere together.

If your child cannot talk at the moment, you could start a conversation by text or write them a letter instead. Whether you're talking in-person or in another way, our tips below can help you to have a positive conversation with your child.