

# Over the top Behaviour in the under tens



Hard to concentrate | Difficult to sit still | Tantrums |  
Nonstop talking | Going "over the top" | Hitting other children  
Normal childhood misbehaviour? Or problem behaviour? Read on...



# CHILDREN behaving badly

## We want our children to behave well.

-  to be polite to others
-  to know how to behave in different situations
-  to be able to concentrate and pay attention
-  to share and to take turns
-  to know how to win... and how to lose.

## But children often behave quite differently.

They can be noisy and rude. They may not do as we ask, they might break things, hit other children or have a tantrum. They can't sit still for more than a few minutes before fidgeting, and disturbing others.

When children behave in this way, we feel annoyed, frustrated and embarrassed. If they keep doing it, worries or doubts might begin to creep in. Is my child's behaviour over the top – is it just normal childhood boisterousness and high spirits? Has it gone too far? Has my child got behaviour problems – are they hyperactive?

There is much talk these days about problems with children's behaviour.

Some of the words people use to describe extremes of behaviour are:

-  behaviour problems
-  challenging behaviour
-  hyperactive

 attention deficit disorder

 conduct disorder

Children with challenging behaviour or other behaviour problems do face more serious problems as they get older if they do not receive help. Behaviour problems can lead to your child doing badly in school, can make their friendships more difficult and can make them more at risk of getting into crime. So nipping bad behaviour in the bud when they are young is important.

But not all children who behave badly have behaviour problems or any of the other disorders.

This leaflet tries to show some of the differences between normal childhood misbehaviour and when there are more serious problems.

Going "over the top"

Nonstop talking

hitting other children



difficult to sit still

tantrums

hard to concentrate



## What is 'normal' bad behaviour?



growing up with 'Dennis the Menace' or 'Minnie the Minx'



### Some reasons might be:

-  They are trying to find out what they are or are not allowed to do
-  They might be upset or anxious about school
-  They might feel jealous of their brother or sister
-  They want their parent to watch them or listen to them

Sometimes bad behaviour can get stuck in a spiral. Most children at some point will misbehave to get their parents' attention. If their parent is troubled, or doesn't pay much attention to children when they are good and quiet, some children will decide that being noisy and naughty is a good way of getting their parent to take notice of them, even if it means them shouting or telling off.

### All children sometimes behave badly.

They:

-  Have tantrums
-  Shout and scream
-  Hit siblings, parents, friends
-  Don't do as they are told
-  Break things, spill things, squash things
-  Don't listen or concentrate

This is normal behaviour. Children are finding out what happens when they have a tantrum, hit another child, say rude words.

Children take risks. It is part of growing up. They take risks physically, and they take risks in behaviour. They are checking out what their parents will draw the line at, what they

can and can't do. Taking risks helps them understand what is acceptable. If children were perfectly behaved and polite all the time, would that be good for them?

And parents develop their own ways of looking after them. There is no simple recipe which applies to all parents and all children. It takes time for children to learn how to behave, and for parents to work out the best way of getting the best out of their child.

### What makes children behave badly?

Children do not usually misbehave just because they are "naughty" or enjoy upsetting their parents. There is often a reason behind their bad behaviour.



# don't just blame the kids and parents

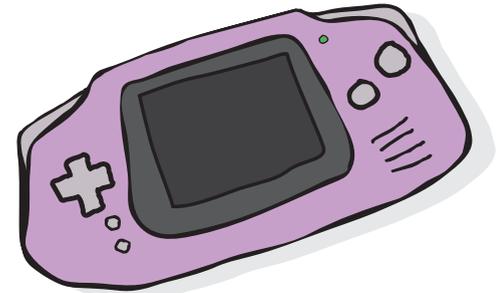


Trying to deal with your child's behaviour can be like a pressure cooker. The more you try to keep the lid on it, the more explosive it is likely to become. Children and parents need to reduce the pressure, but in today's society, that can be much harder than before.

## Why?

Children are much less likely to be allowed to play out, or to roam the streets and parks. They are more likely to be kept indoors, and spend far more time watching TV and playing on computers. But they are still energetic, and need a

way of releasing their energy. If they are cooped up inside, then the pent up energy can overflow into aggression, tantrums and difficult behaviour. We would be doing all our children a favour by making sure that there are safe and exciting places for children to play in every local area.





# When does bad behaviour become a problem?



There is no simple answer. Most of what people consider bad behaviour remains just that – bad behaviour. Many children grow out of their misbehaviour as they get older. They learn to negotiate, to share, to control their temper, to do things which will please their parents and teachers. Children may go through patches of difficult behaviour as they grow up – but it doesn't make them difficult children.

Behaviour problems can sometimes be obvious from an early age, but sometimes something can happen in a child's life which leads to their behaviour becoming more extreme. A child's emotional response to these kinds of situations can cause out of control behaviour.

-  if parents are having a hard time, and if there is conflict in the home
-  if the child has some learning problems
-  if there has been a major upset in the family, for example, a death or divorce
-  if the child is on certain medicines (this is rarer and the doctor should be consulted)

## Recognising the signs

*Katy's eight year old son, Jamie, behaved well at school. But at home, he was rebellious and aggressive. "For three years he was hateful and spiteful" said Katy "I was desperate. I felt I had failed as a parent. I was making empty threats when he behaved badly. I couldn't control him at all"*

The key signs to look for are not so much the **type** of behaviour, but

-  Whether it has been going on a **long time**
-  Whether your child is behaving in **extreme ways**
-  When the out of control behaviour happens – at **inappropriate times**

## Some signs of behaviour problems developing might be:

-  Consistently **refusing** to do as they are asked and ignoring rules of home and perhaps school. Being defiant
-  Not learning from experience, but **repeating the same behaviour**, no matter what the parents might do
-  More than ordinary misbehaviour which is beginning to **affect education**
-  **Unpredictable behaviour**, which can swing between extremes, sometimes leading to the child having few



friends and feeling isolated at school and home

-  Aggression and fighting
-  Lying or stealing with no remorse
-  Doing several of the above over a long period of time

Dealing with this kind of behaviour day in, day out can put a huge strain on family and friends. Parents have reported being exhausted and at their wits end trying to cope with their children.

Ordinary tasks of the day, like getting up, washed and dressed, or going to bed, became mountains to climb.

## attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

**Is my child hyperactive?** There is much confusion around about hyperactivity and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). What was once a description of a small number of children with a severe and long term problem has become a general description for any child who can't concentrate and is restless and full of energy. People are constantly referring to children as "hyper", but children with ADHD show extremes of behaviour:

-  Not able to focus their attention
-  Making careless mistakes
-  Not listening or finishing tasks
-  Being easily distracted
-  Fidgeting and talking non-stop
-  Running around when they shouldn't
-  Being very impulsive

-  Talking when they shouldn't and saying things they shouldn't
-  Not able to wait their turn in games, or in a queue

*Just because a child is naughty or aggressive does not mean that they have ADHD. Children diagnosed with ADHD are thought to have a neurological difference in their brain. It can run in families. ADHD is a medical condition, treatable by therapy and drugs, depending on the individual child.*

No child should be thought to have ADHD unless they have been assessed by a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Once diagnosed, treatment could include a number of different options: therapy, medication, changing diet and avoiding additives.

For more information, try: [www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)

(Attention Deficit Disorder Information Service 020 8952 2800)



*Parents can do a lot to help their children's behaviour. In fact, parents can make the difference between their child's behaviour spiralling out of control, and helping them manage.*



## WHAT can parents do: managing 'normal' bad Behaviour



### Thinking about and understanding your children

It may seem too obvious to say, but all children are unique. Getting to know your own child, and knowing what makes them angry or agitated can help you prevent angry or upsetting situations before they happen.

### Talking and listening to your child.

Tell them you love them, and show them by smiling, cuddling and kissing them. Tell them when you are cross, or when you are not happy with their behaviour. They need to realise that it's the behaviour you don't like, not the child. Encourage your child to talk to you – help them find the

words to describe how they are feeling, even if it is an uphill struggle. If they are angry, for example, at the birth of a new baby, give them an opportunity to tell you without them worrying that you will criticise their feelings.

### Making rules – getting it about right

Be consistent. When you say no, mean no. Keeping to this can be hard work, but if you have a few clear rules, it helps you and your children. Both parents need to agree the rules. The reality is that most parents walk the line between being “too harsh” and “too soft” every day. It may be that there are particular situations that you

find hard to manage – at the supermarket? Going to bed? Or when they won't sit still and listen? Distracting children with suggestions for play or an activity can work wonders.

### Reward and notice good behaviour

Sometimes it is easy to ignore your child when they are playing quietly or behaving well, and only notice them when they are misbehaving. Children love their parents' attention, and if they have to behave badly to get it, they will. Give them lots of praise when they are behaving well, rather than focussing on misbehaviour. An example might be “Jane, you are cutting up your food really well”, rather than “Jane, don't throw your food on the floor”.

### Ignoring bad behaviour

Hard though it is, ignoring the small niggles can help change a child's behaviour. If you are praising things they are doing well, and ignoring the irritating and attention seeking behaviour, your child will learn that ‘bad’



behaviour no longer gets them the attention they want.

### Have realistic expectations

Children are children. They will be messy, noisy and at times, disobedient. A two year old will behave differently from a seven or ten year old. Give them the freedom to make mistakes and take risks.

### Getting some support for yourself

If you make sure you get a break to relax, or to go out, then you will be in better shape to cope with everything. Get together with other parents – children often feel happier if they have a friend for company. Don't be shy to ask for help. Nobody gets it right all the time. It can help to talk things over with family or friends, and they will often be able to help out in practical ways, too.

*Home-Start UK* is an organisation which offers support, friendship and practical help to parents with children, when at least one child is under 5. A volunteer will visit a

family in their home, and help out in whichever way is useful. For more information, phone **08000 68 63 68**.



## ten tips when things are getting difficult



-  Stay calm
-  If it is impossible to stay calm, leave the child in a safe place and leave the room for a few minutes
-  When you return, talk to your child about what is going on
-  Try to get them to pay attention to you
-  Describe as exactly as possible what you want them to do
-  Ask positively not negatively
-  Explain the consequences of their action
-  If the behaviour doesn't stop, follow up on the consequences
-  After the crisis, talk with your child about what happened
-  After it is all over, think about what happened, what set off the behaviour, has it happened before and what could be done differently

*If the behaviour continues, and nothing you try seems to help, get help now. The next page lists some places to go for help.*





## more serious problems – the next steps



### Parenting classes

Parenting courses are run all over the country. The courses are usually for groups of parents, who meet weekly for between 6 and 12 weeks, to share information and experiences, as well as learn skills to improve their parenting. The courses cover topics such as dealing with conflict, setting limits to behaviour and understanding children's behaviour. Most courses are suitable for all parents; there are some which are for parents experiencing particular problems. For example, there are courses for parents living with ADHD children.

For information on courses in your area, contact *Parentline Plus* on **0808 800 2222**, or visit the website of *Parenting UK* at **[www.parentinguk.org](http://www.parentinguk.org)**

### School

It might be worth speaking to your child's school to see if they are worried about your child's behaviour. Parents and school can work together to help the child's behaviour and ability to learn. The local authority employs educational psychologists, who can help your child.

Try contacting the *Advisory Centre for Education (ACE)* on **[www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk)**, for advice and information on school issues.

### Doctor

If you fear that their child's behaviour is more serious, speak to the health visitor or doctor. They will be able to advise you if more specialist help is needed.

If they agree that more help is needed, they might make a number of suggestions. They may suggest counselling or family therapy to help the whole family. Details of organisations offering these services are at the back of this booklet.

They are also likely to suggest that you go to a child and adolescent mental health service. They will be able to help by finding out what is causing the problem, and also by suggesting practical ways of improving the difficult behaviour.



# child and adolescent mental health services



Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are a partnership between health and social services. Some Services are part of the NHS and may be found in hospitals, GP surgeries, health centres and private health care. Others may be found in educational settings such as schools, colleges, universities, youth centres, walk-in centres or counselling services.

If a child has some problems with their behaviour, these services aim to give help early to prevent more serious problems developing later on. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services exist regionally - ask your doctor for more information, or see [www.youngminds.org.uk/camhs](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/camhs)

There is a lot of information and advice available for parents, but finding it can be tricky. Look in books, leaflets, videos and the internet. Ask your health visitor or doctor. Ask other parents and friends what they have found useful. There are a few suggestions below.

### Books and leaflets

*From breakfast to bedtime, Helping you and your child through the day*, FPI, 2002  
[www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)

*Encouraging better behaviour, A practical guide to positive parenting*, NSPCC, 2002  
[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) or phone 0808 800 5000

*The Good, the Bad and the Irritating: A practical approach for parents of children who are attention seeking*, Dr. N. Mellor, Lucky Duck Publishing, 2000

### Understanding Childhood

Leaflet, at [www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention Deficit Disorder Information Service  
020 8952 2800 [www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)

The **Royal College of Psychiatrists** have produced a very good factsheet about ADHD  
[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/mhgu/newmhgu5.htm](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/mhgu/newmhgu5.htm)

**Adders** (the UK ADHD website) [www.adders.org](http://www.adders.org)  
is very helpful

### Helpful organisations

**Advisory Centre for Education (ACE)** for advice and information on school issues: [www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk)

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** can give you information see [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

**Home-Start UK** [www.home-start.org.uk](http://www.home-start.org.uk)

**Institute of Family Therapy** offers therapy to families in crisis. Parents can be referred by the GPs or other professional, but parents can contact the Institute direct themselves. Visit their website on  
[www.instituteoffamilytherapy.org.uk](http://www.instituteoffamilytherapy.org.uk)

**Parentline Plus** – a telephone helpline open 24 hours a day for parents to talk about any worries or problems  
0808 800 2222 (textphone 0800 783 6783)

**YoungMinds Parent Information Service**  
[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Funded by the Youth Justice Board



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