

Positive Parenting in stressful times: Ten Top Tips

What is this factsheet about? During this stressful time of the coronavirus pandemic, families have to *self-isolate* and do *social-distancing*. Here are tips from the positive parenting field that may help parents and children get along better during this difficult time when everyone is closer together for longer.

What is positive parenting?

This is based on the principle of **'Connection before Correction'**.

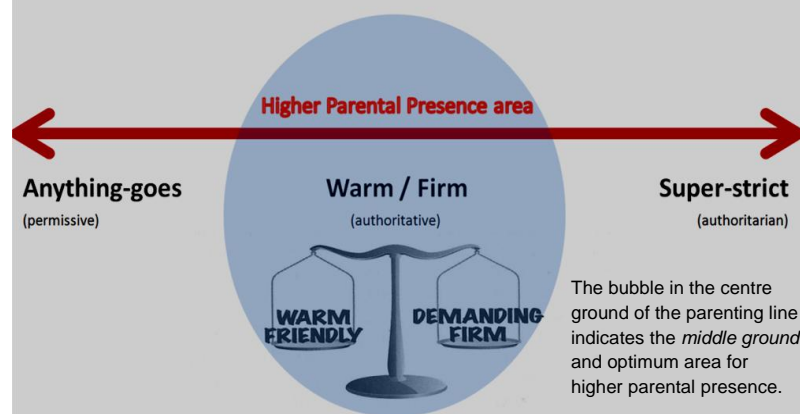
This means noticing when children are cooperating, and praising the cooperation. It also about ignoring low-level misbehaviour which can be classified as 'minor-but-irritating' (or MBI's for short).

When we do need to correct or criticise it also means doing this in ways that do not squash the child's spirit or inadvertently bring about 'button-pushing' behaviour (meaning the child does more things that annoy others).

Why do some children cooperate more than others?

There are many factors. For example, some children have more easy-going temperaments, whilst some children are more sensitive, intense and strong-willed. It is very common for strong-willed children, prone to stubbornness, to get caught up in negative patterns of behaviour and attitudes that often lead to battles with parents and other siblings. There are also children with additional needs such as ADHD and/or ASD and child / parent situations where attachment patterns can be difficult and fraught.

The Parent Line



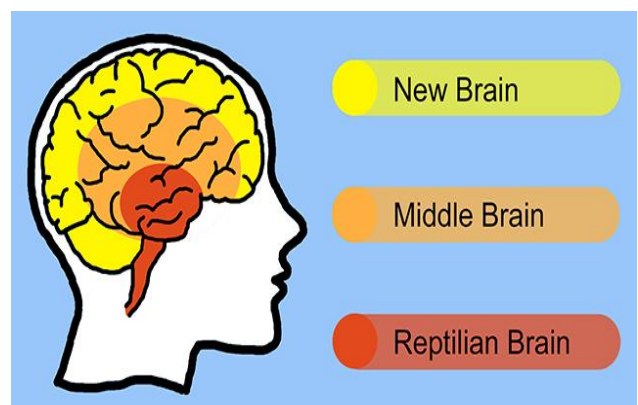
The Parenting Line

This is a line of parenting styles from 'super-strict' at one end to 'anything goes' at the other. Positive parenting is about trying to stay in the *middle ground* – neither too strict nor too chilled. This middle ground is shown as a bubble in the diagram as is sometimes called the high parental presence (influence) area.

The idea is to avoid extreme positions which lead to *joint escalation* (super-strict) or *giving –in escalation* (anything goes). This is easier said than done! Sometimes, especially when under a lot stress, parents may move between each end like a seesaw!

The three part brain (triune brain):

Positive Parenting is about parents and carers staying as much as they can in the 'new brain'. The new brain is our thinking part of the brain, where we think about and reflect on experience. The middle (or mammalian) brain is our emotional part of the brain and our reptile part of the brain is the oldest part – characterised by instinct and fight, fright or freeze. Parents are often invited into 'reptile mode' by children and young people who may inhabit this part of the brain very often. Parents are reminded that when reptile meets reptile the only outcome is parent –child battleground!



Ten tips overview: ① The importance of parental self care ② Create a weekday timetable ③ Strike when the iron is cold ④ Use connecting tools to improve behaviour ⑤ Use correcting tools to manage difficult issues ⑥ Ten point plan for better sibling relationships ⑦ Use rewards & consequences carefully ⑧ Support & Resources ⑨ Speak to a helping professional if needed ⑩ Write down your plan and look at it regularly.

1 Parental self-care

'In order to look after others, we also have to look after ourselves'.

This may seem strange to place this tip first. Just like the airbag on a plane where it says 'puts the mask on yourself before helping others' the idea is to keep your batteries charged. When everyone is together for extended periods it is easy to get on each other's nerves. Parents should remember to take time out for themselves a few times a day – even if only for a minute or two each time.

It is important for parents and carers to keep their batteries charged so that they have enough energy to manage others and to feel better in themselves.

TIP: There are many apps that help with relaxation. One of the most popular is *Headspace* with a wide variety of meditations including many short ones suitable for busy parents! There are also many free alternatives.



2 Create a weekday timetable / routine

Your school may have provided guidance about this. During the 'school day', it is important to establish routines, as everyone will work better with a structure in place. The ingredients of this structure might look like

- ♦ time for school work
- ♦ leisure time (screens allowed)
- ♦ leisure time (no screens)
- ♦ Physical exercise (inside or outside but if outside, observing social distancing rules).
- ♦ You may also like to add short periods of 'chores time', so everyone gets into the spirit of helping keep the home organised.

Sample timetable: Please adjust as needed and use any guidance given by the school.

SAMPLE 'SCHOOL DAY' TIMETABLE	
8.00: get up, wash, have breakfast, get ready.	
9.00-9.15: look at plan for the day	Tip: you can experiments with the timings e.g. if your child has a short attention span you can make the work periods slightly shorter and breaks a bit longer
9.15-10.00: work period	
10.00-10.30: break	
10.30-11.15: work period	
11.15-11.45: break	
11.45-12.30: creative period	
12.30-2.00: lunch and physical activity	
2.00-2.45: work period	
2.45-3.00: write down plan for next day	

3 Strike when the iron is cold



Yes, you read this right! Most parenting experts now suggest that parents should deal with difficult issues at neutral times whenever possible. This means trying to avoid dealing with issues when in 'reptile mode' and showing a calm front whenever possible. Extreme ends of the parenting line create conflict. At the right end, there will be a lot of parental orders, often with much shouting to try to enforce rules. At the left end of the parenting line, there will be no rules and sense of chaos. The middle ground is the authoritative zone, the place where you can state rules paying attention to the three't's – **Timing** (when to talk), **Tone** (how we talk) **Talk** (the words we use).

4 Use Connecting tools (to encourage better behaviour): These are parenting tools that are the left of the parenting line but still in the middle ground. These tools really help support positive attitudes and behaviour. We can divide these into four overlapping categories.

1. Quality time: this is preferably one parent to one child play time or special time. It need only be for 10 minutes and it is a time where the child leads the activity (preferably non-screen). It is very good for bonding between parent and child. During this time the parent is not allowed to raise difficult issues.

2. Reflective listening: this is very good tool to help calm an upset / angry child. It means listening for about 10 minutes without offering advice or solutions. It can be hard to stay quiet but helpful once you see a child begin to calm down. Then you may offer an idea or two if the child will accept this.

3. Connecting actions: these are small gifts or nice things that you may do for your child or shared activities that you may do together. It links well with quality time.

4. Connecting comments are comments that parents give to children using praise and positive feedback. We have a list of six types of these powerful conversational tools attached! Used regularly, these comments improve difficult behaviour.

5 Use Correcting tools

(to manage difficult behaviour):

These tools are to the right of the parenting line, but in the middle area. All children need boundaries and rules, but many children will try to get around rules, especially when it comes to screens. These tools are designed to help parents remain calm and clear when reminding children of rules or addressing difficult behaviour.

Tip: think 'connection before correction' before using these tools and try to keep to the 3-1 praise vs criticism strategy.

1. Think-Through's: At a neutral (calm) time, ask the child what they should do (for 1 min only) about a problematic behaviour and ask that they repeat this back to you. You can do this 2-3 times a day as long as it is at a neutral time and not at the time of the misbehaviour. This helps to lodge the idea in the 'new brain' and avoids dealing with issues when a child is in 'reptile mode'.

2. Sitting apart: Instead of time out, sitting apart is a tool where you ignore a child following misbehaviour, for a short period, and sit nearby, instead of in another room. You do not talk with the child. This can be useful up to the age of 8.

3. Action replays: Following misbehaviour, you can ask the child to replay the event, but this time doing the right thing. This helps to end of a positive note where possible.

Detailed guidance about the above three tools can be found in the excellent parenting book: Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting (see tip 8)

4. Parental 'disobedience': this means not always doing everything for your child. It also means not getting into direct conflict but 'forgetting' to do things e.g. forgetting to put the dinner on the table when the child can do this themselves. This tool is not to be mean to the child, but to encourage small ways of children doing more for themselves, but without constant lectures.

5. Correcting Comments:

Please see the attached handout for six types of helpful correcting comments that help gain the child's cooperation rather than defensive responses. The way we talk and the words we use usually helps children to do the right thing more often.

6 Help deal with Siblings relationships to reduce squabbles and arguments.

Look at the ten point plan and add your own ideas.

The plan can be made into a 'rules chart' but don't add more than 4 or 5 rules. The more rules, the more difficult it is to manage.

'Less is more'

Tip: parents have reported that tip 9 is something they often haven't thought about and can work well.

Ten Point Plan for better sibling relationships

It is useful to write down up to five points of house rules on a large sheet of paper to then stick up on the wall. Ask children to for ideas when setting up rules. A chart reminds everyone of the rules.

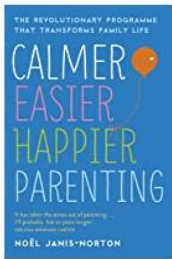


1. Do not use a 'no hitting' rule. Say instead: 'Ways to sort things out without hitting or arguing'.
2. Remember: the child who hits another child may well have been wound up. Some children can become masters of the subtle art of provoking their brothers / sisters.
3. Verbal aggression can hurt as much as physical aggression. Have a politeness rule that you also role-model to the children.
4. There is a role for (supervised) play-fighting, especially for boys. Rough & tumble with a parent or sibling can teach how to rein in more aggressive impulses.
5. If you are worried play fighting is going too far, move in close, to show closer parental presence. A closer presence reminds children of the rules.
6. Watch your own stress. If you are in 'reptile mode' it will be difficult to manage sibling flare-ups!
7. Prevention strategies: Special time with each child separately several times a week; descriptive praise when doing the right thing, reflective listening when child upset about the actions of another child.
8. Give an older child a few special privileges (e.g. later bedtime, more pocket money). These perks can go along way to lowering resentment to a younger sibling. A younger child could get more one-on-one time.
9. Each sibling must play alone for some time (not in front of a screen). This helps to learn self reliance and not irritate siblings when bored. The benefits are that siblings can appreciate each other more after a period of lone play.
10. Arrange a 'patch up' place for siblings to go to help resolve issues. Ask them to let you know what they have come up with.


7 Using Rewards & Consequences to motivate children.


In the positive parenting field lots of evidence shows that both rewards and consequences should be kept small. Also if you use a chart, only place one or a maximum of two, difficult behaviours on it. If you overload the chart, everyone gets confused!

Rewards such as sticker charts, marbles in a jar etc can be very helpful as a short term way of motivating children to improve behaviour. When given with descriptive praise this also stops dependency on the chart.

Consequences should be thought about in advance and list made of three or four mild consequences. Then, when misbehaviour occurs you can use these rather than larger ones that cannot be carried out easily, or which just breed more resentment between parent and child.

<p>8 Support & resources</p> <p>During this time of social isolating and social distancing, why not set up a parent What's App support group; or maintain contact with teachers for advice and keep in touch with any professionals involved with the care of your family. There may not be face to face contacts but there is phone, text and maybe Skype , Zoom or similar contact available.</p> <p>If you get any time to read, please dip into the recommended British positive parenting books and resources on the right; - they can be lifesavers.</p> <div data-bbox="118 712 392 757" data-label="Section-Header"> <h3>Digital Parenting</h3> </div> <p>This website (see right panel) has lots of tips for regaining control over screen time!</p>	<p>For young children aged 2-10:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Calmer, Happier, Easier Parenting. Noel Janis-Norton. Excellent book with all the up to date positive parenting techniques that work! (Quite a fat book, but easy to dip into). ♦ Divas & Dictators. Charlie Taylor. Easy to read book full of practical tips. <p>For older children 10 and over:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Divas & Door-slamers. Charlie Taylor. Teenage version of the above book. ♦ Non-Violent Resistance parenting resources: Lots of tips, tools and fact-sheets at www.oxleas.nhs.uk/nvr <p>For all children:</p> <p>Digital Parenting: how to find a digital-life balance. Very important while there is so much temptation of screen time while away from school. www.vodafone.co.uk/mobile/digital-parenting</p>	 
<p>9 Speak to a helping professional if needed.</p>	<p>Don't forget, even in this time of crisis, you can get phone support, or sometimes video call support from many helping professionals. If you need more urgent support please call the organisation's duty line who will guide you as to what to do.</p>	
<p>10 Devise you own tips to help manage the next few weeks as well as you can in these difficult circumstances.</p>	<p>Why not write down some bullet point of reminders that you can place somewhere private to look at when you need to ...</p>	
<p><i>Special Supplement: TIP 11</i></p> <p>The Baskets exercise</p>  <p>For more information on the baskets exercise see www.oxleas.nhs.uk/nvr and go to the factsheet on 'baskets'.</p>	<p>To help make family life more bearable over this difficult period, try this exercise.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. List all of your child's problematic behaviours. Divide them into three baskets – in the big basket place 'minor-but-irritating' issues (we call these MBI's); In the medium basket place important issues but not the most serious. In the small basket go one or two serious issues. This exercise helps to work out what to focus on so that issues are categorised and become more manageable. 2. After doing this exercise, you are no longer allowed to talk to the child about big basket issues; you can comment on medium basket issues; for small basket issues you take great care using the connecting and correcting comments sheets attached. 3. Repeat for each child. 4. Finally, and most importantly, you make a list of what we call 'rainbow basket' issues. Things that you like, or liked, about you child, including your child's strengths, that may have got lost under the weight of problems. 	

 <p>Finding strengths</p>	<h2>Connecting Comments</h2> <p>Timing: Positive comments for pre-teens / teens are often better received when given at a neutral time.</p> <p>Tone: For older children, use a neutral voice; many teenagers do not respond well to enthusiastic praise!</p> <p>Talk: Choose words carefully to help positive comments improve your child's confidence and cooperation.</p>	<p><i>'When I make a mistake, no-one forgets; when I do well, no-one sees'</i></p> <p>(Sal Severe, author of <i>How to behave so your children will too</i>)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">For all of the following statements, we recommend that they be short and succinct. They are short positive comments that will frequently be re-visited.It can be tricky to remember to be positive. So think of a metaphorical magnifying glass to help re-discover your child's hidden qualities!Also remember the 'connection before correction' principle. Use these 6 connecting comments <u>before</u> considering the 6 resisting comments. Note the 3-1 strategy (point 6) below!		
<h3>Six pre-planned Connecting Comments</h3>		
1 Low key greetings	For <i>low key greeting comments</i> we ask parents to <i>avoid</i> adding any other comments at all (as these invariably become critical ones at this early stage of change). Example: <i>'Hi, good to see you'. 'Morning, breakfast is ready'.</i>	
2 Descriptive appreciation / praise	This simply means using words to describe our comments, so that they become specific rather than general. <i>Descriptive appreciation</i> is useful for comments with all children and especially children with some neuro-developmental conditions. Example: General: <i>'Thanks for doing what I asked you'.</i> Descriptive: <i>'I appreciate your effort to go into school this morning'.</i>	
3 Subtle appreciation	Low key subtle appreciation, in a neutral tone, is generally more appropriate, and less likely to be rejected, by older children and teenagers, as well as children with more sensitive or intense temperaments including diagnoses such as Autism and / or ADHD. Example: <i>Thanks for coming in at the time I asked you to'. (spoken in a neutral tone).</i>	
Once you have practiced the above comments, try the ones below!		
4 Delayed appreciation	Parenting literature usually looks at the need for <i>immediate</i> comments of appreciation / praise. We note that it is the use of delayed appreciation that can be very effective in helping older children to accept appreciative and strength-based comments. Example: <i>'I meant to say earlier, thanks for coming in at the time I asked you to'.</i>	
5 Don't Combine appreciation & criticism	This is advice of what <u>NOT to do</u> - that is, give positive feedback followed by a criticism or reminder in the same sentence. This common pitfall affects all parents and carers. This tendency is well documented and usually has the effect of leaving the recipient with a sour taste of correction that cancels out the earlier appreciation! Example: <i>Thanks for coming in at the time I asked you to. If you did this every time, wouldn't life be easier!'</i>	
6 3-1 praise vs criticism strategy	We ask parents to consider the ratio of 'connection before correction' comments. Here we suggest the 3-1 appreciation vs criticism strategy (adapted from Taylor, 2010). Interestingly, we find that this ratio often stays in parent's minds and helps to remember the importance of connecting comments. It also helps to recognise that current conversations are often overloaded with corrections and reprimands.	

	Correcting comments <i>(Please note the 3:1 strategy on the previous page before using these 6 statements)</i> Timing: Choose a neutral time (<i>strike while the iron is cold</i> moments); Tone: Use a neutral dull tone of voice; record yourself or ask a partner / friend to give you feedback. Talk: Choose words <u>carefully</u> using pre-planned succinct comments.	<i>‘What you resist, persists’</i> (Carl Jung)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">For all of the following statements, we recommend that they be short and succinct. They are not long one-off lectures, but short pre-planned comments (between 1 and 3 minutes) that will frequently be re-visited.Children and young people often respond with non-cooperation or attitude, so imagine a protective Shield to help you avoid slipping into ‘reptile mode’. <i>Note that cooperation with bad attitude usually happens before cooperation with a better attitude!</i>Also remember the ‘connection before correction’ principle. Use the 6 connecting comments before considering these 6 correcting / resisting comments!		
Six pre-planned Correcting (Resisting) Comments		
1 Start with an introductory sentence	Introductory sentences pre-warn a child that a difficult (short) conversation will follow. This prepares the child and usually works far better than a sudden launch into a difficult problem. Examples: ‘I want to let you know about a difficult issue....’ ‘I want to talk upfront about this so you know what it is I want changed...’ ‘I know you’re not going to like this, but I need to say ...’ ‘You must get fed up with this, but I need to tell you ...’	
2 Offer the option to talk at a later time	Offering an appointment for a <i>short</i> conversation often works surprisingly well and stops teenagers’ biggest complaint about parents - ‘spontaneous problem solving lectures’. Appointment examples: ‘I want to talk about something that is worrying me. Do you want to talk now or later at 7pm’. ‘I’d like to talk about this later, after dinner, when we have both had a chance to calm down’.	
3 Add praise at the end (if possible)	Praise / appreciation followed by criticism should <i>never</i> be combined. But the other way around is OK. Example: ‘I am concerned that you did not go into school today. <i>I have noticed you have made an effort to get into school more often</i> ’	
Once you have practiced the above comments, try the ones below!		
4 Use ‘I’ statements & ‘point of view’ statements	Example: ‘YOU’ (wrong way): ‘You need to come home by 10pm’. ‘I’ (right way): ‘I would like you to come home by 10pm please’. ‘I’ statements and ‘point of view’ statements change a ‘hard fact’ into a ‘point of view’. These are usually better received and carry a better chance of cooperation in situations of conflict and disagreement. Wrong way: ‘Your attitude is unacceptable – you need to change this’. Better way: ‘You may not like this, but I think your attitude is unacceptable. I would like you to change this please’. Variations are ‘From my point of view ...’ ‘The way I see it is ...’ ‘You may disagree, but from my perspective ...’	
5 Focus on the problem, not the person	Example: WRONG WAY: ‘Why are you so stupid? Anyone who would do that is an idiot’. ‘You are nothing but trouble’. (irritable or irate tone – reptile brain) RIGHT WAY: ‘This is a problem that we need to sort out’. ‘I regard that behaviour as non-acceptable’. (Neutral yet assertive tone – new brain) Name calling should always be avoided as it erodes the child’s confidence and creates more defiance and the possibility of retaliation.	
6 Use ‘parental duty’ statements	Example: ‘I know this is not pleasant for you, but it is my parental duty not to let you stay on the computer all night’. You may also add a <u>brief</u> explanation: ‘It is my duty to make sure it is turned off at a reasonable time, so that you get enough sleep’. Parental duty statements are very helpful, especially when given in a neutral tone. They impart a duty of care. Use of more forceful language often leads to an energetic, oppositional response from the child or young person.	