

# Information leaflet

## Managing challenging behaviour

Children living with special guardians have had difficult experiences during their early years and some might have feelings of loss, suffered trauma and/or have attachment issues.

As a result they might behave and act in ways that are challenging and difficult for them and you to cope with.

For special guardians the way their child behaves can be confusing and difficult to manage, especially if they haven't had specialist parenting training. It may also come as a surprise if they have raised children without these issues.

Your behaviour towards them and how well you look after yourself to help you stay calm when they're angry is vital. Research shows that how a carer reacts to difficult behaviour may be more important for a child's development than the behaviour itself. So you need to think about your reactions and emotions.

### Common ways children may behave

Children can show challenging behaviour in a number of ways from bedwetting, becoming withdrawn to acting aggressively. The cause of this behaviour is often due to attachment issues and from a lack of self-esteem.

When a child's early experiences involve neglect, abuse or poor nurturing, the acute stress they feel leads to the release of the stress hormone cortisol. This has a negative impact on the parts of the brain responsible for controlling their emotions, moods and their ability to plan and reason.

Try and read our attachment page which explains this further and looks at the impact on their early years and as they grow into teenagers.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse or witnessed inappropriate behaviour by adults, including domestic violence, may act inappropriately and put themselves in situations that could make them vulnerable to harm. For older children this can result in different types of risk-taking behaviours, such as taking drugs, drinking alcohol or vulnerability to sexual exploitation as well as poor internet safety. Children may also self harm or suffer from eating disorders.

This challenging behaviour sometimes begins six months or a year into living with you. Each child is different and for some it will be a phase that they grow out of over time but for others professional help may be needed.

## Managing your child's behaviour

The strategies children have developed to stay safe can result in them resisting you taking control. It can feel natural to respond by becoming upset, authoritarian or aggressive. However this confirms to the child that they should not let down their defences and need to stay in control themselves.

Specialist parenting approaches such as therapeutic parenting help children move towards feeling more secure and resilient. It is vital for special guardians who need this support to get specialist training.

When children are upset or aggressive the key way to respond is to validate their emotions but not their behaviour. You can let them know it is okay to feel angry but it's not acceptable to punch or hurt someone because they feel angry. This is known as emotion coaching. This parenting technique helps children manage their feelings when they are upset and misbehaving, wind down the situation and build positive learning.

You may find this awkward when you start and children may pick up on this if it feels strange, forced or artificial. You may not be used to talking about your own feelings, which will naturally stop children from talking about theirs. So it's important to ease in to the technique by talking about your own feelings. In time you'll both talk about your feelings naturally.

Sitting down and talking through the situation once everyone has calmed down will help them to recognise and be in touch with their emotions.

Some other ways to deal with challenging behaviour are listed below:

- For bedwetting, contact your GP to rule out the possibility of a physical infection. Otherwise treat it as a commonplace occurrence. With bedwetting and smearing faeces, don't laugh or react but suggest the child does something else while you clean up. It's important that you don't stop giving your child drinks as a preventative measure as this concentrates the urine and makes further accidents more likely.
- If a child throws their toys and furniture around you shouldn't simply remove these from their bedroom. Although this may seem like a reasonable response it can lead to feelings of neglect and may be seen as a punishment.
- It is worth using caution with the use of 'time outs'. No matter how much you may intend this as a method of allowing calm and introducing space into the environment it deprives children of relationships and is often seen as a much greater punishment by children who've experienced neglect than is intended.
- To help children protect themselves from sexual exploitation and understand that it's always their right to say no.
- Never hit or shake a child. It teaches children that it is acceptable to hurt people and could trigger memories of past abuse.

- When you catch your child behaving appropriately, give them as much praise as you can. When you praise your child go into detail about why you've praised them. Don't say "good boy" as they may not realise what it is they've done to earn the praise.
- If challenging behaviour continues it is worth speaking to your GP about a referral to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) although there may be a long waiting list.

### Managing reactions to birth family contact

Seeing their birth parents can bring up very difficult feelings for children and a feeling of insecurity about their current situation. As their carer, you will become an expert in their feelings around this and can track and observe how their behaviour changes before, during and after contact to help manage their feelings.

Children need to know as much as possible about what is going to happen: who they're going to see, details of any activity, a reminder to be kind and if they're not happy about something to tell someone.

Others may be fine before contact but the impact hits them afterwards. Reassurance is needed that they'll be coming back to you as usual. Before they go let them know you're going to do something together when you get back. Make sure your home is as you left it as the more consistent and predictable you can make the situation the calmer your child will feel.

You may feel sorry for the child and be tempted to be more lenient with them if they are disruptive afterwards. However it's better for them if you acknowledge how they feel and follow through with a consequence as you usually would.

### Looking after yourself

Special guardians often put pressure on themselves by feeling that they need to fix everything for the child. Reduce your stress by acknowledging:

- You don't need to – and can't – do it all.
- Things don't have to go right the first time.
- It is okay to start small and that things take time to change.

Your own health and state of mind impacts your ability to parent so it is really important to look after yourself. Picking up the phone to talk about how you feel if you're having a hard time or having a bath can sometimes be a necessity not a luxury for you and the child. Don't wait for permission and remember that you can call us too!

### Practical ways you can support your child

- Always be consistent, predictable and available. If you say you'll listen to them or be there for them follow through. This will help them feel safe and learn that people can be trusted.

- Remember your child's past and present behaviour is linked; this may help you see frustrating behaviour as normal and accept it. Try and empathise with them.
- You may find yourself treading very lightly or appeasing difficult or abusive behaviour to compensate for the lack of love they've received. They still need you to help them manage their feelings by remaining consistent.
- Parent children based on their emotional age. If frustrated or tearful they may regress. A 10 year-old child who is acting emotionally like a 2 year-old can be rocked, sung to quietly and soothed without words or complex arguments.
- Communicate with school teachers and other key people in the child's life to help you understand the extent of their behaviour and resolve it together.
- It is important to learn what triggers your child's reactions to previous traumatic memories and to catch them early on.
- Expect to give instructions for tasks more than once, describing each stage the child needs to complete in detail. Ask them to repeat instructions back to you to make sure they've understood what you have asked them to do.

## Key points

- Children living with special guardians have had difficult experiences during their early years and some might have feelings of loss and attachment issues. As a result they might behave and act in ways that are challenging and difficult for them and you to cope with.
- Children can show challenging behaviour in a number of ways from bedwetting, becoming withdrawn to becoming very aggressive.
- When children are upset or aggressive the key way to respond is to validate their emotions but not their behaviour.
- Don't put added pressure on yourself. Things will take time to change and settle down and you need to look after yourself too.

## Useful organisations

### Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Trained and Supported (KEEP)

[www.keep.org.uk](http://www.keep.org.uk) Tel: 0161 203 3264

Some children need more intensive help to recover from their early trauma. KEEP is a 16-20 week group training programme which promotes positive parenting skills designed for special guardians, foster and kinship carers to address children's difficulties reduce disruption and enable them to be successful in childhood and adulthood. Programmes run for children aged 3 to 6 years, 5 to 12 years and 12 to 17 years. It is funded by local authorities and the Department for Education.

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