

# understanding your overactive child



## Understanding Childhood

is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into the child's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to make sense of their behaviour.

This leaflet was originally published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust.

Leaflets available from:

[www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

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[info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)

For many years parents, nursery staff and teachers have found a certain sort of child hard to manage. Such children find it difficult to concentrate, preferring activity to concentration, being quick to react, and not thinking before they act. Children like this cause a lot of upset to parents and teachers alike, 'getting under their skin', adding to the stress they probably already feel under. Without support, and an acknowledgement of the kind of difficulty this sort of child presents, a teacher or school can resort to 'excluding' the child, sometimes even as young as nursery age. Parents under stress can find themselves in a battleground, repeatedly losing their temper, and punishing their child in ways that are likely to make the problem worse. Parents usually feel very bad about this, recognising that the relationship with their child is not as they would wish.

Every child is likely to go through phases when their parents, carers and teachers find them hard to manage. If you want to change the behaviour that worries you, it helps to try and understand the child's feelings. A child may have learnt that the best way of grabbing an adult's attention – even if it is

only to get a telling off – is to behave in an overactive, wild and uncontrolled way. Behaviour like this has to be rethought not only by the child but by the adults too.

## Children behaving badly

Children who are hard to manage are likely to:

- find it difficult to listen or to concentrate on what they are doing and be unable to settle down to anything
- prefer being physically active, often aimlessly, to non-physical activities
- fall behind in their work, whatever their ability and often come to dislike school work
- be quick to react without thinking first
- lose themselves in activities that absorb their minds, such as computer games and television, where they don't need to think.

Children who are all over the place and can't settle down to anything will not feel good about themselves. They are often lacking in self-confidence. Their jumpy behaviour can make it more difficult for them to become friends with other children or to form good relationships with adults.

Each child is an individual and their behaviour is a response to their particular situation and their own problems. Nevertheless, there are typical patterns of behaviour that may help you

to understand what has led to your child's difficulties. For instance:

- Some children, often boys, seem to feel that people only really notice them when they are naughty. When they are good, no one seems to care.
- Some children feel that they have to cheer their parents up by being lively and sometimes acting the clown. This may be a response they learned if their mother was depressed or low in spirits when they were small babies. These children may appear to be overactive.
- Some children feel they are not as good as their sisters or brothers. They react badly to hearing themselves compared with other children.

### Differences between boys and girls

Boys and girls develop in different ways and tend to find themselves in difficulty at different ages.

More boys than girls are likely to need help between the ages of 7 and 13 years old. Small boys often try to get away from any problems they may have with their parents, their teachers or themselves by indulging in physical activity. They tend to have behaviour problems during their junior school days and when they start at secondary school.

At the same age girls may avoid problems by being good little girls and working hard. More girls than boys seek help in adolescence, when they have to manage their sexuality and what this means for their capacity to relate to others or to act assertively.

### Making sense of your child's behaviour

If you can make sense of your child's difficult behaviour, you can also help your child to make better sense of their own behaviour. Try to think about when and how it started and

## Diary

It is often helpful to make a sort of list or diary about how your child has been, for example, when they have been upset, and when calm.

	<i>week 1</i>	<i>week 2</i>	<i>week 3</i>	<i>week 4</i>
Monday am	OK	OK	OK	OK
Monday pm	agitated	agitated	maths lesson: really upset	OK
Tuesday am	OK	OK	OK	OK
Tuesday pm	OK	OK	OK	OK
Wednesday am	won't go to school	won't go to school	maths lesson	a bit upset
Wednesday pm	upset	can't sleep	a bit better	OK
Thursday am	OK	maths test	OK	OK
Thursday pm	upset	bit better	OK	OK
Friday am	OK	OK	OK	OK
Friday pm	OK	OK	OK	OK
Saturday	raining: no football very agitated	wins at football: OK	loses at football: all over the place	football
Sunday	plays with Dad: OK	painting: OK	plays football with Dad: OK	goes to grandparents

It looks as if Ricky, a seven year old, has a problem on Mondays and Wednesdays at school. This seems to coincide with maths lessons, which Ricky can't do. He also plays up when he loses at football.

The maths teacher discovers that Ricky can't understand subtraction, which affects all his mathematics.

His stepfather helps him take on board more calmly the

things he cannot do. He begins to see that he can do it.

Finding there is a reason why maths is a problem helps Ricky see that a problem can be faced and thought about.

This represents the first step in the process of the family making sense of Ricky's 'difficult' behaviour. It's unlikely that the problem of his overactivity will disappear overnight, but it's a step in the right direction.

what triggers it off. For instance:

- What exactly is the behaviour that you are worried about? When did it all start?
- What was your child like when they were little? How are they now?
- What were they like before you had another baby? How are they now?
- What were they like at pre-school or at nursery school? In school at different stages?
- Were you worried or distracted by problems at any particular time during their childhood? Could this be linked to your child's behaviour?
- Does their behaviour change or become difficult in different settings?
- What were you like as a child? Were you similar?

Almost always there is a pattern. (See the example of Ricky in the Diary opposite.) Once you have recognised this pattern, you can start to think about ways for everyone concerned to work together to change your child's behaviour. For instance:

- Don't reward bad behaviour with attention, but give lots of attention to the child's good behaviour instead.
- Don't compare your child with anyone else – especially their sisters or brothers.

Trying to think about your own circumstances when the problem started may help to make sense of your child's later behaviour.

None of this is very easy to do. But a child who feels thought about often starts to think for themselves, and you and they can begin to change together. Your child feels better because they gain the approval of the adults and begin to value themselves more.

## Setting boundaries

The fact that you are trying to think about your child's behaviour doesn't mean that you don't also have to develop strategies for managing everyday situations. You cannot ignore your child's behaviour when it is disruptive, or dangerous to others, or themselves. You do have to set boundaries on what is and isn't acceptable behaviour to you or to other people. You do have to contain the outbursts, to divert, distract, or sometimes physically and safely hold the erupting child. This is never easy, but it will help you and your child if you keep calm and focused, finding ways to stop the behaviour, without becoming punishing and angry towards your child. If you can put a boundary round your own

## Some helpful suggestions

- Your child needs you to keep calm.
- Stop and look at what they are doing and give them your own attention,
- Try to catch their attention and, if possible, talk quietly about what is going on.
- Try to explain to your child and involve them in how you are tackling their behaviour.
- Think about:
  - What has set them off?
  - Is it part of a pattern? Does it link with their usual patterns of behaviour?
  - Is it usually something similar that sets them off?
  - If this time is different from before, what happened?
- Ask yourself what is it about your child's particular behaviour which gets to you so much.
  - Does it need to get to you?
  - Can you find another way of dealing with it and avoid conflict?

If you have managed to work through all these steps, looking at and thinking about your child's behaviour, they may have calmed down and so may you. Repeat this process each time problems arise.

If you have tried this again and again and really can't find a pattern to your child's behaviour, now is the time to seek help.

behaviour as a parent, working at keeping calm, the hard work will pay off and help you make real changes in your relationship with your child.

## Working together to change behaviour

Parents, teachers, the family generally and the child themselves should be able to work together to see what is preventing the child from being able to focus, and to develop strategies for helping them to concentrate.

It is helpful to everybody to be up front about it. Your child needs to know that you are concerned, and it will help other people to understand and to co-operate with you in looking for patterns and intervening in them. Grandparents and friends, who probably see the child less frequently, can offer you and your child encouragement as you begin to make changes, and can offer further



thoughts and observations about what might help when things do not seem to be going so well.

#### Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

*Postnatal depression*

*Sibling rivalry*

*Separations and changes in the early years*

*The child's experience of primary school*

*Fathers*

*Grandparents and the extended family*

### When the problem is serious

When the child's behaviour is affected most or all of the time, there may be a serious

problem. Among these kinds of behaviour are some that are more difficult to tackle than most. Today some experts describe these as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Child psychotherapists believe that it is essential to consider each child's situation individually, including their physical health, before making this diagnosis or prescribing any medication.

The local Child & Family Clinic, together with its child psychotherapist, if available, will be helpful. Only in the most severe cases will drug treatments be required.

If you feel you need help, please contact your GP or Health Visitor or local Child Guidance or Child and Family Clinic (address in telephone directory under your local Health Authority).

### Further help – organisations

#### YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person

*Phone* 0800 018 2138

*Web* [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

#### Parentline Plus

Support and advice for anyone parenting a child.

*Phone* 0808 800 2222

*Textphone* 0800 783 6783

*Web* [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

#### Contact a Family

Registered charity helping families who care for children with any disability or special need.

*Phone* 0808 808 3555

*Email* [info@cafamily.org.uk](mailto:info@cafamily.org.uk)

*Web* [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

#### The National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service

Registered charity providing information and resources about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

*Phone* 020 8906 9068

*Email* [info@addiss.co.uk](mailto:info@addiss.co.uk)

*Web* [www.addiss.co.uk](http://www.addiss.co.uk)

#### Mental Health Foundation

Registered charity working in mental health and learning disabilities.

*Phone* 020 7802 0302 (info line)

*Email* [mhf@mhf.org.uk](mailto:mhf@mhf.org.uk)

*Web* [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

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