

Information Sheet – Parenting Series

Parenting Strategies

Parenting can be the most rewarding and the most difficult job in the world. Children don't come with instructions, so it can help parents to have some strategies for more challenging situations.

Attachment and attention

Attachment describes the emotional bond between a child and their parent or main caregiver. Attachment-rich attention describes a type of attention that is laden with emotion. The deep sense of connection a child feels with an adult who is providing attachment-rich attention is a powerful influence on the child's behaviour.

Importantly, attachment-rich attention provides the child with the same sense of closeness regardless of whether the emotion is 'positive' (e.g. love, joy) or 'negative' (e.g. anger, disgust).

Attachment-rich Rewards; Attachment-neutral Consequences

Inherently, parents pay more attention (and give more emotion) to behaviours they would like to see occur less. When they notice their children behaving in a way they would like to see more often, they are less likely to pay attention to those behaviours. Unfortunately, this results in some children receiving attachment-rich attention for misbehaviour, and no attention (or relatively emotionless attention) for behaving well!

Ideally, we would like to flip this so that when our children are behaving well, we react towards them in an emotion laden way. However, when they are misbehaving or engaging in a behaviour we would like to see less, our reaction is neutral, calm and matter-of-fact (you may need to summon your acting skills here, as you could be feeling something other than neutral or calm!).

Effective Rewards – make these fun and unpredictable! Examples include:

- Descriptive praise
- Physical affection
- Time with you
- Tangible rewards

Effective Consequences – Make these boring and predictable! Examples include:

- Time out (extremely effective when undertaken correctly)
- Removal of privileges
- Natural consequences

Helping children recognise & process their emotions

When children are highly emotional, they are not responsive to reason, threats, discussion, or any other methods parents often employ. For the child's emotion to reduce enough for them to cope, they first need to feel heard and understood. Validating a child's emotions does not mean you agree with them or can't impose limits on their behaviour.

Validating Emotions:

- **Listen** attentively; mirror the child's posture, tone of voice and facial expression;
- **Acknowledge** their feelings with a word or sound ("Oh... Mmmm... I see..."); refrain from solving or giving advice.
- **Validate** the feeling by giving it a name: "You're SO MAD about that!"; "That seems so unfair to you!"; "That sounds really rough".
- **Give** the child their wishes in fantasy: "I wish I could use my superpowers to make that happen right now!"

If your child's emotion continues to escalate it is crucial that you *stay calm*. Let them know you will leave them for a few minutes to calm down, and then come back to check on them. Repeat the process until they are calm enough to cope with their emotions.