

Being a parent

Being a parent is a role that can bring you great joy and happiness as well as challenges to deal with. Nurturing your child and watching them grow and develop into their own unique person can add meaning and purpose to your life. An important part of parenting is looking after yourself so you can be your best for your children and family.

ParentLink

informing



supporting



connecting



The role of parents

There are many different ways to be a parent. For the most part the law allows parents to bring up children according to their own values and beliefs as long as children's welfare is taken care of. The most important thing is that children have the warmth, love and care they need for their wellbeing and development.

Parents can help children achieve their best and prepare for adult life by:

- building their confidence and resilience
- providing opportunities to learn and explore
- providing safe boundaries and guidance
- helping children learn to get along with others.

Each child is a unique individual with their own temperament and qualities. Parents need to be flexible and adapt their parenting to meet their child's needs.

Being a parent can change you as a person. While all parents bring strengths and skills to their parenting, many find they grow and learn 'on the job', just as children grow and learn. They come to understand more about children and what they need at each stage of their development. Parents can also learn a lot about themselves and what helps them be their best as a parent.

A close-up photograph of two babies holding hands. The baby on the left is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and olive green pants, with a pink pacifier in its mouth. The baby on the right is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and grey pants. They are both holding hands in the center of the frame. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field.

What influences our parenting?

How we were raised and the relationships we have with our own parents are often the biggest influences on our parenting. You might have memories about what worked well in your own childhood and what was important for you. You can repeat patterns from the past or do things differently for your own children. It's up to you. You can decide the kind of parent you want to be.

Our parenting can also be influenced by

- our culture or religion
- what we see friends, family and other doing
- images of parents and families we see in the media
- our life circumstances, e.g. health, job income
- the amount of practical or emotional support we have from family, friends or services.

The most important thing you can do as a parent is show children you love them.

Enjoying time together and getting to know each other builds your relationship and a strong foundation for parenting.

Looking after you

Being a parent takes a lot of physical and emotional energy. If you become tired, worn out or stressed it is harder to be your best as a parent. Nurturing yourself and looking after your own needs is important for you and nurtures your whole family. You 'refill your cup' so you have more to give your children.

Here are some things that can help you have balance in your life and prevent stress building up.

- As you go about your busy day, make a habit of pausing and noticing the good things that are happening, however small. You are nurturing yourself by being mindful, aware and 'in the moment'.
- Enjoy being with your children, notice what's special and unique about them.
- Be kind to yourself. Be realistic about what you can achieve and don't expect to be perfect.
- Take time to relax and do things you enjoy. Keep up your interests and hobbies, catch up with friends.
- Value yourself and the job you are doing as a parent. Trust yourself and have confidence in your parenting.

Reward yourself and plan things to look forward to.

- Be optimistic and positive. Don't dwell on negatives.
- Make health a priority in your family. Eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep is good for everyone.
- Surround yourself with supportive family and friends and connect with them as much as you can. They can provide practical and emotional support.

Make time to look after your own needs. Remember you are a person as well as a parent.

Finding information

When you are a parent, information and advice comes from everywhere — friends, family, the media, the internet and professionals. It is important to be open to ideas but to base your decisions on trustworthy information.

- If you find information online, make sure it is reliable.
- Social media can be a great way to share experiences with family and friends and find encouragement and support. It can also be a place where parents are judged and criticised. If this happens think about whether you want to be involved.

Seek help from others but keep on believing in yourself.

- Be strong enough to say you don't know something and to ask for information and advice. If the first place you try doesn't have what you need, be persistent and keep going until you find something that helps.
- Find out about your child's stage of development and how you can meet their needs. Keep learning about each stage as children grow up. Remember every child is different and you need to adapt to your child's changing needs.

Work and family

Many parents feel they are constantly juggling work and family life and doing neither as well as they would like.

Many feel guilty about not 'being there' or having time to do all the things they'd like to do with their children.

They can :

- worry about what to do when children are sick

- worry what others think when they have to leave work to attend to a child
- feel stressed when things don't go as planned. Sometimes plans can be disrupted before work even starts for the day.

It helps to plan how you will manage the demands and deal with the unexpected. You could consider:

- what is the first priority?
- who will do what tasks?
- what plans are there for sick children, school events? Who will take time off work?

The more positive experiences parents and children share, the better the relationship will be.

If you are using child care it is important to choose a place your child enjoys. If you are confident their needs are being met you are less likely to feel anxious or guilty. Check the service's credentials to ensure quality and that they have ways to keep children safe.

Children have an ongoing need for connection with parents. They equate love with time and connection, not just being told they are loved or given material things. In a busy day they can feel they have to compete for your time and attention.

Your feelings

One of the most important things in parenting is your feelings and attitudes towards it. Are you enjoying it? Do you feel relaxed and confident, or scared and worried?

As a parent you can feel a range of emotions at different times which are all normal yet it can feel like a rollercoaster ride. You can feel happiness, joy and pride as well as unappreciated, tired, upset, angry, panic, despair and even hatred.

Take time to notice your feelings. What are the underlying causes of negative feelings? A first step can be to talk things through with someone supportive — your partner, family, friends or services. If you feel low a lot, talk with a professional.

Calming yourself

At times, children's behaviour or other things in life can challenge you and 'push your buttons'. When this happens remember one of the most important things you can do for your children is to regulate your own emotions.

When children see you staying calm, they can learn to do this too. This is an important life skill.

When children's behaviour upsets you, remember they are probably doing something that is normal for their stage of development. How you feel about it and how you respond is up to you.

You could ask yourself:

- do I really understand why my child is behaving this way?
- am I reacting based on my emotions, or what my child needs from me in this situation?
- am I being fair?
- am I being kind and patient?

Pausing and taking a deep breath before you react can make a big difference. Children need you to see things from their point of view and show you understand their feelings.

If they have big emotions they need your help to calm down. You can choose to get angry, or use this as a chance to connect with your child and help them learn.

If you are concerned about your child's behaviour contact a professional.

When you stay calm you are showing children how to regulate their emotions. This is an important life skill they can learn from you.

Your values

Being clear about your values and beliefs can be a good foundation for your parenting.

Talk with your child's other parent/ your partner about what's important to each of you and for your family.

You might decide you value:

- showing love and kindness
- respecting each other's differences
- being responsible
- no shouting or hitting.

If you have different views try to come to an understanding.

Don't put each other down or criticise each other in front of children.

Parents can grow into their role and develop their parenting skills every day.





Parenting styles

Research shows there are four broad styles that parents use: 'authoritarian', 'permissive', 'disengaged' and 'supportive' (see ParentLink Guide 'What is your parenting style?'). While parents usually use a mix of these, they tend to use one style the most. The 'supportive' style works best for children's wellbeing and development. This involves being warm and loving and providing clear guidance and support. Some ways to be a 'supportive' parent are below.

Show love and kindness

The most important thing children need from parents is to feel loved, safe and secure. Children become free to focus their energy on the growing and learning they need to do as part of childhood.

- Be kind and patient with your children. It will bring you closer and build your relationship.
- Show you enjoy spending time with them. Play and have fun together.
- Put down your phone and pay attention to children. Talk and really listen. Show interest in what interests them.
- Tell children you love them. Give hugs and cuddles.
- Have regular meals together as a family, without TV or other screens. It's a chance to talk and share your day.

Build on strengths

Help children learn and build on their strengths. This develops self-confidence and resilience.

- Be interested and support children's learning. Keep in touch with their school or childcare.
- Help them have a go at different activities and find what they enjoy or are good at, e.g. art, music, sport, languages, writing, science, dance.



Help them pursue their interests and show them where these could take them in life.

- Encourage children to play and be creative, both indoors and outdoors.
- Share books together. This can be a special time children remember all their lives.
- Seek help and support if children need it.

Be optimistic and positive

How you think and what you say to yourself and your children really matters. Being positive and optimistic creates a happier outlook for your family and models this for your children.

- Notice and talk about the good things in a situation.

- Rather than say to yourself 'Why should I put up with this?' say 'What's happening for my child to make them behave this way?' It will help you respond in a way that meets your child's needs.
- When there are problems, take positive steps to deal with them. Talk about how you'll get through it or how things will get better.

Provide guidance

Children need to know what is OK and not OK. Set clear rules and boundaries suitable for their age and development.

Be patient as children practice what you want. Rules can be changed as they learn (see ParentLink Guide 'Discipline 0-12 years').



- Talk about the behaviour you want, e.g. 'In our family we are kind to each other/share things'. Try not to constantly say 'don't'. Praise children when they do well. This works much better than punishment.
- Say sorry to children when you make a mistake or act unfairly. You will be modelling taking responsibility.
- Help children learn, aim high and see all the possibilities for their future.
- Help children have trusted adults they can talk to. Older children benefit from mentors who can expand their horizons.

You are a role model for your children. Remember to behave the way you would like them to behave.

Sorting out problems

Problems in other areas of your life can take your attention and leave you with less energy for your children and parenting.

If there is violence in your home, money problems, health problems, arguments with neighbours or problems at work, try to sort things out.

Avoiding it will only make things worse. Seek professional advice if you need to.

Managing anger

All parents have times when they feel angry. Mostly parents handle it well, but sometimes it can be in danger of getting out of control.

Anger is always mixed with another feeling such as guilt, frustration, sadness, or feeling unappreciated.

- Try to do something about the cause of the underlying feeling.
- Get to know your body signs for when anger is building and act before you lose your temper. Go outside, go for a walk or a run. If you have young children and no one to mind them, take them with you.
- Work out times you are most likely to become angry and do something different at that time, e.g. when you first get home from work.

Some parents are unaware of, or deny the impact their anger has on their family.

If you have trouble managing anger, contact a professional.

Taking care of your relationships

One of the best things you can do for your children is to look after your own need for support and love. Make regular time to be alone with your partner, do things you enjoy, talk about your day, share ideas and feelings and just relax. These times are important for clearing up misunderstandings and avoiding any build-up of stress in your relationship. Spend time with others who are important to you.

Children learn about relationships from what they see happening with people around them.

Creating a safe home

Violence in your home harms everyone and is never OK.

- Stay calm and model respect towards others.
- Don't allow yelling, hitting or other violence in your home.
- Listen to others and talk things through when there are disagreements. If it gets heated, take a break and agree to talk later when things are calm.

If there is violence in your home, seek professional help. It rarely stops by itself.

Getting support

All parents need help with some aspect of parenting at some time. Seeking help and support early is the smart thing to do. You could talk with trusted family or friends, see your doctor or contact a service.

Being a parent

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

© Department of Health and Ageing, Government of South Australia (revised 08/16). Reproduced with permission and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect Australian Capital Territory laws (08/17).

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

Published by ParentLink, Community Services Directorate
GPO Box 158 Canberra ACT 2601

e parentlink@act.gov.au
t 13 34 27

Looking for more information?

ACT Government Publication No. 17/0608 (August 2017)



ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support
www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>