



# Behaviour 10 Top Tips

So you can Love Living with Your Pre-Schooler

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## So you can Love Living with Your Pre-Schooler

Here are 10 tips that work. They have been tried and tested by many families.

Instead of getting bogged down in specifics, these pointers give you big picture principles that will help you keep perspective. I hope these pointers stir your soul, stimulate your ideas and better equip you for parenting your child. My goal in all this is to get you over the hump of survival - and into the groove of thriving.

We want to see families' experience

less struggle  
more delight

less glass half-empty  
more gratitude and curiosity

less striving for perfection  
more acceptance and trust

## 1. Model what you want to see

- Managing strong emotions • empathy • sharing • gentle touch • manners
- humour • playfulness • perseverance

– these are some of the life skills we want to see our kids develop.

But they don't happen in a vacuum. All children need to see these life skills modelled – they can't grow something they haven't seen, and won't see the value of a skill if they don't experience the benefits. To make it an everyday behaviour, it needs to be everyday for the parents too. Social skills are learnt through the day-to-day experiences of family members rubbing up against one another in the home.

Naturally a high-energy kid might find it hard to use their voice or hands gently; or a child with vivid imagination may lose themselves in play and forget to take turns with a toy. Each child is born with a unique temperament and talents that make some skills more challenging to develop than others – that's diversity. It makes sense that each child will naturally express their skills with varying success, but *all* children need example.

*"Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others, it is the only means." ~ Albert Einstein*

## 2. Set fair and reasonable boundaries

More often than not, there can be a natural consequence that occurs if your child does not behave in an appropriate way. There are very few occasions in real life where an antisocial behaviour does not cause an

unwanted response. In the home, we need to allow those natural laws to take effect, so they understand the healthy reality of cause and effect. For example if your child hits out, you can stop playing and walk away. If she

is yelling demands, you can escort her outside - where outside voices belong. If she starts throwing toys, they can be swiftly packed away.

When developing boundaries, ask yourself:

Have I explained and modelled it?

Is it age appropriate?

Is it realistic?

Or is she overwhelmed by hunger, tiredness, over/under stimulation?

Am I rewarding positive behaviour?

With a smile, attention, privileges, etc.

Parents often struggle with knowing where the limits are, and not surprisingly, so do their children. Soon after breakfast, packing

away may be effortless for the three year old, but at 5pm it could be all too hard.

Being capable is so very important to a pre-schooler. Avoid setting tasks that you think she cannot achieve. We want her to experience affirming feelings of accomplishment rather than feelings of being overwhelmed. If it's all too hard, it might be time to put on some fun music and pack away *with* your child, rather than expect her to pack-away when you're in the kitchen preparing dinner. Kindness, respect and a sense of team are more important values to promote than achieving the tidy house.

When it comes to setting boundaries: aim for the big-ticket attitudes, this will help you to not sweat the small stuff.

### 3. Follow through

If you see your child act out, warn him once, using a low, slow voice at your child's eye level. If he persists, after one warning, carry out the consequence in a calm, matter-of-fact way. Remember: it's about cause and effect. Give him the opportunity to learn.

There is no need to contaminate it by barking the order, repeating it or inflicting harsh consequences. There is also no need for unhelpful labels like 'naughty' or 'bad'. Coming on too strong is emotionally exhausting for you - and your pre-schooler. It may trigger an adrenalin fight/flight survival response, which naturally switches his brain off from responding and learning. He may freeze up in fear, or feel anger and fight back to protect his sense of self.

Keep it simple and tell him what you want to see. Here are some everyday examples:

*When the timer beeps it will be time to give your sister a turn.*

*The train is for the track; if you throw it we will need to put it away.*

*That's an outside voice; come, lets take it outside*

*Couches are for sitting; come on, let's take those bouncy legs out to the trampoline.*

### 4. Tune-in

Emotions are an acceptable part of everyday life. The joyful ones, we seem to be comfortable with. However your child will also experience other feelings such as frustration, anger, disappointment, and loss - especially when she crosses a boundary

and feels caught out. Allow her to feel it - that's part of learning. These emotions are acceptable and play an important role in feeling the personal cost of her action.

The feelings may be expressed in a bodily way such as through a shriek, collapse on the floor or other physical gestures. Allow her to vent the feelings. You may want to label the emotion, empathise and allow her more space. If at some stage your child starts to damage person or property – redirect her to a safer option such as the beanbag, spare room or backyard. For example:

*Looks like you're angry with the train being packed away. Here's your exercise ball, lets take it outdoors till you're ready to put away those hitting hands.*

Action: escort her outside and close the door behind her.

These are sensible ground rules for adults too. Label your feelings and express them in an appropriate way. If you are ever feeling strong emotions such as anger and think you might do something you might regret – head to your safe place, such as a bedroom to cool off. Emerge a few minutes later with a calmer demeanour. It's good to model what to do with your emotions and your body. Expressing regret and saying sorry is also a learning opportunity for your child.

Understanding and regulating emotions, often labelled *emotional intelligence* in adulthood, is a fundamental life skill for the playground and beyond.

## 5. Move-on

Don't hold a grudge. When your child is ready, allow him to re-enter and re-join the activity. A standoff is based on pride and a heart that is not open to being a learner. Is that what we want to model? We all make mistakes. To live together well, we need to practice forgiveness - towards our children and ourselves.

A day is a long time in the life of a child. Your child is curious and testing his environment to help make sense of his world. The home is the perfect place to test that the foundations to their world are rock solid. Seize the moment and get in there with him on the learning journey.

## 6. Reflect

About once a week in the quiet of an evening, spend some time reflecting on your child's behaviour. Behaviour is only a legitimate issue if it is repeated and causing harm to herself, other people or property. If not, let it go and celebrate the good. Life is too short to sweat the small stuff.

When certain behaviour becomes problematic, ask yourself:

- What triggers this behaviour?  
Is there a pattern?
- Is the boundary realistic?
- Can we avoid it?

*Do we spend a lot of time indoors?  
Leading to her desire to jump on the couch.*

*Is a shopping centre too overstimulating for my tired pre-schooler?*

*Is it realistic to expect her to share her one precious doll with others at a play over?*

*Is packing away a days worth of mixed toys realistic for a 4 year old?*

*Can I expect positive mealtime behaviour at 6pm?*

In so many cases, antisocial behaviour can be prevented and with fewer confrontations. This helps keep the positive tone in your house.

- d) Why is it bothering me so much?  
Is it more about me than her?

*Did I respond meaningfully by being at their level, speaking clearly and staying calm?*

When you reflect on a deeper level you might uncover feelings of your own inadequacy, shame, guilt or loss that has been triggered by their behaviour. These feelings are worth talking to someone about as they may limit your joy in parenting.

## 7. Save your breath

Save the following words for emergencies:

**NO STOP DON'T**

That is, if he is hurting himself, another person or property.

When a child runs across a road or plays with the carving knife – there is no time to explain. A short and sharp command is necessary, we startle them and we expect an immediate response. This is a rare event.

In contrast repeating words such as “no, stop, don’t” from sun-up to sundown dulls

into background noise. The words become meaningless and your child may tune out.

If you find yourself in this place, perhaps you can just focus on the top one or two big-ticket ‘attitude’ items that need some guidance and leave the rest for another time. Next time when the event occurs, instead of ‘no’ - find a constructive way of curbing it. Remember ‘no’ does not teach a skill. And learning skills is what helps a child develop independence, and independence is a key goal for your developing child

## 8. Teachable moments

Find a quiet time of the day when you are not rushed and your child is fresh and relaxed, and take the opportunity to teach her a life skill. Recall an event, the dilemma and invite her to brainstorm solutions. You may want to have a few suggestions to support her. Keep it positive practical and map it out visually if that helps.

If she is young, there may be few words, and more modelling or role-play with a favourite toy. If she is older and has a strong sense of dignity, you may need to travel more gently. Rather than putting the spotlight on her, you may point out the

same issue in yourself, a character from a book, or another loved one. Teach the strategies through stories and metaphors, so as to preserve her dignity. Invite her to comment on what she learnt.

Most learning occurs during the quiet teachable times in the day when a child’s brain is relaxed and heart is open.

Children are fun loving and creative with their solutions – our role is to support them to manage their own behaviour. In other words, we help them *self-regulate* – another core goal for the developing child.

## 9. Brief your child

There are some triggers to poor behaviour that you may not be able to avoid: a visit to Grandma, dentist, necessary shopping. Some of these events may stress or over-excite your child and lead to antisocial

behaviour. In the heat of the moment, adrenalin kicks in and off he goes.

To combat this, before the anticipated event, prepare him. Give him a heads up so he is less likely to forget the desired skill.

Remind him step-by-step in a positive way. Or better still, explain what's likely to be coming up and show some curiosity, inviting him to solve the situation. Let him be the expert and tell you what he needs to do.

*We are going to playgroup after breakfast. When we walk through the door; what are the three things you can do to greet people?*

*John sometimes gets excited when you come over. What will you say and do, to let him know it's not OK to hit?*

I expect there will be some natural benefits for your child from appropriate behaviour – such as enjoying friendships and more positive feedback from others. However if you feel that for some reason there is little immediate benefit, a natural incentive might help keep the motivation high. For example:

*If we manage the shopping with no meltdowns, we will have energy for a crazy car sing-along with the windows down ALL the way home.*

## 10. Model it

Yep, I have gone back to the beginning!

If all the above suggestions sound too hard, take a breather and go back to the beginning. Treat your child in a way that you want to be treated - with respect and care and love. That's right; fill her little love tank.

If you're running on empty, my guess is, your child is as well. What matters most is love and acceptance.

*Find one thing that you both enjoy and do it, and then do it some more. Have some fun.*

If you feel like you have the microscope out spotting the bad behaviour, chances are you have moved from growing your child's strengths, to a deficit model where you are trying to fix their flaws. No close relationship will benefit from 24/7 scrutinies. Put the microscope away and go celebrate the good stuff.

The above tips are all about building a loving relationship with your child. It's about getting to a place where you truly delight in one another. Ultimately it's the love between you that builds trust, and good behaviour is the (valued) side-product. Love is the stuff, the glue that sticks families together.

*A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.*

*John C. Maxwell*

For more information and support, check out the FamilyWorks services options on our website.

We can offer sensitive and confidential coaching to support you in understanding and guiding your child's behaviour.

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