

The  
**ParentPatch**

# Pocket Guide to Parenting

Practical, Actionable Tips You  
Can Use to Help Your Family  
Live Each Day More Fully



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## Introduction

Anytime from six months onward, babies start to develop the skills that enable them to become mobile, and in doing so they are encouraged to explore and learn about their world. This stage is one of the most exciting times in both the parents' and babies' journey; however, it is also the time to start setting limits and teaching our children about the value of boundaries. Parenting can be an extremely complicated job at times, and our role consists of so many duties, including physical skills, emotional stability, healthy eating, and protection from harm, but equally as important as these skills are the lessons we need to teach our children about the importance of boundaries.



At such a young age, our children have yet to learn the skill of controlling their behaviour. They are learning at such a rapid rate that understanding boundaries is merely one of the many things they are striving to achieve. Unfortunately, unlike some physical skills that seem to be learned relatively quickly, measuring boundaries is a journey that we continue to learn right through into adulthood. We often gain an understanding of limits by watching and listening to others, but in our younger years the most productive way of testing a boundary is to push it, ultimately creating one of the most challenging aspects of parenting: pushing the limits. Children will regularly push boundaries and it is our job to ensure those boundaries are firm, consistent and fair. Without limits, babies may be exposed to danger, and toddlers' behaviour can quickly become out of control, making it difficult to maintain a happy and healthy home environment.

Each family is different and there is no set way of creating limits within each home; however, here are a few guidelines that may help in creating an environment that allows our children to thrive.

## Boundaries should be firm, consistent and fair



The limits that we set will always be relative to the age of our children. In saying that, there will also be a different boundary for each child within the family, but as they grow and learn these boundaries must always stay firm and consistent.

This, in my opinion, is the single most important aspect of limit setting and discipline. If the line is in any way blurry for our children, it can give them reason to believe that pushing a little harder may help them to achieve the result they are after.

For example, if on one particular night we allow them to have dessert after dinner when they didn't finish it to our satisfaction but the next night we expect them to eat their dinner in full, the child knows that the boundaries are flexible and they will do what it takes to ensure they receive their dessert without finishing their dinner. Each time the parent relaxes their limits the more that child will remember that this particular rule is flexible. Understandably there will be areas within each family that are flexible, but it is important to choose a few rules that are not negotiable. A good place to start is with regard to a child's safety and good eating habits. Each time they receive a positive result, they will be more likely to continue with the favourable behaviour.

In addition to the limits being firm and consistent, they should also be fair and achievable. Making sure that each child is treated as an individual is very important in

the overall concept of limit setting. If a child is expected to accomplish something they are not physically or mentally capable of, this could lead to a feeling of failure and result in undesirable behaviour. Ensuring that our expectations are age appropriate will provide the best opportunity for our children to gain self-confidence, and in doing so create an opportunity for them to engage in more positive experiences.

## Being patient and calm is the key



Patience is a true skill, and we all have differing thresholds regarding tolerance to our children's behaviour, but often patience and good behaviour go hand in hand. Telling a child 'no' once is never enough and, as previously mentioned, children will test these

limits over and over again, but it is the thousands of repetitive and consistent reactions over time that help them understand what is expected of them.

Our patience can be affected by many factors, including feeling tired and frustrated, and often our children see this as an opportunity to behave poorly. This behaviour is most evident on the days that we have an agenda that our children are required to fit into. On a morning where we are in a hurry to leave the house, we often find ourselves telling them to hurry up, eat their breakfast and get dressed while they are taking their time, ultimately testing our patience. If we compare this to a day where we allow them to take their time and play with a few toys, maintaining flexibility in our routine, behaviour can be much more tolerable. The days where our patience is put to the test are more likely to be those days when our routine does not match theirs.

Understandably, we cannot have flexible days every day; however, we can do a few things to ensure we find a balance between obligations and flexibility:

- Try to get up half an hour before the kids to eat breakfast and have a shower in order to start the day calmly and happily awake.
- With day care or school-age children, make all lunches the night before and organise clothes for the next day. For younger children, organise bottles and meals.
- Before putting the children to bed each night, have a discussion regarding the day ahead and what it consists of so they are prepared in advance for what is expected of them.
- Give them plenty of notice regarding timeframes in the morning and remind them often of what is expected. The younger the child is the more reminding is necessary.
- At night give clear timeframes for dinnertime, bath time, and when they will need to go to bed. Drawing out these stages only allows our children to take their time and delay the next step.

Being organised and prepared is often a great way to ensure our patience is not tested and we are able to remain calm more often.

## You're the voice, use it wisely

During an adult conversation, most of our interpretation comes from body language and tone rather than the actual words that are spoken, and this is especially true when it comes to the way in which our children understand us. If we are smiling, they know that they are acting and behaving within acceptable boundaries; however, if we are using a firm tone, yelling or acting frustrated, they are aware that their actions are most likely pushing the limits.

When we talk with our children (babies included), using body language and a tone that matches the message we are trying to convey is key to helping them understand

what is expected. If we consistently use a firm 'no' when they are about to make a poor decision, they will understand our requirements and we can maintain control.



More often than not they will test this boundary, but they will know we are serious about consequences. However, it can be very easy to convey this message by yelling, and by doing this we can easily lose control of the situation as communication breaks down. Our children will no longer hear what we have to say but rather will watch the situation unfold and react accordingly. This not only limits any amicable resolution but also teaches our children a new and undesirable way of responding to conflict.

Our children learn how to handle situations based on what they see and learn around them. If we can aim to remain as calm as possible and maintain a controlled voice when communicating, we can slowly teach our children that better outcomes are achieved through effective communication.

## Teach boundaries from the get-go

Babies learn the art of communication very early, and as previously mentioned this happens not through words but rather body language and tone. We may not think our children are ready for correction at an early age, but the earlier we teach boundaries the easier they will be to maintain. Once bad habits begin to form, it makes the challenge of reining them back in much harder to achieve.

Babies will continually explore new skills and this is the best time to start setting some small limits. For example, when babies get their first teeth they will bite everything, including us! A simple and firm 'no' when they do this will help them learn that biting people is not okay, in contrast to the smiles and encouraging words we give them when they are biting food and teething. In these early years, the boundaries we set are not so much about discipline but rather teaching children about acceptable behaviours as they grow.

The key to this, however, is ensuring that we increase our scope of limits as they in turn increase their capacity to learn. By adding consequences at an acceptable time, we move closer to the concept of discipline in order to complement our limit setting. Each parent will know best about their child's ability to comprehend and understand expectations, but when we notice our children making deliberately poor choices, this is usually the best time to include consequences as part of our behaviour-management practices.

## Setting consequences

There comes a time when our children adapt their learning from an understanding of boundaries to deliberately testing them, and this is a crucial time to introduce consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Consequences are a necessary part of our lives, even as adults. Learning that certain behaviours or actions can lead to differing

results is a concept that we all struggle with at times, but we do need to teach our children that every action brings with it a certain result, either positive or negative.

The delicate part of setting consequences within families is that we are all individuals and we all have different expectations of our children with their diverse sensitivities. It



is difficult to provide examples without knowing individual circumstances, but here are some general guidelines to follow when deciding to introduce consequences:

Some children (not all) react well to time out. For younger children, use the rule of one minute per year of age. Alternatively, we can use time out as a means to gather our thoughts and find some calm. Placing the child in a quiet place for a small period of time provides an opportunity to remove our child and ourselves from the conflict, and we can both return when there is calm.

When using this method, the child should always have one warning only before time out is used. Always explain during the warning that if they continue to behave in this way, they will go to time out. When giving a warning, we should always explain very clearly and calmly, with minimal words, what our intentions are. There can be no doubt in the child's mind as to what will happen if they continue. As previously mentioned, it is necessary for to always follow through with the consequence, each and every time. If we are not always consistent, the child can take advantage of this flexibility. Always get down to the child's level to avoid seeming intimidating, just in control.

All consequences must be carried out immediately after the bad behaviour is noticed. Punishing a child long after the event will only add confusion. With this in mind, always set a punishment that can be achieved in the timeframe available.

Every child has what I like to call ‘currency’. This is something in their lives that they consider to be very important, such as a favourite toy or regular outing. If we decide to use this currency as a deterrent for poor behaviour, firstly, we must be prepared to follow through, and secondly, we must only use it sparingly (like playing our ace card).

Consequences don’t need to be complicated; often the simpler they are the more effective they can be. For example, if the child won’t eat their toast in the morning, we explain that if they haven’t eaten it in five minutes we will prepare a second piece and they will have to eat that too.

## Positive distraction

In conjunction with setting consequences, it is important to recognise that we can’t pick every battle we are presented with or we may have several meltdowns before breakfast. I maintain that when it comes to safety, healthy eating and fundamental behaviours, we should ensure our children know their actions are wrong; however, there are many battles that can be avoided.

Positive distraction is a method that can be incorporated into our day where the behaviour is not affecting anything other than our sanity. If the child is simply being difficult for no apparent reason, it is acceptable to ignore the behaviour and direct their attention toward something more positive. Some children simply need a diversion, such as a short television show, something to eat or time outside, while others may benefit from an activity that helps them to feel needed and appreciated.

On any given day we tell our children when to sleep, when and what to eat, and provide their entertainment for the day, often with little flexibility. This is a normal part of growing up and it is how children learn routine and respect; however, most children need to feel empowered and like to feel as though they are being heard and their input is beneficial. By picking our battles and allowing children to win the

challenges that are not important to us, we give them a feeling of control and significance that cannot be measured. These small triumphs in their world help to build self-confidence and self-worth, and are precious gifts we give to our children.

## Monkey see, monkey do

As parents we are the single most influential role models in a child's life, making it extremely important to ensure that we demonstrate the types of behaviour we wish to see in our children. The majority of their learning comes through observation and, more interestingly, through the incidental aspects of their day. They watch what we eat and directly connect this with the types of food they should be eating themselves; therefore making healthy choices can be influential.

Likewise, children see our reactions in different situations and acknowledge this as a representation of how they should act in similar situations. The calmer we stay, the better they can understand appropriate ways of dealing with conflict.

As humans we are not perfect, and at times we can all deal with situations the wrong way. Just as adults would expect an apology, we should also acknowledge that our children do too. Saying sorry to a young child may seem trivial to us, but it is significant to our children; they need to see that mistakes can be made, and that admitting to them and showing remorse is valuable.

As previously mentioned, children need to see things happen over and over again before they begin to understand appropriate ways to behave. By modelling desired behaviour consistently over the years, we can slowly develop a good foundation for future behaviours.



## Star power! Reward good behaviour

Recognising bad behaviour is something that we all do with reasonable consistency; however, the good behaviour can at times be taken for granted or simply go unnoticed. Often we become so focused on correcting negative behaviours that we can lose sight of the fact that our children are doing so many wonderful things every day.

From the start, our children demand our attention and they develop strategies that help them to receive it. As babies they cry; as they grow they use words; and ultimately, they use behaviour as a way of achieving the attention they need. Usually, the bad behaviour guarantees them a result; therefore, they tend to rely on this as they grow, reinforcing a negative pattern.

In order to create a more positive approach to attention, try to acknowledge good behaviour at every opportunity. If performed repeatedly, these instances provide the knowledge our children require to recognise appropriate ways of behaving, and the more we acknowledge the small things, the more likely they will be to repeat them. It may sound silly, but the more excited we are about the situation the better the child will respond.

To encourage independence, there are many ways in which we can set up our children to thrive. Ask them to pick an outfit and dress themselves, and make a big deal about the clothes they choose to dress themselves in. It may not be a matching outfit but acknowledging that they made a choice and dressed themselves will give them confidence.

If we see a demonstration of sharing, we should be sure to make an enormous effort to notice this. Sharing is one of the hardest concepts and can take a lot of time for children to understand. When we do see them share, we need to tell them



how proud we are that this occurred. Provide frequent opportunities throughout the day to encourage sharing and reiterate the value of this. Sharing between siblings and friends is often an easy opportunity to focus on the negative; however, if we do see any positive interactions we should ensure that we acknowledge this and praise our child for what they achieved.



When a child achieves a new milestone, make sure that they are made to feel proud. It may be walking, new words, new physical skills, or demonstrating knowledge, but no matter what it is, it will be something the child has been practising and working toward for some time. For us, these skills may seem insignificant, but to them they are momentous and should be treated as such. There can be no limit to our excitement and enthusiasm for these talents, as our children will thrive on the positive attention.

## Be united as parents

In modern times, the definition of family has changed considerably. Families can be traditional but these days the definition is much more widely spread, and no matter how each family's dynamics are structured there needs to be one consistent aspect: parents must unite.

Understandably, there is any number of circumstances where this is not possible; however, the more consistent we can be as parents, the more structured the child will be. Children feel a sense of safety within boundaries and when these boundaries shift on a regular basis the unpredictable nature of their environment can lead to poor behaviour. It is perfectly fine for there to be different rules in cases where families are separated and children move between homes, but the child needs to know these boundaries are firm in their respective environments.



It is very common and perfectly normal for parents to disagree about the upbringing of their children. This may stem from their own childhood and experiences, or it may be that one parent is simply stricter than the other, but it is important that children are not aware of these differences. When they see a united front, it is much harder for them to negotiate a better outcome; however, when they see a noticeable variation among opinions, one parent can easily be played against the other. If this is happening, or if one parent feels as though the other is undermining their credibility, it is important to discuss this away from the ears of the children to ensure that the parents return as a consistent unit.

## Keep them safe

Being a parent involves wearing many hats at any one time with regard to the job that we do; however, keeping our children safe is arguably the most important. At a young

age our children have little understanding of danger and even less of a concept regarding the consequences of their actions.

Every day we are faced with decisions that enable us to keep our children safe, where we make a judgment call as to whether or not our children are capable of the activities they are undertaking; however, it can be so easy to ignore potential risks when our intervention may lead to a tantrum or argument. Dealing with an upset child is something we all try to avoid at any cost; however, dealing with a sick or hurt child would be much worse. It is a very difficult concept to teach a child the value of consequences when they have been kept from harm their whole lives, but eventually they will understand what is safe and what is not, and it is our job to teach this and demonstrate it.

## Organisational ninja parent skills

Being organised is difficult; organisation is a skill that needs practice and persistence and does not come easily to everyone. We have all had to be organised in our lives at certain times, whether it be at school, during study or in the workplace, but ultimately we have been practising this skill over the years.

Being organised as a parent is one of the hardest challenges we need to master. We may feel planned within ourselves; however, we are relying on the rest of our family to conform in order to maintain a certain level of order.

There are a few measures we can take to make sure we keep on top of our commitments, both inside and outside the home:

- If our children are older, we can allocate certain jobs that they are required to do, ensuring that these jobs are age specific. The earlier this is implemented, the easier it will be to maintain, and it is a great way to teach responsibility. It is surprising by how helpful our children can be if they are given tasks that they are capable of achieving.

- It can make life a little easier and structured if we split up key jobs and allocate them to specific days of the week. For example, we may choose to iron all the uniforms on Sunday night ready for the week ahead; or grocery shopping can be done (or ordered online) every Friday afternoon/evening to ensure we have what we need throughout the week.
- Always try to go to bed with a tidy, up-to-date house. This may be difficult to do every night; however, if we can wake up to an organised house we don't start the day behind.
- Using a calendar that is specific to our needs is essential. We all have different methods of keeping up to date with future obligations, but the methods must be specific to our circumstances. I recommend using a weekly planner that allows each member of the family to record their commitments in a format that easily identifies clashes or available time. Furthermore, it is important to allow space for a to-do list as well as things to remember for the coming weeks.

## Your free weekly planner template

Below is an example of a template that I have found very useful in a family situation.

Please feel free to print out and use the blank template for yourself.

# Template Example (Mon-Fri)

Name	Jason (Dad)	Melissa (Mum)	Emily	Joel	Matty		TO DO LIST Things to remember
Monday			Ballet lesson 4pm				Go to butcher to buy supplies for Sunday BBQ
Tuesday							Buy new ballet shoes for Emily
Wednesday			Netball training until 5pm				Ring school to let them know Joel will be late on Wednesday
Thursday				Dentist appt 8am	Basketball training until 5pm		Organise Jason to pick Emily and Matty up at 5pm on Wednesday
Friday							



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I'm happy to help with any questions and would love to hear from you.



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