

My kid is biting, hitting and kicking. I'm at my wit's end, what can I do?

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Everyone with young children experiences parenting challenges. And these are often exacerbated by parental exhaustion, financial or relationship difficulties, and work stress.

I'm a clinical child psychologist who runs a clinic for [parents](#) experiencing difficulty parenting [young children](#). One of the first questions parents ask us is "do I need help?"

If there is more stress than enjoyment for you in being a parent, or you are becoming increasingly reactive or angry, or struggling to find things that work in your situation, the answer may be "yes."

When parents come and see us, they might tell us their child is kicking or biting or screaming. Or they might say their child is anxious, worried or reticent. They might also say they're getting angry and yelling at their child.

From [decades](#) of [research](#), we [know](#) there is every chance we can improve these things. And the [earlier](#) we start, the better the outcomes.

What is the science behind parenting?

Parents who seek help are often referred into evidence-based parenting programs.

The [scientific evidence](#) shows babies are born with a genetic blueprint that determines who they will become. But even [identical twins](#) arrive with unique [temperaments](#)—the outward expression of who they are.

A child's genetics and temperament are also influenced by their developmental environment. From a child's earliest days, the experiences they have with their parents and caregivers [influence](#) much of their social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development.

Parents and caregivers are the most important people in their child's life, and their attention is hugely [reinforcing](#) for the child—they are built to receive it, and develop as a result.

I do need help!

It's important families get assistance from someone who is experienced

and qualified to treat parenting difficulties.

But here's how we work with families who are experiencing difficulties.

1. How were you parented?

We first ask parents who come to see us what their [experience of being parented](#) was like.

Sometimes they tell us it wasn't good and now they are getting angry just like their parents did.

Other times, we hear parents are so determined not to be like their parents that they have made no rules or routine.

Sometimes we see kids who worry, who are anxious or clingy—and we see their parents working hard to protect them from the things they worry about.

When parents come to us wanting to change their child's behavior, change generally has to start with them—and their relationship with their child.

2. How reactive has the family become?

We work to calm parents who are yelling or getting angry by teaching them ways to calm and allocate their attention away from things that cause them anger.

Children who see parents regulate their emotions [learn to regulate their own emotions](#) and are better able to control their own behavior.

Unregulated emotions, on the other hand, might result in the child

hitting, biting and kicking because they're unable to calm themselves down, or because hitting, biting and kicking ensure their parents will interact with them.

3. What are the desirable behaviors you'd like to see?

We want to know about everything the child does that their parents regard as desirable.

Parents can usually identify things they like—but sometimes they say there is no desirable behavior. I don't think I've ever seen a child who only behaves badly.

Desirable might mean an anxious child behaving without worry. For a child who runs around causing mayhem, desirable might be seeing them sitting down, concentrating on coloring in. For a child who has meltdowns, desirable might be whenever parents realize the meltdown is starting to calm.

4. How can you reward desirable behavior?

We ask parents to develop new habits: we ask them to start commenting on and responding in "relationally rich" ways to all the desirable things their child does. Relationally rich means parents use verbal, physical and facial responses to the child's desirable behavior, so it increases.

Think about a see-saw. At one end of the see-saw is desirable behavior and we want to see that go up. At the other end is undesirable behavior and we want to see that go down. We know, for most families, if parents increase their engagement of the child's desirable behavior, it will increase.

If you're concerned about a [child](#) in your family, start by discussing

getting assistance. This might be from a [family](#) GP or from a clinical psychology practice that specializes in parenting. Remember, if you need assistance, consult someone who is experienced and qualified to provide it.

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