

Children's Services

Parenting: Maintaining discipline when your child is ill

Why can it be difficult to get my child to behave?

When a child is unwell it can be very difficult to keep the family rules in place. There are lots of reasons for this:

When a child is diagnosed with a serious illness or injury, they get lots of attention. They may be given extra treats (like gifts and cards). It is normal for a child to want this special attention to continue. But, in time everyone has to get on with daily life. It can then be very difficult to put the usual rules back in place.

The illness and some medications (like steroids) can make children feel bad-tempered. This makes it difficult for parents to know what sort of behaviour they should expect from their child. It is also hard for parents to know what they should let their children "get away with" and how to tell them off.

Why should I discipline my child when they're not well?

Children need structure and guidance from adults who are in charge. This helps them to feel safe; removing boundaries can be very scary for young children. For parents, it is very difficult to cope when your child is not behaving themselves. It can also be difficult for the child to make friendships with other children if they do not know how they should behave.

But it feels wrong to be strict when my child is ill

It is common for parents to feel lots of emotions (like feeling helpless) when their child is ill and is having treatment. Parents often make up for this by being less strict about behaviour. However, doing this too much can lead to problems later.

It is best for a child to know what the rules are and for parents to stick to them. This helps parents feel more in control. It also helps the child feel safe. It's OK to be a bit

flexible about rules, as long as everyone knows what it is generally OK to do and not to do. Some advice on how to do this is at the end of this booklet.

It is also very difficult for parents to discipline children and siblings whilst in the hospital environment. It can feel very embarrassing for parents when children misbehave whilst in full view of other parents and staff, but it is important to maintain clear guidance and boundaries. This is especially important with regard to siblings who sometimes 'play up' due to less attention. This can be disruptive to other patients.

How do I encourage my child to do things they should do – like go to school, take their medication and eat?

When a child is ill, they may not want to do things they normally would, like go to school. It can also be hard to get them to do things to help them get better, like take medication. There are things you can do to help:

1. Focus on the Positives:

When you need to get your child to do something, don't focus on the negative side of not doing it. It is better to talk about the positive things that will/can happen if they do what they need to.

Some examples: it may not be helpful to say "if you don't eat you'll lose too much weight and will have to have a feeding tube". It would be better to say "you might feel better if you eat something, just try a little". By doing this you focus on the positive things, rather than the negative things that could happen. This is better for your child. This will positively reinforce behaviours you want the child to repeat.

2. A Star chart

A very helpful way of strengthening your child's good behaviour is to use the "prize" of a star chart. On a piece of paper, make a simple calendar - with a slot for every time you have to give medication, for example.

For every time that your child is able to do the behaviour (like take their medication) he/she earns a sticker/star to put on the chart. Most children like to stick it on the chart themselves. Do it straight after the good behaviour. Remind the child each time why he/she has earned the sticker and give lots of praise.

Once they have a certain number of stickers (you can decide how many), they get a prize. Here are some ideas for prizes:

- i. Things to eat – such as favourite fruit, crisps, nuts and raisins, a few sweets, or a favourite food you know of.
- ii. Things to do – games that the child really likes such as playing with water, making a model, a favourite story, a trip to the park.
- iii. A special treat – “helping with baking”, “getting the paints out and painting mum/dad”.
- iv. Money – a few pence in a moneybox or special jar.

The play specialists can help you with star charts if you need more advice.

How do I maintain discipline?

This advice might help to maintain discipline:

- **Be clear.** Let your child know what is expected of him or her, and try to stick to it.
- **Be a little flexible.** If your child has been sick with a fever or vomiting for the past hour, it is understandable that he or she may not say “please” and “thank you” etc. This is understandable. However, it is not OK for him or her to scream orders at you, or hit. Be calm but firm in saying “No” to bad behaviour. Later, when your child is feeling better, it might be a good time to remind him/her of what is OK and what is not.
- **Use praise and attention to reward good behaviour.** When your child's behaviour is good, let them know. Praise tells your child that you are pleased with what s/he has done. It gives your child attention for behaving well. If you praise good behaviour, your child learns to keep behaving well.

Children also like cuddles and hugs when you are pleased, and sometimes small rewards. When you give praise, your child feels good and you feel good by giving it. There are some things to remember about giving praise:

- Praise needs to be given immediately after the behaviour you want more of. Delay in praise only confuses your child about what you want.
- Praise needs to be given each and every time your child is doing something you want to encourage more of.

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- Praise needs to be the same from everyone. Make sure everyone involved agrees on what you want to encourage the child to do more of, and then all do the same.
 - **Do not use spanking to punish bad behaviour.** Spanking is not a good way to discipline your child, especially when they are ill. Parents sometimes use this as a last resort when they lose control. If you feel you are not coping, please speak to your nurse or one of the nursery nurses or play specialists.
 - **There are lots of ways to say "no".** "Time out" – where everyone has a quiet few minutes - can be very effective. Be firm and calm and explain that the behaviour the child has done is not OK and that everyone is going to have a quiet few minutes until things calm down.

Don't threaten a punishment that won't happen. If you do, your child will not take it seriously.

The punishment should be in keeping with how bad the behaviour is. If the behaviour is not very bad, but is not OK, ignore it until your child behaves again, then give them attention. Ignoring bad behaviour and giving attention for good behaviour works well.

Finally

It is much easier for us to write this leaflet than it is for you to do these things when your child is ill. If you find it difficult, don't worry. It is normal. Staff can offer you advice if your child's behaviour is difficult to cope with.

Finally, remember that although these are unusual circumstances, you are still the parent. The skills that you have always used have not gone away.



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Bengali

Document history

Authors	Anna Zeffert
Department	Children's Services, Box 51, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 0QQ www.cuh.org.uk
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