



SECURE PARENTHOOD



Rädda Barnen

HANDLING CONFLICTS WITH CHILDREN



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 Printing: Ätta45, 2019
 1st edition ISBN: 91-7321-369-1
 Article number: 70006

The quotes in this handbook are translated responses to the survey "What is a good parent like?", which was conducted by Rädda Barnen in Umeå in 2007. The names of the children have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

What is a good parent like?

"Nice and doesn't fight" said a five-year-old girl.

"They should have time to play" was the answer of an eight-year-old boy.

Naturally, that is how we want to be for our children! Nice, understanding and able to give them our time, so they can feel secure and valued.

But, living with children is not always easy. Day-to-day life is full of different interests and desires. Every parent has days where things feel overwhelming. There are sometimes misunderstandings and conflicts. We have feelings of frustration, worry, anger and powerlessness. Sometimes all at once.

We do the best we can, and that is usually good enough. But, sometimes there is too much nagging. Sometimes, we do not know how to move forward. Sometimes, we say and do things that we later regret.

At work, we usually have co-workers we can ask for help if there is something that seems difficult or we do not know how to handle. But, in our role as parent, we can sometimes

feel all alone. Many are reluctant to ask for help. This guide can help you in such situations.

It contains a lot of tips we want to share. They do not deal with how we as parents or other important adults can get our children under control and make them obedient. It instead focuses on what changes we can make within ourselves to improve our interactions and solve problems in day-to-day life.

The intention is not to give pointers. We do not think that parents should be perfect or that there is only one right way to do things. After reading this, we hope that you will have gained inspiration and perhaps some new thoughts about what you do that works and what you want to change.

Most importantly, we hope that you will remember that there are many different ways to be a good parent. ❤️

A SECURE RELATIONSHIP

**Becoming a parent is one of the biggest events in life.
The start of a fantastic, and challenging, journey.**

There are many different ways to look at parenting, but most share the hope that their own children will become secure individuals who feel like they have a say over their own lives and make their dreams come true.

There are many different things that affect a child's development: family, school, friends, culture and society, as well as innate characteristics.

Most researchers seem to agree that the child's early close relationship with their parents, or other important adults, is particularly important. The interaction with these people shapes the child's self-image and their image of others. It lays the foundation for a lifelong development process.

The child needs available, supportive and reliable adults who see, listen and understand what the child needs. Our need for attention seems to be innate. As young as a newborn, we seek out eye contact.

But, in day-to-day life it may sometimes be hard to find the time and succeed in creating good contact.



Many of us work a lot or are stressed for other reasons. We have high standards for both ourselves and our children. There is a lot that has to get done. It is easy for the "just being" time to fall by the wayside. In such cases, it is good to know that just spending time hanging out together in pyjamas may be more important than doing a lot of cool stuff.

Children have made it clear that they appreciate relaxed parents who just sit and enjoy time with their children, playing or talking. A few minutes of such time each day can have a big impact. Research also shows that it is important to acknowledge what the child does well. It has been shown that nagging, criticism and reprimands lead to more problems and conflicts. If you focus on the negative, you get more negative. If you focus on the positive, you get more positive.

You create a relationship by investing in it. You could compare it to depositing money in a bank account. If you put in money – then you can also take it out. The relationship with our children works in much the same way. If we only complain and nag, they will probably not want to cooperate. If we instead deposit a smile in our "relationship account", we are more likely to get one back.

As parents, we need to create an environment where the children experience a sense of security and calmness. We do this in a number of different ways. It involves both physical and emotional security, as well as things such as reliability, predictability and honesty.

Ways to make a deposit in the relationship account:

- Happy eyes! Look at your child and show with a smile that you are happy to see them.
- Friendly voice and show of interest. We can ask how things were in school in a number of different ways. Ask because you really want to know. And be prepared to listen!
- Acknowledge what the child does well.
- Show that you have noticed that the child is making an effort by saying, for example: "Good job putting your shoes away" (even though their jacket is on the floor).
- Ignore what is not good (unless there is a risk that someone could be injured).
- Laugh together
- Play together – find games that you also enjoy. Stay one step behind the child in the game and do not take over and control things.
- Comfort, calm, rock and speak calmly with your child when they are stressed or upset. This way, your child will gradually learn how to handle stress.

Ways to take away from the relationship account:

- Nag
- Scold
- Threaten
- Punish
- Talk down to the child "You don't understand. You never listen. You can never sit still. You drive me crazy!"
- Interrupt
- Do not listen
- Grab your child in anger
- Yell at your child



HOW TO LISTEN ACTIVELY:

- Ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with just yes or no.
- Give yourself time to listen to your child's answer.
- Put words to the feelings your child is showing. You may not know for sure what your child is thinking or feeling, but you can try saying things like "are you feeling...?" or "You sound sad...".
- Repeat what your child says to show that you heard them.
- Avoid providing quick advice and talking about yourself and what you would have done.
- Ask follow-up questions, like "What do you think about it?" or "What would you like to do; do you have any ideas?".
- Talk a little less yourself. Children do not have the patience to listen for a long period of time. They can easily shut down. Have the courage to be quiet and just listen instead.

→ It makes it easier for children if they understand what is expected of them in day-to-day life. As a parent, you need to guide them and teach them.

Children also need to be involved in creating good routines at home. One way to create a sense of security and control is to include the child in decision making on issues that concern them (to the extent appropriate based on their age and maturity).

Research shows that routines help to reduce arguing. If there are routines in place, such as sweets only on Saturdays, then you can also choose to deviate from them. When this happens, it is good to voice that it is a deviation, for example "We usually don't eat sweets during the week, but we're making an exception today". This is different than just giving in with a deep sigh when the child is pestering for it.

Finally – think about what vibes you are giving off. **Children listen actively to the message we convey.** What we say is important, but how we say it and what we actually do may be even more important.

The foundation of a secure relationship is warmth, responsiveness and time.

The following pages provide advice and tips on children's specific needs at different ages, and parents' most important role at that time.

At the end of the handbook, there is a section on what to think about when there are problems, and tips on where you can turn if you need support or are concerned. ♥

HOW TO GIVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK:

It is better to give positive feedback to the child based on what they do rather than be really general. It is better to say "Good job setting the table", "I love the colours you used in your drawing" or "I can see that you worked hard" rather than just "Good job!". It is easier for the child to take in the praise when it is something concrete.



THE EARLY YEARS



**“Parents should
be nice
and not fight”**

Agnes, age 5

During their first few years of life, your child is busy exploring themselves, their daily life and the world around them. A lot of time is spent discovering how their own body works; what it can and cannot do.

Their attention is also focused on exploring the world by tasting, touching and throwing things.

A lot of this happens together with you, the adult, simply because the child is dependent on your help.

Creating a secure relationship, a secure base for exploration, is your most important role during this period. You do this by giving the child warmth and closeness, and by trying to understand and meet the child's feelings and needs.

You might not always understand why the child is crying. That is completely normal. But, the child should feel that there is someone who cares and tries to give them help and support.

When you are little and very dependent on others, it is also important to be able to do things yourself. The extra time it takes to let the child put on their socks themselves strengthens both their integrity and their self-esteem. Also try to find ways to let the child feel like they →

→ are a part of things, for example by letting them help cut the cucumber for dinner or set the table.

The child also learns to talk during their first few years of life. This is a social activity. The foundation of language development is laid in their interaction with the adults around them. The most important thing you can do is listen and respond, both with words and with sounds and mimicry. This may take the form of, for example, responding to the child's first response smile and babble.

Language is a foundation for thinking.

Words help the child understand both themselves and why others do what they do.

Young children can easily collapse in anger, grief and frustration. They may scream and throw themselves or things to the floor. This is because they are overwhelmed by emotions that they do not fully understand or cannot put into words.

As an adult, you can help by putting words to what the child is expressing, for example by saying "You seem sad right now" or "I think you're mad right now". This way, you help the child understand more and show that they are allowed to have different emotions and that you respect them. This does not mean that you just accept anything the child does. You

can teach the child what is acceptable and what is not, for example by clearly saying that it hurts when you hit someone. Or that you have to stop when someone says no.

Young children do the best they can.

They never try to make things difficult for you on purpose. But, they do not always understand how you and others think.

When your child is upset, they need you to be able to calm down. At that time, you need to be calm yourself. As a parent, it is easy to run out of patience and lose your temper. A little baby can turn everything upside down. It may be hard to get enough sleep. The child may cry all night. You may feel like you are just not enough. In such case, you may need to step away for a moment and take some calming breaths, perhaps count to ten. Do not hesitate to ask for relief. Many find it difficult to ask for help, but it is actually a sign of strength. Taking responsibility for your own energy level is also taking responsibility for the child. It is like the advice they give you on an airplane – to be able to take care of your child, you need to put your own oxygen mask on first. ♥

TO THINK ABOUT: What do you remember?

As a parent, it may be good to stop and think about how it was for you when you were a child. Remembering can help you understand your own child.

Take a moment to think about the questions below:

- What is your first memory?
- Who was with you at that time?
- What did you feel?

**"Parents should make
their children
feel safe
everywhere"**

William, age 7



SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

When your child starts school, it broadens their world. The child must adjust to new rules and routines – and learn new skills, like reading and writing.

During this same time, friends become more important and children compare themselves with one another. Who can jump the highest? Who is best at counting? Who is the most daring?

It is sometimes a challenge to get along with other children; to make and keep friends. The child must both learn to function in new social contexts, and talk to and handle conflicts with other children.

As a parent, it is important to see and encourage the child's efforts and to show involvement and interest. It is good to show that you want to know what is going well at school, and what is difficult. One suggestion is to not just focus on the concrete issues, with questions like "How is school going? Do you have any homework?". You can instead ask about the high point and low point of the day.

**What was the best thing about today?
What was the worst thing?**

At this age, children need adults who listen and who can support them in the often tough reality of friendships at school.

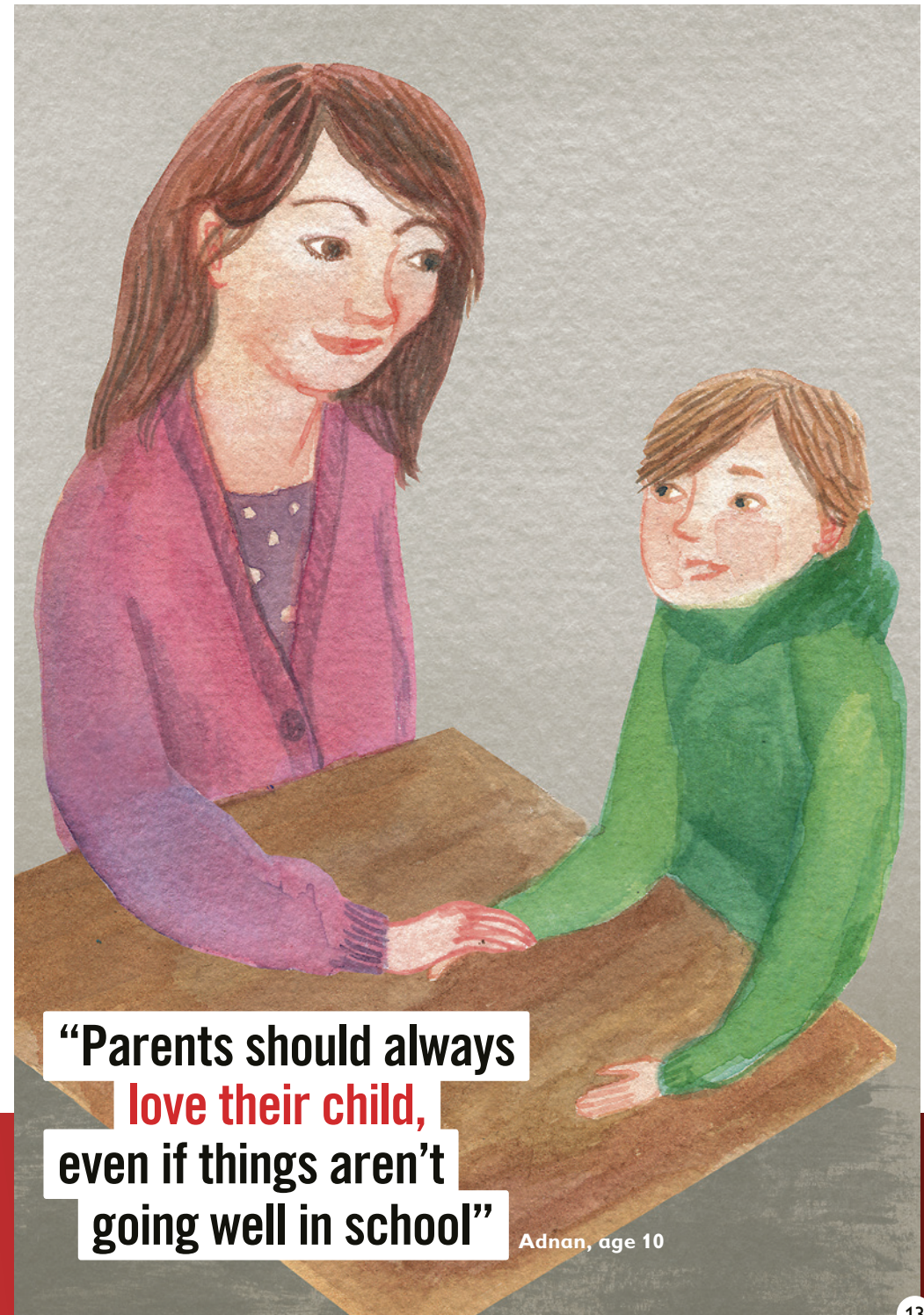
Let your child invite friends home so you can make sure their play is respectful. Here, children will make use of what they have seen with their own parents; how they resolve conflicts and how they listen and talk to each other.

Think about your own behaviour. Your child watches you and does as you do, not as you say. Do you respect others? Do you show kindness? Do you say "I'm sorry"? You are the child's most important role model. Do you give them good examples of how to handle their feelings and resolve conflicts? If not – what do you need to improve?

During this period, the child also needs to develop a positive self-image. As a parent, you can help with this by showing interest and respect for your child's thoughts and feelings. When your child needs help, it is important to offer support without taking over; to believe in and strengthen your child's own ability – that they are capable. In this way, you also help the child become more independent. ♥

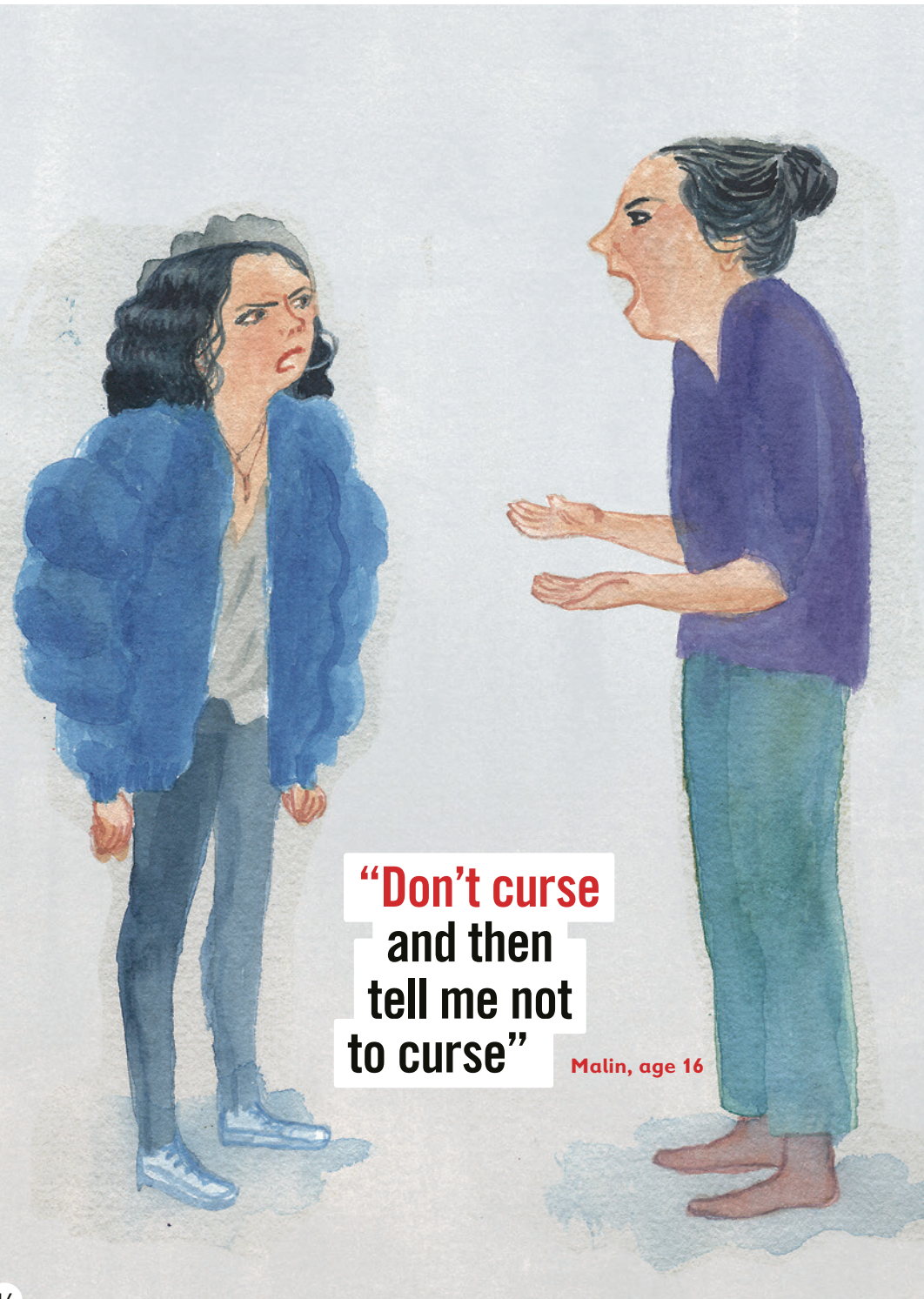
TO THINK ABOUT: What was it like for you?

Think back to when you were a child. Something bad happened, for example in school, and you were sad. Who did you want to talk to? What was it about that person that you liked? Was there something that you did not like?



**"Parents should always
love their child,
even if things aren't
going well in school"**

Adnan, age 10



**“Don’t curse
and then
tell me not
to curse”**

Malin, age 16

TEENAGERS

Being a teenager can be like riding a roller coaster. There are major fluctuations in their body, their mood and their emotions.

One day, they may feel like a little kid, the next day like an adult. All the demands of what they should be able to handle can feel overwhelming. They want to be independent, but not all at once.

It is important to give them the time they need. To let the mood swings and fluctuations happen. To let your child be both big and little during this period.

As parents, we need to be a little chill.

We need to believe that our young adults are doing the best they can, show them trust, and show our hope and faith in their future. We also need to be good models. Stand strong in what it means to be an adult. In particular, we need to accept and handle our own frustrations and feelings of powerlessness.

It can be a challenge to keep up with the twists and turns, and not take the teenager’s behaviour personally or be infected by their anger. But, try to understand how tough it can be. Think back and try to remember what it was like for you. What helps a teenager is the same thing that helped them in their early years – calm and secure adults. Think about what you need to keep calm.

Teenagers need to break free and become more independent.

This means that they sometimes have to go against you as a parent. They need to question your values and your way of being. It is a process they go through. They need to decide what they stand for.

Teenagers also spend more time with friends. Many parents feel like they are losing control and worry about where their children are.

It can often feel challenging to let teenagers become independent and have their own private life, while at the same time making sure that nothing bad happens to them. Be honest if you are feeling concerned, and talk about the risks and consequences of, for example, alcohol and smoking. Talk to their friends’ parents, share information, and reach an agreement about what rules apply for your children.

Teenagers have trouble understanding that things could actually go wrong. They need adults to help them set good boundaries. At the same time, you need to believe that your teenager will learn from their own mistakes.

When a teenager is feeling down, isolates themselves and pushes people away, it is easy for a parent to think: “I’ll give them some space”. But, you are still really important. Show them that you are there for them and want to listen. Keep in mind that your teenager needs your support even if they do their utmost to say the opposite. Show interest, but avoid pressuring them and being invasive.

Do not forget to do things together! Try to understand the feelings behind the behaviour. Remember that even teenagers need adults to help them cope and put words to difficult feelings. ♥

TIPS TO parents of teenagers

- Show warmth and interest.
- Offer help and support, for example with school work, if it is needed.
- Offer yourself as a conversation partner, but do not force or pressure them.
- Try not to take rejection personally.
- Try to understand the feelings behind the behaviour.
- Do not give up if you do not connect. Try again!
- Rejoice with – rather than trying to compete with – your teenager in relation to beauty and attractiveness.
- Be honest if you feel concerned.
- Sometimes, you have to let them learn from their own mistakes. Have the courage to believe that your teenager will learn from theirs.
- Encourage your teenager to talk to another adult if they need support but do not feel comfortable talking to you.

TO THINK ABOUT: What do you need?

Think back to when you were a teenager. What was a struggle? Fun? What did your own parents do well? What could they have done better? What do you think you would have needed?

**“Children should be
their parents’ treasure;
the most important
thing in their life”**

Julia, age 14



PROBLEMS AND CONFLICTS

Despite our best intentions, most parents end up in conflict with their children from time to time. This is not necessarily a bad thing, if you find a solution. But, conflicts can sometimes repeat in a way that makes things feel bad.

You sometimes end up in fights that make everyone sad. Situations when the frustration just escalates. Situations when the child refuses or explodes. Or, it might be you who gets so mad that you almost crack. Or you may just feel sad, dejected, powerless. What can you do then?

There are actually a few tricks that are good to know to help you avoid difficult situations as much as possible and resolve conflicts in a way that you do not regret later.

You need to think about what happens before

the fight, and how you act when it occurs and afterwards.

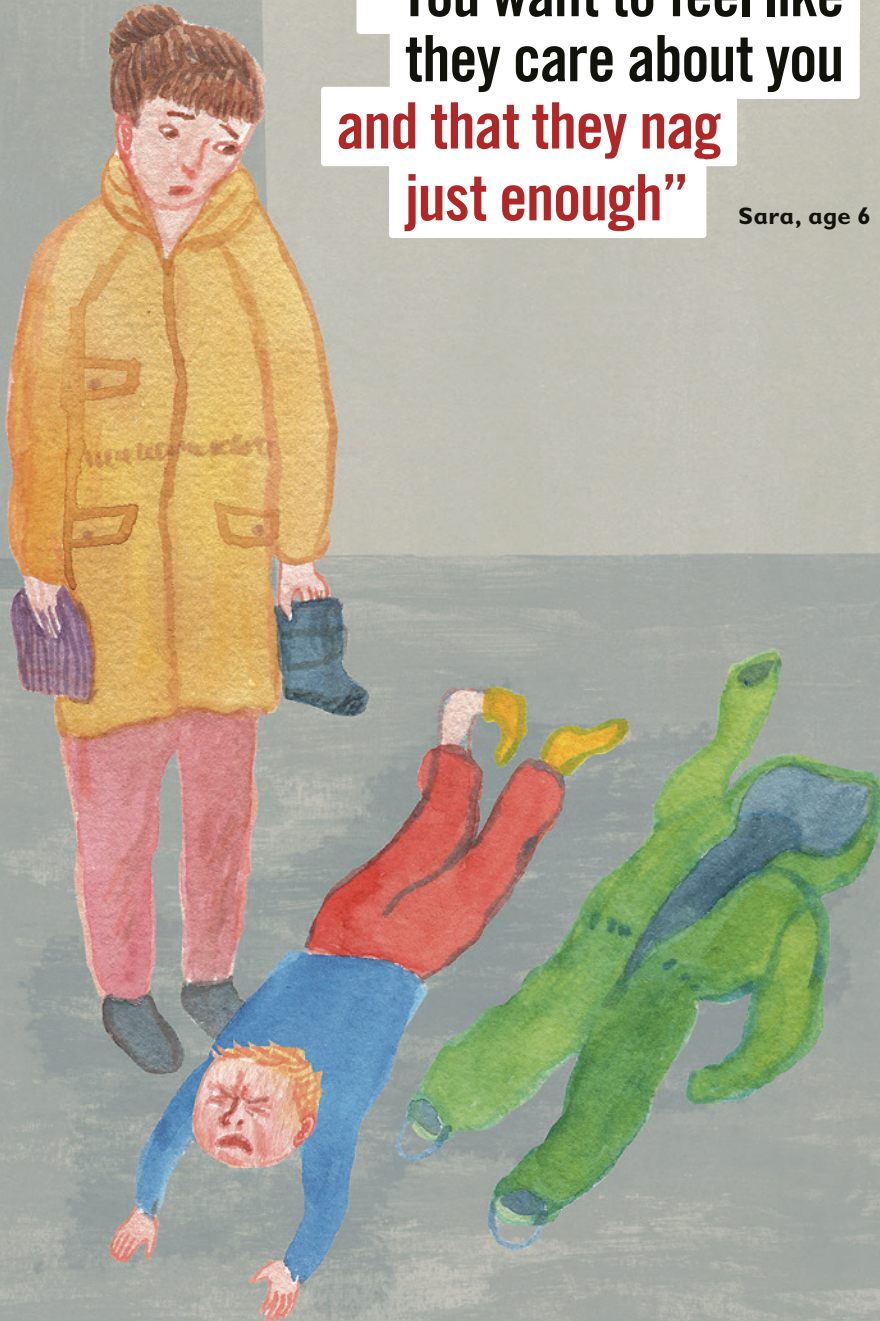
The first step is to think about what the situation is like before your fight occurs. What is your relationship like? **A secure foundation with good contact is the basis for avoiding fights** and being able to actually hear what each other is saying the times they do occur.

Children who can behave, do so. If a child protests, it is usually because the demands and expectations of them are too high. By →



**“You want to feel like
they care about you
and that they nag
just enough”**

Sara, age 6



→ thinking about what expectations we have for our children and adjusting them, we reduce conflict.

Children need to feel like they succeed more often than they fail. Positive attention is important; that we see and praise steps towards something that the child is learning. We can also support the child by letting them know what they could do next time in order to succeed.

Also think about whether you have any habits and routines that are repeated so that the child learns what to do and what is expected of them. Be clear about what is OK and where the boundaries lie, but do not focus on rewarding or punishing as a way of steering the child's behaviour in the desired direction.

Take a moment to stop and think if fights have become a part of everyday life. Sit down in peace and quiet and discuss what you want a morning to be like. Let the child be involved. Should the routine be to get dressed before breakfast or after breakfast? Think about whether you have enough time? Do you maybe need to get up a little earlier?

When a fight does occur and you are in the middle of it, there are also things you can do to calm down and resolve the situation.

It is important that you try to stay calm. Children have a great ability to absorb what the adults around them are feeling. If you are upset, tense and screaming, then your child will often scream back. It is often said that emotions are contagious. So, if you want your child to stay calm, then you need to stay calm yourself.

Naturally, all of this is easier said than done. →

Here are some good questions to ask yourself:

- Do you give your child enough positive attention?
- Do you spend time together regularly? If not – what can you do to spend more time together? What does your child like to do?
- Do you respond to your child's requests to spend time together?
- Do you listen to your child? Do you ask open-ended questions and let your child talk and explain freely?
- Do you encourage progress?
- Are you making reasonable demands? Do not refer to what a child can normally do at a certain age or compare the child with their siblings. Treating children equally is not always fair. Adjust your requirements to suit your unique child.
- Do you formulate your demands in a way your child can understand?
- Do you prepare your child for what is going to happen?
- Do you use clear and positive requests? Or just nagging and scolding?
- Do you have good routines? If conflicts arise at about the same time of day, it may mean that the routines need to be changed.
- Think about past conflict situations – are there any patterns?
- Is there anything you do that helps to escalate or de-escalate the conflicts?

Footnote: The list is based on Martins Forster's book "Fem gånger mer kärlek".

→ There are times when the best thing to do is take a deep breath and step away for a moment. In such cases, let your child know that you are stepping away for a minute to calm down.

If you can manage to keep your own balance, you are teaching your child something about how to handle stressful situations and calm yourself down. **You show that this is possible by putting words to feelings** instead of reacting with your body; that it is OK to take a break; that you can put the situation on ice. Children do their best to maintain self-control, and most of what parents perceive as defiance or disobedience is actually the child's strategy for maintaining control. To help the child stop such behaviour, they need help to find other strategies. With your calm body, you help the child calm down.

Another tip for calming an upset child is to just listen to what the child is expressing and try to understand. There is no point in contradicting, trying to explain, nagging, praying or threatening at that moment. Wait until the child has calmed down to talk about what you think.

You can also divert a conflict before it even arises. For example, if your child is running around screaming, you can suggest doing an activity together or ask the child for help instead of just telling them to "calm down".

It is so easy to say something like "Geez, you want to argue about everything..." But negative focus and physical and emotional punishment have negative consequences. Research has shown this to be true. →

Some tips for how to calm yourself down:

- Focus on your own body, on breathing.
- Note how you feel and put words to it within yourself.
- Lower your voice; talk slowly and with few words. Arguing rarely works in the heat of the situation.
- Imagine it will work out! When a child starts to act up, it is easy to think negative thoughts like "Here we go again".
- It is better to say how you are feeling than to raise your voice or gesticulate violently.
- Actively think about something else that requires your attention. Counting to ten, preferably backwards, is common advice.
- Reverse things. Change the direction of the situation; take a step back; change the subject.
- Say that you need to take a break and think about things. Being left alone for a while usually helps to calm things down.



**"If you've done
something you regret
— say you're sorry!"**

WHEN YOU ARE STRESSED

When a parent reacts with stress, it easily spreads to the child and makes them feel stressed.

To think about:

- What situations trigger stress in you?
- When was the last time you got irritated?
- What happened at that time?

3 reading tips:

Lyhört föräldraskap (2013),
by Malin Bergström

Fem gånger mer kärlek (2009),
by Martin Forster

Barn som bråkar (2015),
by Bo Hejlskov Elvén and Tina Wiman



→ If, despite your best efforts, you have done or said something you regret during an argument, there is a lot you can do to repair the situation afterwards.

Once everything has calmed down, it is a good idea to think about what caused the argument. Ask the child for their perspective of what happened.

You might learn something about your child's way of thinking or about yourself.

You should also think about what it was that made you upset. Would it have been possible to follow your child's way of resolving the situation?

Could any aspect of your behaviour have contributed to your child becoming upset? How do you act when things become difficult? Punishment, consequences, rewards? What could you do instead?

If you've done something you regret – say you're sorry!

It is a good idea to say that you understand that what you said or did made the child sad. This way, you teach your child that even adults can make mistakes, but that you take responsibility for it and try to make things right. You also show that you respect your child's feelings. This creates trust.

Finally – think about whether you need more support yourself. It is usually when we ourselves are at our most tired and irritated that arguments occur. You may need help from an outside source to recharge your batteries. ♥



CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

All people have rights, but children also have their own special rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children in Sweden, regardless of culture, religion, ethnicity and disability.

The four core principles are particularly important to be aware of:

- No child may be discriminated against
- The best interests of the child must always be in focus
- Each child has the right to life, survival and development
- All children have the right to speak their mind

Because we know that parents are so important in a child's life and in order to safeguard their children's rights, parents are also included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- Parents are responsible for the upbringing and development of their child. This is both a right and an obligation.
- Parents shall give their child guidance and advice, but also listen to the child and take their thoughts into consideration.
- Both parents have joint responsibility.
The best interests of the child must always come first.
- Parents are entitled to support in their parenting from society.

It is good to know that the Convention on the Rights of the Child also states that you as a parent are entitled to support from society when you need it.

WHEN DO YOU NEED TO ASK FOR HELP?

It is often difficult to draw a clear boundary line between when you as an adult should seek help for yourself and when it is the child who needs more support.

A simple rule of thumb is that the younger the child when the problem arises, the more likely it is that it is you, the parent, who need more help. This is because young children are completely dependent on their parents to develop their abilities. Whether the problems are innate or acquired.

Another rule of thumb is that you need to seek help for yourself if you think the arguing takes over too much. Or if you argue with your child in a way that makes the child feel bad or scared. Many times, it is hard to realise yourself that this type of situation is happening. So, listen if someone in your sphere tells you that you need to find a different approach. You should also seek help for yourself if you are not feeling well psychologically, have an addiction, or feel like your own worries are affecting your child's life and development.

Accepting help for yourself is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child.

If your child has trouble mastering what other children of the same age can do, does not develop as expected, or seems to be feeling poorly psychologically or emotionally in a way that you do not understand and do not know how to handle. That is the time you need to seek help for your child. Even if you

seek help for your child, there are many assistance initiatives for children that require active participation on the part of the parents.

You should also seek help if you are concerned that your child has been the victim of violence or victimising behaviour by another person. ♥

What is violence?

Violence can be both psychological and physical.

Examples of physical violence:

Hitting, shoving, kicking, shaking, pinching, scratching.

Examples of psychological violence:

Degrading judgements, unreasonable punishment, derision, isolation and freezing out.

"Violence is any action directed against another person who, through this action, harms, causes pain, scares or violates, or that causes the person to do something against their will or to refrain from doing something they want to do" (Isdal, 2001)

All forms of violence are considered a crime under Swedish law.

WHERE YOU CAN TURN

Child healthcare centre

Called Barnavårdcentral (BVC) in Swedish, this centre offers basic support to new parents. Your child health care centre can also give you a referral if more help is needed.

Healthcare centre or family centre

These are part of the healthcare system and are divided into primary care and specialist care. Primary care, or first line care, is intended for children and parents with mild or moderate mental ill health. First line psychiatry is a service that is in the establishment phase. It is currently available at a number of healthcare centres and family centres.

1177.se

Vårdguiden's website contains information about issues related to children and parenthood. It also provides a list of which healthcare centres have clinics for children and adolescents.

School

Once your child has started school, you can seek assistance from student health services, which is sometimes able to meet the child directly for shorter measures.

BUP

If the child's problems are more extensive, you can turn directly to BUP, Barn- och ungdomspsykiatri [Children and Adolescent Psychiatry Centre]. Please see www.bup.se for more information. To find your nearest BUP centre, perform a search at 1177.se.

Social Services

You can seek help in your parenting from Social Services if there is a lot of fighting in the home, if you are worried about how your own well-being is affecting your child, if anyone in your family is abusing drugs or alcohol, if your child is being exposed to violence, victimising behaviour or threats, or if your child is victimising others. Information about Social Services can be found on your municipality's website.

National Association of Swedish Crisis Centres for Men

The National Association of Swedish Crisis Centres for Men, called Rikskriscentrum in Swedish, has crisis centres that work with violence in close relationships, men in crisis, and male violence against women. For a list of centres, please search at rikskriscentrum.se.

Parent helplines

MIND's parental helpline: Tel 020-852 000

Bris' adult helpline – about children:
Tel: 0771-50 50 50

For additional tips, please visit Rädda Barnen's website: www.raddabarnen.se

**“Parents should
do what is best
for their children”**

Leo, age 7

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