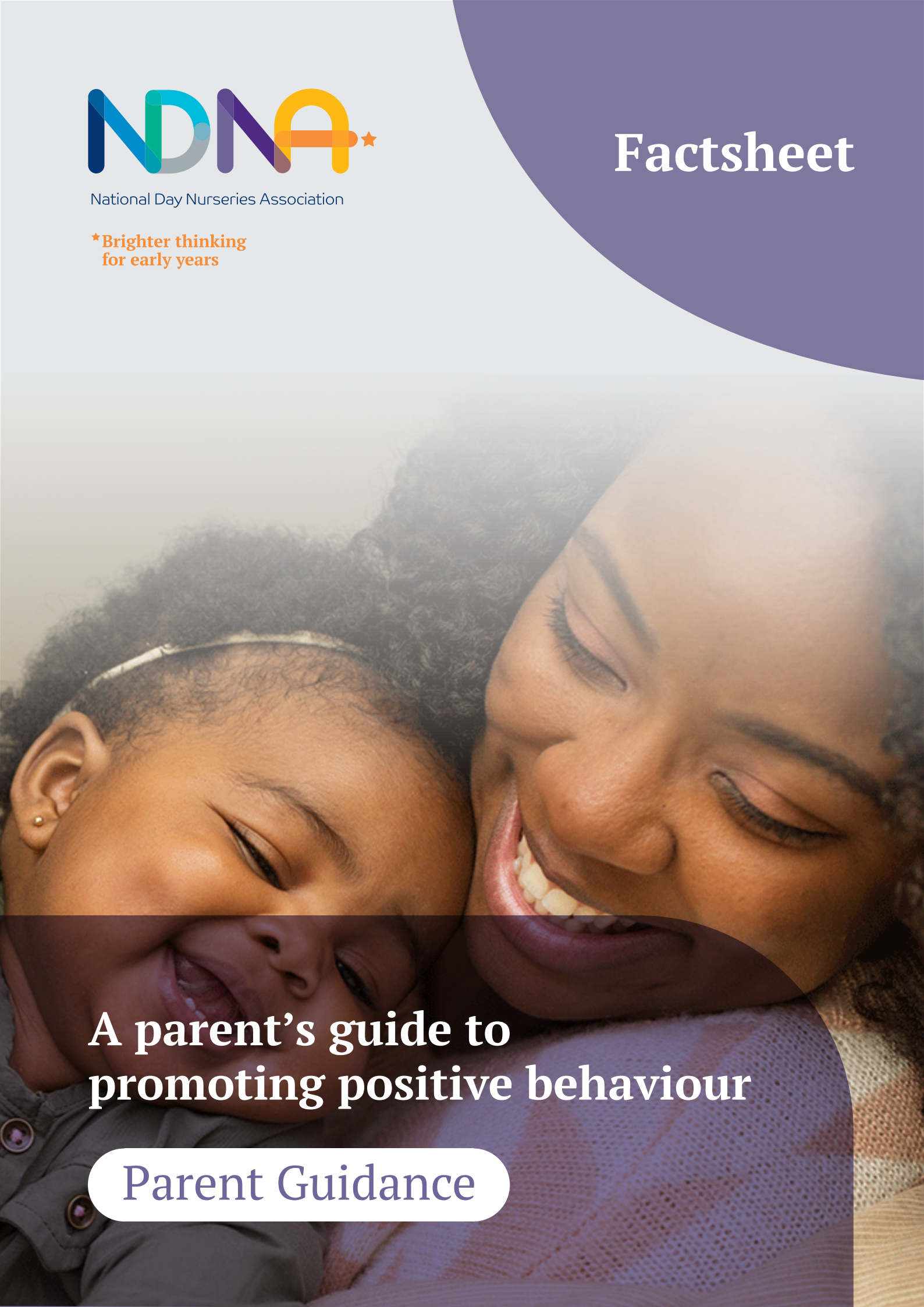




National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet

A close-up photograph of a parent and a young child smiling and hugging. The parent is on the right, and the child is on the left. Both are looking down at each other with joyful expressions. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

A parent's guide to
promoting positive behaviour

Parent Guidance

Parent Guide to Promoting Positive Behaviour

Being a parent is a wonderful experience with many magical moments that create memories to treasure for a lifetime. Sometimes there are bumps in the road which can be caused by a young child's behaviour that challenges us. All parents will have differing experiences of behaviour that challenges with their children, rest assured you are not alone.

This factsheet has been developed to offer some tips to promote and support positive behaviour, identify some of the typical behaviours that your child may display which may be challenging, and suggest ways in which you can work together with your child's nursery. Working with the nursery to implement strategies will ensure consistency to enable you and your child to have a more settled time at home and nursery.

Promoting positive behaviour

Relationships are built on meeting the emotional needs that we all have - love, attention, acceptance, approval, comfort, security, encouragement, support, respect and affection. When our needs are met, we feel happy and secure. When they are not met, we can feel anxious, insecure and unhappy. Young children can often display distressed behaviour because they are tired or hungry or want something that someone else has. Distressed behaviour may also be seen when they feel they cannot communicate what they want, or the adult doesn't understand what they want. It is worth noting that adults can also sometimes react adversely in these situations and may display signs of frustration and need time and space to calm down and regain perspective.

Young children's understanding of abstract concepts such as 'later', keeping safe or possessions belonging to someone else are still early in the development stage. Your child might hear what you are saying but may not yet have the knowledge or language skills to fully understand what you are saying, what this means or be able to negotiate with you. This can sometimes result in tears and/or anger. It is unlikely that your child has planned this. It is more a response to pent-up frustration.

Reflection

Think about a time when you were starting a new job or going through a stressful time. How did this make you feel?

Usually, as adults, we can talk about how we feel and gain support from family and friends. Young children usually display their frustration through their behaviour as this can be the only way they know. **Children use behaviour as communication.**

Children are individuals who develop at their own pace. Some children will pass through developmental stages with ease, whereas some may need a little more support. As children go through a range of new and different experiences, they begin to explore and test out boundaries. Young children may go through short periods of distressed behaviour but when these behaviours continue for a prolonged period, it may be due to undiagnosed needs where further support is required.

Providing a positive, safe environment and meeting primary needs will support positive behaviour traits.

Supporting positive behaviour is about encouraging children to understand their actions and the impact they may have on themselves and those around them. Focus on displays of positive behaviour and praise them, remembering to be specific so your child knows what the praise is for e.g. “That was kind of you to share your apple with your sister”. There will be times when your child or others are at risk of harm when you will have to use strategies to immediately stop distressed behaviour. However, preventing this behaviour in the first place through praising, rewarding and being responsive to positive behaviour, will encourage the preferred behaviour and meet the needs of your child for connection with you and other significant people in their lives

Top tips to encourage positive behaviour:

- **Be consistent** – Adopt a consistent approach to behaviour so children can quickly develop their understanding of what is expected. Share expectations with other family members such as grandparents, so children don’t become confused as to what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable, e.g. if you expect your child to sit down to drink their milk, then ensure those around them do the same
- **Provide positive role models** - Children learn from those around them. It is important for them to have positive role models who follow the rules and boundaries themselves and model appropriate behaviours, such as paying attention, listening when someone else is speaking, taking turns, saying please and thank you and using positive body language
- **Have clear and realistic expectations** - Rules or boundaries that are achievable and fair are an important part of daily life. These may include walking inside, looking after toys and not hurting others. As children get older try to involve them in developing the rules too
- **Positive reinforcement** - Positive feedback is the best and most effective way to promote positive behaviour.. This encourages children’s self-confidence and self-esteem. Children need to know when they are getting it right through your positive and warm body language, tone of voice, physical touch, praise and compliments, encouragement, attention and connection.

Top tip

Every behaviour is a form of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas and Jackson, 2021)

Pre-planning: Children may become distressed when their routine is altered and they feel insecure, even if the routine is being altered because of something exciting or novel. Try to prepare your child wherever possible about any changes, so for example, if you need to change your plans on a Saturday because of a late party invitation, explain this to your child and tell them about the different kind of fun they will have at the party.

Distraction: Many young children can be supported in their moments of overwhelm by giving them your focused attention and simply turning their attention to something else. This can often be successful when diverting them to something that they are particularly interested in, a particular favourite toy or something novel. For example, if your child is becoming agitated in the supermarket because they want a chocolate bar, try distracting them by giving them responsibility for finding a specific item on your shopping list that would interest them, e.g. fruit or yoghurt. Make it exciting, like a treasure hunt. This can distract them away from the cause of their behaviour that challenges.

Choices: Offering choices can take conflict out of the situation. If you would like your child to sit down at the dinner table (and they are refusing) offer them a choice e.g. “You can sit down on that chair or on the big chair next to me. Which would you like to choose?”

Problem-solving: You can begin to support your child in developing the necessary skills they need for later life. As your child rushes over to you and tells you what their problem is, do not rush in to give them a solution. Repeat back what they have told you, acknowledge how they feel about the situation and then ask them, “How are we going to solve this?” This will encourage them to begin to solve problems for themselves. For example, If your child runs over to you and tells you they want the toy their friend or sibling has, encourage them to think about how they can share this or come to a compromise.

Structures and routines: Young children find routines safe and reassuring and are more likely to produce positive behaviour within structures they feel comfortable with. Routines should be flexible and appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the child, for example, observe when your child has reached their limit sitting at the meal table. Allow for shorter mealtimes to keep the experience positive and prevent any feelings of frustration.

An excellent summary can be found on the Parenting Pyramid ([link below](#)).

Typical behaviours in young children

There can be a range of underlying reasons for why a child is behaving in a certain way and unfortunately there is no single answer to ‘fixing’ any of these. There is a spectrum of behaviours:

some may be due to changes in the child's life, for example, a new sibling, loss of a family member or pet or your child may have needs that have not been identified yet e.g. underlying educational or physical needs or disability, such as a hearing impairment.

Some knowledge of child development can help us to understand our children better. Schemas are repeated patterns of behaviour that young children display in their play. Often these can appear to be negative behaviour by adults, but they are just part of your child's development. Examples that you may have observed in your child might include:

- Your child repeatedly dropping items from their highchair. This is known as a trajectory schema
- Repeatedly filling and emptying boxes, bins and bags. This may result in you losing important items in your home such as car keys or the television remote. This is known as an enveloping and containing schema.

Some of the most common reasons for behaviour that challenges may be your child trying to tell you something but not being able to use the correct words yet, or maybe unable to communicate at all. This can lead to behaviour that challenges due to frustration, fear, discomfort, a lack of understanding by the child or adult, or a lack of connection or attention your child needs at that moment in time.

Sharing

The development stage for 'learning to share' can be a complex one and takes time. Some children will understand this concept earlier than others and this can cause additional conflict. Having positive role models that support and encourage sharing is important as well as supporting children to take turns in play and conversation.

During the earlier stages, your child may have a favourite toy that they do not want to share. Role modelling and encouraging them to share and praising others who are sharing are positive ways to encourage this. It will not happen overnight and sometimes, if this toy is also a comforter for your child, it may not be appropriate for the child to share this particular toy but instead share another.

As children get older, they begin to understand what sharing is. Sand timers or timers on your phone are useful to support them in understanding when it is their turn or when they need to give someone else a turn. This can help with arguments between your children about sharing toys, games or books.

Biting

Biting other children and adults can be quite common in young children as many children pass through this stage as part of their development. This can occur out of frustration because they want something that another child has, or want connection but haven't the skills to communicate what they want, or because they are teething.

Biting incidents can be a difficult time for parents. Your child may bite a sibling, a friend's child or other children at nursery, or your child may be bitten by another child. Often there is no known cause as to why the child is biting and, in some cases, particular children will continue to bite for an extended period of time.

If your child bites, it is important to direct your attention to the child who has been bitten and give them comfort and support, so that your child can see that they do not receive attention for biting. Afterwards, you should then speak to your child (in terms that they understand). Talk with them about how biting hurts their friend or sibling and how it makes them really sad.

If your child is bitten while at nursery this can be upsetting, as no one wants to hear that their child has been injured, especially by another child and bite marks can be quite deep and distressing to see. Nurseries will have behaviour policies that should include biting incidents so you can request to see them and ask what the nursery are doing to support both children, to minimise the chance of it happening again.

If your child is the one who is biting other children at nursery, the nursery team should invite you to talk about how you can work together to prevent the incidents. They shouldn't make you feel that it is either your or your child's fault. Identifying triggers e.g. when your child is tired, hungry or in need of connection, is helpful to gain an understanding of when and why they may bite. Strategies to support your child could include having biting rings, picture routines (photographs showing the sequence of events in your day), relaxing and sensory time, reiterating the importance of positive role models, encouraging all children to be kind to one another and praising positive behaviour.

Bullying

Young children may display distressed behaviour but usually, with the right support and strategies, these do not lead to anything more serious. The word bully and bullying are usually a bigger concern during primary and secondary school.

There are many definitions of bullying, but most have three things in common.

These are:

- Deliberately hurting behaviour
- Repeated over time
- An imbalance of power, which makes it hard for those who are being bullied to defend themselves.

Behaviours of young children are very unlikely to include deliberately and repeatedly hurting others time. They are usually due to young children still developing their emotional regulation and communication skills.

Inappropriate language

Children develop their vocabulary through experiences. If children hear inappropriate language more than once, then they may repeat it. Children could hear this from familiar adults, other children, others in their local surroundings, or even accidentally through overhearing conversations on TV when an adult is watching something that they think the child is paying no attention to.

If the inappropriate language incident is a one-off, you may choose to ignore it and instead reinforce what has been said with an alternative word.

Lindon (2011) suggests, for example, replacing “What a ***** big beetle” with “That is one enormous beetle” or “Hey! Olivia’s found a giant beetle!”

Where the inappropriate language becomes a repeated behaviour, you need to acknowledge the words rather than ignore them, as this is unlikely to be effective. Children need to know that the words are not kind, or that those words are not used at home and then given an alternative example.

Children need positive role models. If you accidentally stub your toe, you may be tempted to use inappropriate language. You need to be aware of how you respond to these situations and use alternatives because, as we know, children will copy. If you do use inappropriate language, then you need to explain to your children that this is not the right word to use and that you were wrong when you said this. Positive role modelling does not stop at the behaviours and language you use as it also includes admitting when you are in the wrong and correcting your own behaviour if you need to.

Working in partnership with your child’s nursery

All nurseries in England, Wales and Scotland have a duty to follow the statutory guidance and the framework from their regulatory body, for managing your child’s behaviour at nursery.

Additional needs

Children who have additional needs may have greater frustrations, especially if they do not have the words or signs to express themselves. This can sometimes result in emotional outbursts, screaming, hurting others, breaking things, feeding problems and lack of sleep.

If you are worried about your child’s behaviour, you should seek further support. You should try to record any incidents, so you have a log of how often these occur and any potential triggers. These can then be shared with other professionals who may be involved in any referral process.

If your child attends nursery, it is important that you work together and share information with the nursery, especially your child’s key person. The nursery will carry out observations that will also identify any triggers or times of the day that your child finds particularly challenging.. Supporting

children's behaviour is easier when everyone works together and implements the same strategies, ensuring there is a consistent approach.

Further information, support and resources

- NHS guidance: <https://bit.ly/3a4E3ua>
- Child Mind Institute: Managing problem behaviour at home: <https://bit.ly/3Osc1M8>
- Parenting Pyramid: <https://bit.ly/3Db5ezS>
- <https://bit.ly/ParentWithoutPunishment>

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Factsheet

Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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National Early Years Enterprise Centre, Longbow Close, Huddersfield HD2 1GQ
tel: 01484 407070 info@ndna.org.uk www.ndna.org.uk