Understanding Childhood

is a series of leaflets
written by experienced
child psychotherapists to
give insight into the
child’s feelings and view
of the world and help
parents, and those who
work with children, to
make sense of their
behaviour.

For many years parents, nursery staff and
teachers have found a certain sort of child
hard to manage. Such children find it difficult
to concentrate, preferring activity to
concentration, being quick to react, and not
thinking before they act. Children like this
cause a lot of upset to parents and teachers
alike, ‘getting under their skin’, adding to the
stress they probably already feel under.
Without support, and an acknowledgement
of the kind of difficulty this sort of child
presents, a teacher or school can resort to
‘excluding’ the child, sometimes even as
young as nursery age. Parents under stress
can find themselves in a battleground,
repeatedly losing their temper, and punishing
their child in ways that are likely to make the
problem worse. Parents usually feel very bad
about this, recognising that the relationship
with their child is not as they would wish.

Every child is likely to go through phases
when their parents, carers and teachers find
them hard to manage. If you want to change
the behaviour that worries you, it helps to try
and understand the child’s feelings. A child
may have learnt that the best way of
grabbing an adult’s attention – even if it is
only to get a telling off – is to behave in an
overactive, wild and uncontrolled way.
Behaviour like this has to be rethought not
only by the child but by the adults too.

Children behaving badly

Children who are hard to manage are likely to:
• find it difficult to listen or to concentrate on
what they are doing and be unable to settle
down to anything
• prefer being physically active, often
aimlessly, to non-physical activities
• fall behind in their work, whatever their
ability and often come to dislike school work
• be quick to react without thinking first
• lose themselves in activities that absorb their
minds, such as computer games and
television, where they don’t need to think.
Children who are all over the place and can’t
settle down to anything will not feel good
about themselves. They are often lacking in
self-confidence. Their jumpy behaviour can
make it more difficult for them to become
friends with other children or to form good
relationships with adults.

Each child is an individual and their behaviour
is a response to their particular situation and
their own problems. Nevertheless, there are
typical patterns of behaviour that may help you
to understand what has led to your child’s difficulties. For instance:

- Some children, often boys, seem to feel that people only really notice them when they are naughty. When they are good, no one seems to care.
- Some children feel that they have to cheer their parents up by being lively and sometimes acting the clown. This may be a response they learned if their mother was depressed or low in spirits when they were small babies. These children may appear to be overactive.
- Some children feel they are not as good as their sisters or brothers. They react badly to hearing themselves compared with other children.

**Differences between boys and girls**

Boys and girls develop in different ways and tend to find themselves in difficulty at different ages.

More boys than girls are likely to need help between the ages of 7 and 13 years old. Small boys often try to get away from any problems they may have with their parents, their teachers or themselves by indulging in physical activity. They tend to have behaviour problems during their junior school days and when they start at secondary school.

At the same age girls may avoid problems by being good little girls and working hard. More girls than boys seek help in adolescence, when they have to manage their sexuality and what this means for their capacity to relate to others or to act assertively.

**Making sense of your child’s behaviour**

If you can make sense of your child’s difficult behaviour, you can also help your child to make better sense of their own behaviour. Try to think about when and how it started and

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**Diary**

It is often helpful to make a sort of list or diary about how your child has been, for example, when they have been upset, and when calm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>week 1</th>
<th>week 2</th>
<th>week 3</th>
<th>week 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday am</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday pm</td>
<td>agitated</td>
<td>agitated</td>
<td>maths lesson: really upset</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday am</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday pm</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday am</td>
<td>won’t go to school upset</td>
<td>won’t go to school can’t sleep</td>
<td>maths lesson</td>
<td>a bit upset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday pm</td>
<td>upset</td>
<td>upset</td>
<td>a bit better</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday am</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>maths test</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday pm</td>
<td>upset</td>
<td>bit better</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday am</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday pm</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>raining: no football very agitated</td>
<td>wins at football: OK</td>
<td>loses at football: all over the place</td>
<td>football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>plays with Dad: OK</td>
<td>painting: OK</td>
<td>plays football with Dad: OK</td>
<td>goes to grandparents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It looks as if Ricky, a seven year old, has a problem on Mondays and Wednesdays at school. This seems to coincide with maths lessons, which Ricky can’t do. He also plays up when he loses at football.

The maths teacher discovers that Ricky can’t understand subtraction, which affects all his mathematics.

His stepfather helps him take on board more calmly the things he cannot do. He begins to see that he can do it. Finding there is a reason why maths is a problem helps Ricky see that a problem can be faced and thought about. This represents the first step in the process of the family making sense of Ricky’s ‘difficult’ behaviour. It’s unlikely that the problem of his overactivity will disappear overnight, but it’s a step in the right direction.
what triggers it off. For instance:

- What exactly is the behaviour that you are worried about? When did it all start?
- What was your child like when they were little? How are they now?
- What were they like before you had another baby? How are they now?
- What were they like at pre-school or at nursery school? In school at different stages?
- Were you worried or distracted by problems at any particular time during their childhood? Could this be linked to your child's behaviour?
- Does their behaviour change or become difficult in different settings?
- What were you like as a child? Were you similar?

Almost always there is a pattern. (See the example of Ricky in the Diary opposite.) Once you have recognised this pattern, you can start to think about ways for everyone concerned to work together to change your child's behaviour. For instance:

- Don't reward bad behaviour with attention, but give lots of attention to the child's good behaviour instead.
- Don't compare your child with anyone else — especially their sisters or brothers.

Trying to think about your own circumstances when the problem started may help to make sense of your child's later behaviour. For instance:

- Don't reward bad behaviour with attention, but give lots of attention to the child's good behaviour instead.
- Don't compare your child with anyone else — especially their sisters or brothers.

None of this is very easy to do. But a child who feels thought about often starts to think for themselves, and you and they can begin to change together. Your child feels better because they gain the approval of the adults and begin to value themselves more.

### Setting boundaries

The fact that you are trying to think about your child's behaviour doesn't mean that you don't also have to develop strategies for managing everyday situations. You cannot ignore your child's behaviour when it is disruptive, or dangerous to others, or themselves. You do have to set boundaries on what is and isn't acceptable behaviour to you or to other people. You do have to contain the outbursts, to divert, distract, or sometimes physically and safely hold the erupting child. This is never easy, but it will help you and your child if you keep calm and focused, finding ways to stop the behaviour, without becoming punishing and angry towards your child. If you can put a boundary round your own

### Some helpful suggestions

- Your child needs you to keep calm.
- Stop and look at what they are doing and give them your own attention.
- Try to catch their attention and, if possible, talk quietly about what is going on.
- Try to explain to your child and involve them in how you are tackling their behaviour.
- Think about:
  - What has set them off?
  - Is it part of a pattern? Does it link with their usual patterns of behaviour?
  - Is it usually something similar that sets them off?
  - If this time is different from before, what happened?

If you have managed to work through all these steps, looking at and thinking about your child's behaviour, they may have calmed down and so may you. Repeat this process each time problems arise.

If you have tried this again and again and really can't find a pattern to your child's behaviour, now is the time to seek help.

### Working together to change behaviour

Parents, teachers, the family generally and the child themselves should be able to work together to see what is preventing the child from being able to focus, and to develop strategies for helping them to concentrate.

It is helpful to everybody to be up front about it. Your child needs to know that you are concerned, and it will help other people to understand and to co-operate with you in looking for patterns and intervening in them. Grandparents and friends, who probably see the child less frequently, can offer you and your child encouragement as you begin to make changes, and can offer further
thoughts and observations about what might help when things do not seem to be going so well.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets
Postnatal depression
Sibling rivalry
Separations and changes in the early years
The child’s experience of primary school
Fathers
Grandparents and the extended family

When the problem is serious
When the child’s behaviour is affected most or all of the time, there may be a serious problem. Among these kinds of behaviour are some that are more difficult to tackle than most. Today some experts describe these as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Child psychotherapists believe that it is essential to consider each child’s situation individually, including their physical health, before making this diagnosis or prescribing any medication.

The local Child & Family Clinic, together with its child psychotherapist, if available, will be helpful. Only in the most severe cases will drug treatments be required.

If you feel you need help, please contact your GP or Health Visitor or local Child Guidance or Child and Family Clinic (address in telephone directory under your local Health Authority).

Further help – organisations

YoungMinds Parents’ Information Service
Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person
Phone 0800 018 2138
Web www.youngminds.org.uk

Parentline Plus
Support and advice for anyone parenting a child.
Phone 0808 800 2222
Textphone 0800 783 6783
Web www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Contact a Family
Registered charity helping families who care for children with any disability or special need.
Phone 0808 808 3555

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www.understandingchildhood.net

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