

Media Release

Confused, guilty, overwhelmed: Child behaviour a daily stress for parents

Australian parents are struggling with the daily stress of trying to manage their child's behaviour, according to new findings from The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll.

The latest RCH Poll has uncovered an undercurrent of confusion, guilt and stress among parents who are trying to get the best behaviour from their children yet unsure of where to go for help.

The poll of 2044 Australian parents caring for 3545 children aged one year to under 18 found:

- The vast majority of parents use positive strategies to promote good behaviour in their children, such as attention, praise and reward
- One in four parents (27%) report they feel stressed every day by their child's behaviour
- A significant proportion of Australian children have been physically disciplined in the past month, according to parent report, with 4% being physically disciplined 'quite a lot or most of the time', 13% 'some of the time' and a further 24% 'rarely'
- Almost half of parents (48%) said they become impatient too quickly, while one in three (36%) said they often lost their temper and later felt guilty
- One third (32%) said they often feel overwhelmed by managing their child's behaviour
- And almost half (45%) of parents are not confident that they would know where to go for help if they had difficulty managing their child's behaviour

The RCH Poll reveals that parents spend a lot of time thinking about how to manage their child's behaviour yet many are critical of their own strategies. Parents of younger children are especially more likely to feel stressed at least once a day by their child's behaviour.

However, almost all parents use positive techniques to guide their child's behaviour at least some of the time. These include:

- Giving their child praise or attention when they behave well (95%)
- Rewarding good behaviour with an activity together (84%)
- Talking with their child about the type of behaviour they expect (93%)
- Talking with their children about their feelings when they misbehave (85%)
- Implementing non-physical consequences for undesired behaviour, such as time out or withdrawal of privileges (84%)

Many parents used both positive and negative strategies to manage challenging behaviour. Negative or punitive techniques used at least some of the time in the previous month included:

- Shouting or yelling at their child (61%)
- Making their child feel bad to teach them a lesson (35%)

Media Release

- Threatening physical discipline (23%)
- Using physical discipline (17%) such as smacking, hitting, spanking, slapping, pinching or pulling.

The poll found more than half of parents (51%) think it is never okay to use physical discipline. However, almost one in five parents (23%) subscribe to the myth that physical discipline teaches a child to respect their parents. Another one in five (23%) incorrectly believe it teaches self-discipline, while a quarter believe children can become unmanageable without physical discipline.

One in three parents believe children should be on their best behaviour at all times – suggesting unrealistic expectations about the normal range of child behaviours.

The RCH Poll was conducted in August 2018 and results were weighted to reflect the Australian population.

Quotes attributable to the Director of the RCH National Child Health Poll, Dr Anthea Rhodes

“Children behave in different ways depending on their age, temperament, developmental stage and the situation. It is normal for them to push boundaries and to have difficulty regulating their emotions sometimes. Understanding the reasons for a child’s behaviour will help parents respond sensitively and more effectively to challenging behaviours.”

“Managing behaviours can be stressful. If parents feel overwhelmed and are often losing their cool with their kids, they should reach out for help. Speak to friends and family or your GP for advice and support.”

“Punitive or negative discipline does not help children learn what is expected from them as it centres on what not to do rather than modelling or reinforcing desired behaviour.”

“Physical discipline can have long-lasting negative effects on a child, including reduced self-esteem and psychological harm. Children who experience aggressive discipline are also more likely to develop aggressive behaviour themselves.”

“Children’s brains are wired for attention. The best type of attention to give a child is a positive response to desired behaviour as it encourages them to behave that way again. Praise, praise and more praise. If you see your child behaving well – praise them and tell them why.”

The RCH is inviting parents to take part in the *Catch Them Being Good* Challenge. All you need to do is:

1. Take note of your child’s everyday efforts and achievements
2. Tell them what they have done well
3. Double the amount of praise you give them – the more the better!
4. Try this every day for at least a week
5. Share your story on The Royal Children’s Hospital Facebook page so other parents can learn from your experience #catchthembeinggood