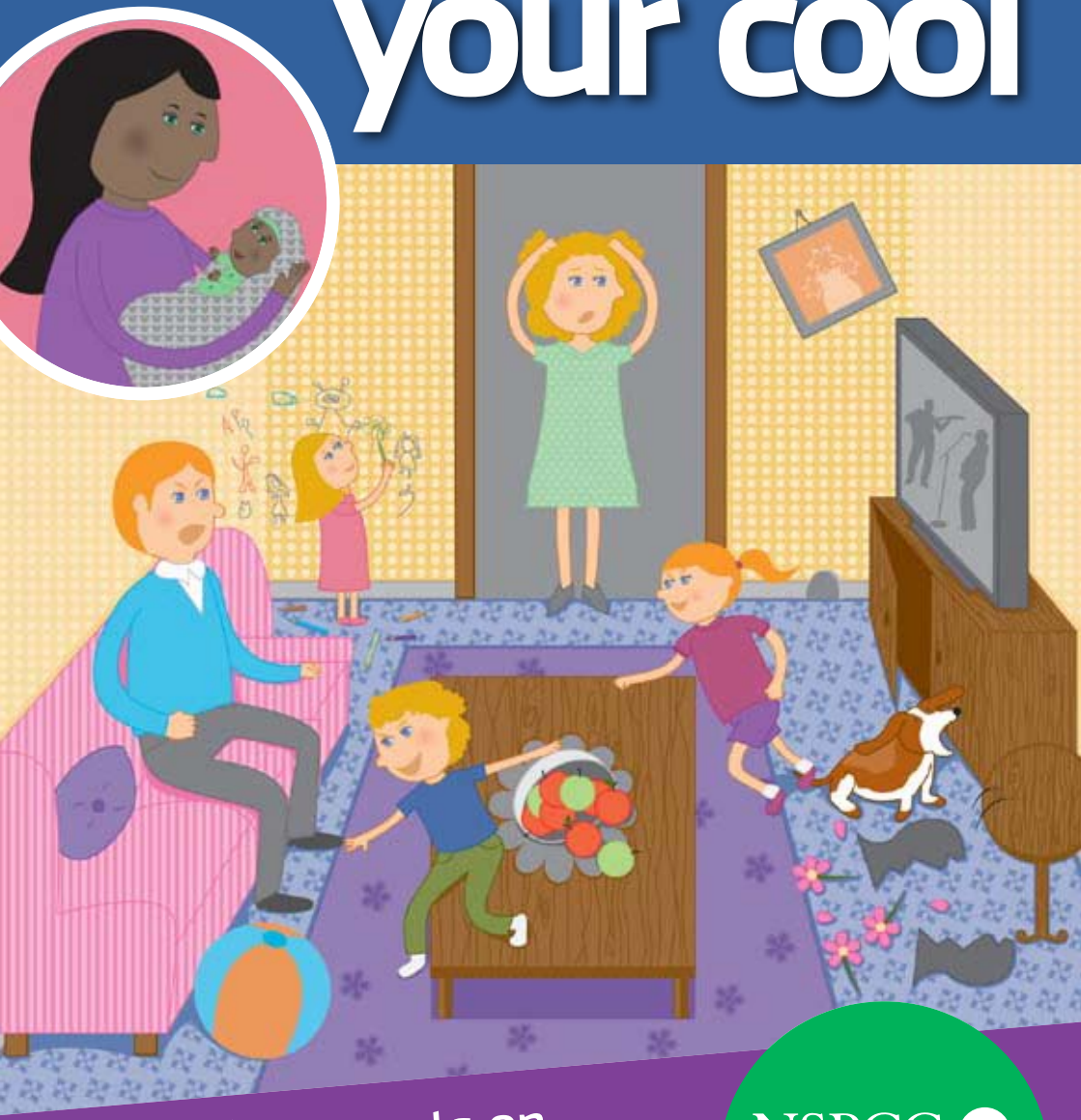
Keeping your cool



Advice for parents on managing stress and anger

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Most parents find bringing up their children very rewarding, but also pretty demanding. This may be particularly true if there are extra problems to cope with, such as money worries, housing, unemployment, fear of violence, drug or alcohol concerns or relationship difficulties.

Adults whose childhood relationship with their own parents has left them angry or anxious may also find it harder to cope. These stress factors can sometimes push parents past their limit so that they take it out on their children in some way.

We've collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you identify the stress and anger points in your life that may get in the way of good parenting, and encourage you to find ways of coping with these. It will also help you to think more carefully about your child's feelings.

To make for easier reading, this booklet refers to children as he or him, and she or her in alternating sections. All the information applies equally to boys and girls.

For more of our positive parenting advice, visit www.yourfamily.org.uk

Who would be a parent?

Being a parent is about watching your baby's first smile, helping her take those first steps, enjoying all those childish games again, and deciding to drop everything and have a picnic in the park. But it's also about your toddler having a tantrum in the supermarket, wondering when on earth you're going to get a minute to yourself, and teenagers who think you were born in the Dark Ages.

Children of all ages require an enormous amount of their parents' energy and patience – sometimes more than you feel able to give. You have your own needs to take care of as well. At times it can be hard to balance the two. Perhaps you're all ready to go shopping when you realise you need to change your baby's nappy yet again, and your 10-year-old won't stop talking about the school trip that you know you can't afford. Then, of course, you start feeling guilty about not being the perfect parent. By the end of the day, your head aches and you've had a blazing row with your partner.

Remember

A completely stress-free family life is probably impossible, because loving relationships, whether with partners or children, always involve a certain amount of conflict and some give and take. But if you feel that there is too much stress in your life, there are steps you can take to improve life for yourself and your children – however bad you might be feeling at the moment.

Some adults may take their frustration out on their children, or even blame them for the problems in their own lives. Stress can also lead parents to discipline or punish their children in ways that can be harmful.

It's reassuring to know that all parents find it difficult at times. There isn't only one correct way of parenting. Children from all kinds of social, religious and cultural backgrounds can grow up to be happy, well-adjusted adults – so long as their basic needs for love, security and respect are met.

What kind of parent are you?

It's important to think about this because it influences the sort of relationship you have with your children now, and affects the way they will develop as adults.

Your own childhood

Most of us learn about being a parent from the example set by our own parents. For many of us this can be helpful, but if we had bad experiences, they can get in the way of our relationship with our children or even cause harm.

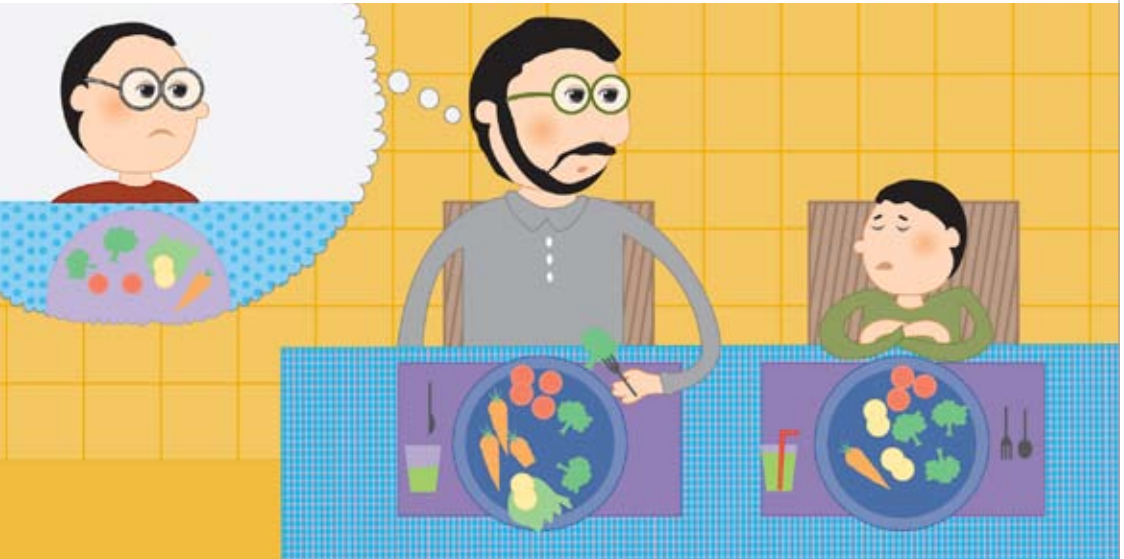
Some parents may treat their children in a particular way, not because they think it is important, but simply because that was how they were treated when they were young.

"I found myself saying things like 'If you don't eat your vegetables I'll send you to your room'. I didn't even care whether he ate his vegetables! I was just repeating what my mother said to me."

Others vow to be nothing like their parents and to bring their children up very differently.

"My father was always comparing me to my older brother, who was so much better at everything. I vowed that if I had children of my own I would never do that."

Most parents who were treated badly when they were children grow up to be caring and loving parents, but there is no doubt that it can make being a parent that much more difficult.



Superwoman and New Man

Many parents are stressed by the feeling that they must take responsibility for everything in their children's lives – and that they have to do it all really well. They often find it hard to accept that some tasks can be done perfectly well by others, and that some things could be left undone. The media doesn't help, with its image of glamorous women who manage to combine a high-powered career with bringing up beautiful children and cooking wonderful meals – all without the slightest hint of stress, of course.

Nowadays, many more dads take an active role in caring for their children. Even so, New Man is probably a media creation too, with his involvement in the home and childcare, and his ability to understand his partner perfectly.

As well as giving us unrealistic expectations of ourselves, these images may make us expect impossibly high standards of behaviour from our partners and children. This inevitably leads to conflicts and more stress.

It's reassuring to know that all parents find it difficult at times.

Understanding stress

What is stress?

If an event or situation makes us very worried or anxious, or gets in the way of our everyday life, we are said to be suffering from stress.

What causes it?

Stress depends on a number of factors:

The type of person you are

Some people seem naturally easy-going and self-assured. Others may feel tense and anxious most of the time, or may lack confidence.

What's happening to you

There are some events that almost everyone would find difficult – happy events, such as a new baby in the family or getting married, as well as sad ones, such as the breakdown of a relationship or unemployment. But generally, what causes stress will vary from person to person. For some people, the most difficult things in life are those everyday "disasters", such as the tights that ladder the moment you put them on.

Your child

Some children have a naturally easy temperament, while others are more challenging and this can be harder on parents.

Your responsibilities

We need a certain level of responsibility to give us a sense of purpose. But feeling that you have to cope with too much can cause stress.

The people around you

Whatever happens, it is always easier to cope if you have a supportive partner, family and friends.

Your ability to influence your life

Whether or not you take steps to reduce stress and make life easier depends most of all on you. You can't change everything, but there's nearly always something you can do and often people who are willing to help.

How does stress affect us?

Stress affects people in different ways. It can make us feel tired, miserable, bad-tempered, angry or tearful. At worst, it can lead to panic attacks, insomnia and severe depression. Stress can also cause or contribute to physical problems, including headaches and migraine, asthma and eczema. Some experts think that by damaging our immune system, stress may play a part in other illnesses, including heart disease and certain cancers.

Stress also affects the way parents relate to their children, so it is important for you to understand why it happens and how your actions make your child feel. Only then can you take steps to cut down the stress in your life, and reduce the harm that your child may suffer.

Understanding anger

Suffering from stress and feeling under increasing pressure can sometimes lead to real anger. Everyone gets angry at times – it is a normal human emotion. But it is important that, as a parent, you know how to control your anger so that it is not expressed in ways that could harm your children.

Signals

Although you are the only person who really knows what it feels like when you are starting to get angry, there can be lots of early warning signs.

- Can you feel your body tensing?
- Are you clenching your fists?
- Is your heart beating faster?
- Are you gritting your teeth?
- Are you feeling hotter?
- Are you pacing around?

Looking out for these signals can help you know when you have to act fast to stay in control.

Triggers

People react differently to the wide range of situations they face as parents. If you are feeling calm you might choose to sing out loud rather than listen to a toddler having a tantrum; however, if you are already feeling stressed, a toddler tantrum might be the one thing that makes you snap.

• Avoid self-pressure

Try not to put pressure on yourself, as this can make you feel helpless, lonely and, at times, angry. Remember that being a parent is one of the hardest jobs anyone can take on. Try to find your own way of feeling good about yourself as a parent.

• Don't compare

All children are different, so don't try and compare yourself with other parents based on what their children have achieved. This can put unnecessary pressure on you and your child.

• Change your routine

If some tasks that you do every day with your children make you feel angry, change your routine. For example, if struggles between your children sharing a bath trigger off your anger, try bathing them one at a time.

Reactions

The way people react when they feel themselves getting angry can be extreme; some may seem very cold while others fly into a wild rage.

Controlling the way you act when you feel like you are at breaking point is important for you and your children.

• Think positive

Instead of getting too stressed about your child's bad behaviour, look out for and reward their good behaviour.

• Laugh

Humour can take the heat out of a situation and can even make everyone forget about what's made them angry. Try to see the funny side of things if you can.

• Use distraction

All children will try and test your limits. Setting limits and sticking to them is good for your child, but it can lead to them becoming angry, and in the case of younger children, throwing tantrums.

Use distraction to keep things calm. For example, when your toddler goes again to touch the cat food that you've already asked them three times not to touch, rather than getting angry, pick them up and quickly point at something interesting outside the window.

• Talk to someone

Don't bottle your anger up until you explode. Find someone you can talk to about how you are feeling, such as your partner, a friend, a health visitor or your GP. "You have to remember that you are the adult and set a good example – so however mad you feel, don't show it or the kids will just do the same." **Ellen, mum of Susie, 7, and Matthew, 4**

Find out more

Anger management classes
Your GP should be able to tell you about anger management classes in your area, or might refer you to a counsellor or self-help group.

Mental Health Foundation
Provides information, carries out research and campaigns on mental health problems.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind
Provides information, support and services across England and Wales on mental health problems.
www.mind.org.uk 0845 766 0163

What about your life?

Sometimes parents find that what is happening in their own lives is getting in the way of being a parent. These pages give some examples of the more common difficulties and suggestions on how to cope, along with details of other organisations that may be able to help.

Relationship difficulties

Serious problems with a partner can be a major source of stress. Your children may well suffer, and you probably won't have the time or energy to listen to them. If you become separated or divorced, reassure your child that it is not their fault that your relationship with your partner failed, and that you both love them as much as ever.

One Parent Families/Gingerbread
Provides a network of self-help groups for single parents.
www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk
0800 018 5026 (Northern Ireland – **www.gingerbreadni.org** or **028 9023 1417**)

Relate
A confidential counselling service for relationship problems of any kind.
www.relate.org.uk 0300 100 1234
(Northern Ireland – **www.relateni.org** or **028 9023 3454**)

Relationships Scotland
Relationship counselling, mediation and family support across Scotland.
www.relationships-scotland.org.uk
0845 119 2020

Home/work-life balance

Holding down a job or developing a career is hard, and many parents report that bringing up children is the most difficult thing they have done. Today, most parents have to do both. Getting the balance right between parenting and working is an everyday reality in most families.

Employees in the UK work longer hours than workers in most European Union countries. Many employees feel the pressure to work long hours to help secure a family income. However, employees, particularly those with young children, have rights to break from work and employers have a duty to seriously consider requests to work flexibly. Many employers have developed their own approaches on this and are open to requests to work more flexibly or to work reduced hours for lower pay.

Working Families
Helps children, working parents and carers, and their employers find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work.
www.workingfamilies.org.uk
0800 013 0313

Money worries

If you're worried about money or you're unhappy with where you live, life can be very stressful indeed. You may find yourself getting short-tempered more easily, and may be so concerned about your worries that you may neglect your children's needs. Unfortunately there's no magic wand that anyone can wave, but there are some positive steps you can take. Check that you are getting all the benefits that you are entitled to, and remember that your child's greatest need is for love, not material things.

DirectGov – money, tax and benefits section
Information and advice on all types of benefits provided by the UK Government
www.direct.gov.uk/en/moneytaxandbenefits

Coping with unemployment

Unemployment can cause parents to lose self-confidence and to worry about their financial situation and their family's future. If you think that you may be taking out your feelings on your children, you may need some advice and support.

Many areas have training schemes, activities and support groups for people who are looking for work.

You can find out about these from your local library or Citizens Advice Bureau.

Citizens Advice Bureau
Helps to resolve money, legal and other problems by providing free, independent and confidential advice.
England and Wales –
www.citizensadvice.org.uk
Northern Ireland –
www.citizensadvice.co.uk

Employment Tribunals Service
Hears claims about matters to do with employment, including unfair dismissal, redundancy payments and discrimination.
www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk
0845 795 9775 Minicom **0845 757 3722**

Getting help is a positive step – not a sign of weakness.

What to do about stress

You can't remove stress from your life completely, but you might find some of the following ideas useful.

Talk and listen
Communication is the key to all good relationships. Unless you ask for what you need, you probably won't get it. Unless you say what you think, you'll end up feeling frustrated. Unless you and your partner can be open to each other's needs, you will be dissatisfied. Unless you listen to your children's needs, they may be badly affected.

Get organised
Make lists of things to remember.

Plan ahead
Work out the possible stress points in your day and think about what you can do about them.

Take time off
Make sure you have some time to yourself – each day if possible. You are an important person too. If you're really having a difficult week, promise to treat yourself to something special.

Try to relax
Find ways to help yourself relax. Exercise, peaceful music, a quiet cup of tea – or whatever works for you.

Congratulate yourself
If you have coped with something difficult, you have a right to feel proud of it.

Look on the bright side
Concentrate on what you like most about being a parent, and the good times in your life.

Remember that stress is catching
If your children see you getting upset and angry when things don't go right, they will probably react in a similar way to the disappointments and difficulties in their own lives.

Get help
This is a positive, useful step to take – not a sign of weakness. Don't assume that just because you're a parent you are the only one capable of meeting your child's needs. And remember that you're not the only parent who feels that outside help would be useful.

Parents talk about stress

Top NSPCC parenting advisor Eileen Hayes responds with advice for four parents talking about the common parenting situations that cause them stress.

Crying

"Lizzie suffered from terrible colic and she cried a lot right from the start. But even when the colic ended, the crying didn't. Everyone else seems to have lovely, gurgling, contented babies, while mine screams and grizzles. It makes me feel like a total failure." **Alison, mum of Lizzie, 4 months**

Eileen "One in ten babies cries a lot, and it's not because their parents are doing anything wrong. Often, these babies are just more sensitive and easily overwhelmed. Many babies improve once they can do more physically, such as sitting or crawling. You could try gently rocking, cuddling or stroking your baby, or swaddling her firmly in a light shawl. Music and singing, car rides and the sound of some white noise, like a vacuum cleaner, can also help. The important thing is not to compare your baby with anyone else's – they are all individuals."

Squabbling

"Our two boys are beautiful, lively and intelligent. There's just one problem: every day is ruined by their continual arguing and fighting. We both feel exhausted and depressed and we're fed up with playing peacekeepers!" **Sue and Demi, parents of Felix, 4, and Harrison, 2**

Eileen "Many parents feel terrible if their children fight a lot, and worry that their children will never learn to get on with other people. Children need to learn how to settle their own differences, so try not to interfere every time. Usually the arguments don't last long, and the children become the best of friends again. If you do need to intervene, try and find out what has gone wrong. Listen to what each child says and help them see each other's point of view."

Terrible tantrums

"Florence is a delightful and bright toddler. The only difficulty is her tendency to throw tantrums – as often as four or five times a day. I feel as if I'm always tense, waiting for the next tantrum. It's so bad that sometimes I dread going to pick her up from nursery." **Kate, mum of Florence, 2½**

Eileen "Small children have strong feelings and can express them very forcefully. This is normal behaviour in most toddlers. Try to stay calm and avoid situations that might trigger a tantrum. You should also try to ignore minor tantrums and praise good behaviour as much as possible."

Arguing

"I love my son dearly but, since he turned 13, he's become so moody and argumentative that I find it impossible to talk to him sometimes." **Graham, dad of Paul, 13**

Eileen "Many parents of teenagers feel like this. Adolescence is a time of learning to cope with intense feelings and testing out opinions and people, including parents. Show him that you understand how he feels and that you're there to help if he wants you to. However, don't expect to agree with each other all the time. Try to understand his views and let him make his own choices where possible."

Find out more

Cry-sis
Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.
www.cry-sis.org.uk 08451 228 669

Gotateenager
www.gotateenager.org.uk
(Provided by Parentline Plus)

Parents Advice Centre
(Northern Ireland)
www.parentsadvicecentre.org
0808 8010 722

Parentline Plus
www.parentlineplus.org.uk
0808 800 2222
(including ParentLine Scotland)

ParentsCentre online
www.parentscentre.gov.uk

Your Family
Positive parenting tips brought to you by the NSPCC
www.yourfamily.org.uk

Positive choices for parents

Below are some ideas that can help you to influence your child's behaviour when you need to, without creating bad feelings.

Choose not to smack or shout

Smacking may seem to work at the time, but parents may find themselves hitting harder and harder in order to achieve the same result. Shouting at a child or constantly putting him down can be just as harmful, as it can lead to long-term emotional difficulties. These punishments also do nothing to help children understand the need for self-control and respect.

Forget the winners and losers game

Negotiation and a bit of give and take will help find a solution that both you and your child can live with.

Is it really naughty?

Distinguish between generally unacceptable behaviour and behaviour that you find hard to cope with. Biting is unacceptable, but noisy play is fine – if the time and place are right.

Don't rely solely on rewards and punishments

As children get older, your power will run out and you may not be able to find many rewards and punishments that work. It is far better to explain the reasons for your thinking.

Change the environment, not the child

It's better to keep precious or dangerous objects out of reach than to punish your child's natural curiosity.

Show respect and understanding

If you're tempted to say something rude or hurtful, think how it would sound if you said it to an adult. You may have to criticise your child's behaviour, but don't criticise him as a person.

Sometimes it's not so much the child's behaviour that makes a parent feel wound up, but the parent's own stress levels. Exactly the same behaviour can be perfectly acceptable one day, but can drive you mad the next. No one can get it right all the time, but if your child gets too many mixed messages, it can be very confusing.

Remember that being a parent is one of the most valuable and important jobs you can do. Looking back, many parents wish that they'd spent more time doing the things they enjoyed with their children, and less time getting worked up about the bad bits. The odd angry word to your child probably won't be harmful, as long as your relationship is basically good.

But if you get angry a lot, your child will suffer – and you'll probably feel pretty bad yourself. So why not take action today, and spend a little time working out what you like about being a parent and how you can sort out the things that get you down? It could be the most important step towards getting the most out of your relationship with your children, and helping them to grow into happy adults.

Count to 10 and think again

When your children wind you up, there's a chance that you could say or do something that may harm them or make them feel bad. The following tips should help you to cool down.

1. Breathe slowly and deeply and count to 10.
2. Remind yourself that you are the adult, and can set a good example to your child of how to behave.
3. Think about what you're about to say. How would you feel if another adult said it to you?
4. Go into another room on your own for a minute and think about why you are angry. Is it really because of your child or is something else upsetting you?
5. Ring your partner or someone you can talk to. The problem may not seem so bad once you've shared it with another adult.
6. Go outside for a breath of fresh air.
7. When things really get you down, plan a treat for yourself. Choose something that makes you feel good – a quiet cup of tea, a hot bath, or a visit to the shops.
8. Humour is sometimes the best remedy. Try to see the funny side of things if you can.
9. Leave the room and scream if you feel like it. It's better to shout at the walls than at your children.
10. Visualise a beautiful, peaceful scene, or your own idea of paradise. This can help to calm you down.

It's important that you know how to control your anger so that it doesn't harm your children.

More advice from the NSPCC and Your family

NSPCC Helpline

Don't talk yourself out of it. Talk to us.

The NSPCC Helpline

If you're finding it hard to cope as a parent and want to talk, or you're worried about a child's safety or wellbeing, the NSPCC Helpline is here to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Call **0808 800 5000** to speak to a helpline advisor. For help by email **help@nspcc.org.uk**

If you are hard of hearing, you can contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm by:

- textphone **0808 056 0566**
- British Sign Language interpreters on videophone **020 8463 1148**
- British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam – **nspcc.signvideo.tv**

"Don't just keep worries to yourself – talk to us."

Our parenting pack

If you've found this booklet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like listening to your children, encouraging better behaviour and keeping your child safe when they're out alone.

To request a pack, please send an A4 SAE (with £2 in stamps), mentioning the parenting pack, to NSPCC Publications, Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH or download copies from **www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting**

Something your children might find useful

Beat exam stress

Provides children and young people with guidance on coping with exams and the stress that they can cause.

Download a copy from www.nspcc.org.uk/beatexamstress

NSPCC Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH
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