

PARENTING PRIMER

A Handbook of Tips
for Parents of
Children Birth – 5 Years

**THIS BROCHURE ALSO
AVAILABLE IN SPANISH**

ABOUT PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PFSA) has been strengthening families in Pennsylvania for more than thirty years and is a vital partner in the prevention, intervention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Our mission is to give children a safe environment by educating parents, providing support services for families, and training professionals.

PFSA provides a wide range of services, including materials, training, and technical assistance, to affiliated agencies in our statewide network. With strong support from our organization, community-based member agencies offer services such as our parenting curriculum, “Building Your Family,” or our Family Support Program with childcare provided (in most communities). Services are also provided to professionals who receive training on recognizing, reporting and responding to child abuse and neglect in order to fulfill their obligation as mandated reporters under the Pennsylvania Child Protective Services Law.

If you are parenting a child or working with children, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance has services to help you – call our office today or visit our website for more information.

Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance
2001 North Front Street, Building 1, Suite 210
Harrisburg, PA 17102
800-448-4906 or 717-238-0937
www.pa-fsa.org

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

There are two keys to being a good parent – one is information and the other is support. This booklet gives general information about a variety of topics of interest to parents and encourages its readers to find support through Family Support Programs in their local communities. Neither information nor support can solve all parenting problems, and we encourage readers to get professional help whenever it is warranted; no book can take the place of a doctor, counselor, or other professional.

To avoid the awkwardness of “he/she,” we have used “he” or “she” interchangeably – each implies all children.

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SAFE SLEEPING

Each year, many infants die or are severely injured as a result of an unsafe sleeping environment. Here are some tips for assuring that your baby's sleeping area is safe.

In order to assure that infants one year of age and younger are in the safest possible sleep environment, it is recommended that an infant:

- Is placed to sleep on her back in the same room as the parent
- Sleeps on a separate sleep surface that is firm and flat; this includes a crib or bassinet in the room near the parent's bed
- Not sleep alone or with anyone else on a couch, chair, water bed, or other soft surface
- Not be covered with heavy blankets, pillows, or comforters. Don't have loose bedding, bumper pads or toys in the sleep area.
- Not be overheated and not over bundled
- Be dressed in a sleeper or sleep sack so his head and face do not get covered by a blanket

Some other safety reminders:

- Be especially careful not to smoke in a home with an infant. The chances of a child dying of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) are much higher around smoke.
- Never sleep with a child if you are under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or medicines that make you sleepy.



WHEN A CHILD SAYS “NO” ALL THE TIME

Sometimes it seems like “no” is the only word our child says. He hears it often from us and sometimes even say it when he mean “yes.”

- For toddlers, saying “no” is a way of expressing independence and is a normal – if frustrating – developmental stage. Keep the rules simple and give the toddler choices when you can.
- Instead of asking, “Do you want to put on your coat?” ask, “Do you want to wear your red coat or your blue sweatshirt?” This helps keep “no” to a minimum.
- Children need firm limits about important issues like safety – don’t accept a “no” on an issue like a car seat or holding hands in traffic.
- Remember that it is unreasonable to expect total obedience – do you really want a robot instead of a child? Give children some control of their lives, especially in things that affect only them, and then praise them when they do cooperate.

A CHILD WHO BITES

The parent of a “biter” is often criticized – “Make that child stop!” – and this behavior can be difficult to stop once it gets started.

- Young children may not even understand that they are hurting someone by biting. Be firm: “No! We don’t bite!”
- Don’t give a lot of attention when the child is misbehaving; praise good behavior.
- Prevent the situations where biting occurs – is it with other children who are fighting for toys? Separate the children or distract them with other things to do.
- Some children respond to having one thing that they are allowed to bite. Teach children to express feelings through words or through drawing about how they feel.
- Never bite a child back. It’s disrespectful and doesn’t really teach the desired behavior. Firmness and patience, with lots of prevention, do a better job.

GETTING ATTENTION BY INTERRUPTING

Children who interrupt your conversations – whining, pulling at your clothing, or just barging in – can be very frustrating! It's important to answer children's questions, but help them understand that interrupting is not acceptable.

- Try to plan phone calls or visits when young children are napping or playing quietly. Have a few special “on the phone” toys nearby.
- For young children, it can help to hold their hand or rub their back when they interrupt you, so they know you are paying attention to them without stopping what you are doing.
- Teach children aged 3 and up that they need to wait for you (not too long!) and praise them when they wait even for a moment. Toddlers and preschoolers are too young to wait or to keep from interrupting.
- Show your child how you want him to behave with your own behavior – say “excuse me” when you interrupt him or anyone else.

TAMING TANTRUMS

Tantrums are embarrassing and frightening for parents because they often occur when the child has an audience. Most tantrums are short-lived, and the behavior disappears if parents can manage to remain calm.

- As long as your child is safe, the most useful thing to do is ignore the behavior. Yes, this is hard to do! But, any behavior that you pay attention to will happen again. If you can safely walk away from the child (stay near enough to see him), walk away. Don't reason with him or pay any attention.
- Whatever you do, don't give in to the child's demands. It teaches the child that tantrums can help him get what he wants.
- Some children hit, kick, or pinch when having a tantrum. If you can, isolate the child from others until the behavior stops. Come back to the child when he is calm, but say nothing. Compliment the child when he does behave, especially in the same situation.
- Prevent tantrums by watching that the child doesn't become too tired, hungry, or stressed, especially in public. Try to ignore critical looks from other people.

HONESTY IN CHILDREN

Honesty is important to most parents, and they get upset when their children lie. Younger kids may not know they are lying and older kids lie out of fear; they're afraid of being punished if they tell the truth.

- Young children (under age 5) don't really know the difference between truth and lies; they believe that whatever they are saying is true. Begin talking to them before age 5 about the difference between make-believe and reality.
- Children make mistakes, just like adults. If you have unreasonable expectations, they may lie to you when they don't live up to them.
- Don't set them up to lie. If you know they broke a rule, why ask them, "Did you do it?" Just decide on the consequence and follow through.
- Model good behavior. Does your child hear you call in sick when you really aren't? They learn more by what you do than what you say.
- Sometimes, you can skip the consequence if a child tells the truth and make telling the truth a positive thing for the child.
- If lies increase as the child gets older, there may be serious problems needing professional help. Talk with a counselor or your physician.

WHEN A CHILD IS AFRAID

Fear is natural for all of us. Your child's fears might seem silly to you, but they are very real to her.

- Avoid saying things like "there's nothing to be afraid of," let them express their feelings.
- Reassure her that you will keep her safe and hug her when she's afraid. Chase away scary monsters with a can of "monster spray" (air freshener) and show her how shadows can look like monsters.
- Find out the source of the fear, if you can. TV programs, video games and stories told by older siblings can often scare kids. Help them come up with their own ways to get rid of these fears.
- Fear of the dark is common. Leave a night light on, rearrange the room to eliminate scary sights, or leave the door open a crack.

THE PICKY EATER

Parents feel unappreciated and angry when kids won't eat what they cook. Children's tastes in food vary greatly even day to day, and some children are just "picky" about almost all food.

- Realize that kids' appetites change often. They like the same foods over and over and have strong feelings about which foods they like or dislike.
- It is not worth fighting about one particular food; no one food insures good health.
- An inexpensive chewable multivitamin can help make up for some of the foods your child won't eat.
- Give choices and small portions, allowing the child to ask for more. Let the child determine when she has had enough.
- A picky eater who disrupts mealtime for others can be given a "time out" in another room or turn their chair around for a brief time. Don't give a child attention – even scolding – for being "picky."
- Your child needs nutritious snacks, but if there is too much snacking going on, he may not be hungry at mealtime.
- Make meal times happy, social times and talk about the good events of the day. Turn off the TV and talk to your child at meal times.

GETTING RID OF THE TV MONSTER

Television can be educational and expand a child's world; it can also give him messages that parents don't want him to have.

- Turn the television on for certain programs and off when they are over. Don't leave the TV on for "company" or background noise; have your kids ask permission before turning the TV on.
- Watch TV with your child and explain what ideas you agree with and why. Pick educational programs appropriate for the age of your child.
- Offer lots of alternatives – games, books, cooking, exercise – to get kids away from the television. Praise kids when they choose not to watch TV.
- Limit TV and video game time. Don't allow a TV in your child's bedroom. Keep the TV off at bedtime and mealtime so you can talk and listen to each other.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO BE KIND TO ANIMALS

Teaching children to be kind to animals can go a long way toward preventing violence later in life. Here are some ways to communicate healthy, nurturing attitudes to your children.

- Be clear about what you expect. Children must be taught how to play with animals or they can get hurt. Explain why it's not nice to pull on the dog's tail or drag the cat by the tail. Give your children clear rules on how to treat animals.
- Be a good role model. The way you act toward animals teaches your child. When you scratch the neighbor's cat under the chin, or gently pet a dog, your children will watch and copy your behavior.
- Be consistent. Children thrive on routine. If you tell them not to pull on the dog's ears one day, but don't say anything when they do it the next day, your children will become confused about what's okay.
- Be realistic. Don't get a pet just to help make your child responsible; children learn responsibility from parents who demonstrate how to care about others. The relationship between a child and a pet can teach him or her many other things: ways to communicate without words, how to give and receive unconditional love, and why it's important to respect other living creatures.

You can teach preschool age children that animals can be a lot like children:

- They need food, water, and shelter, as well as vaccinations and visits to the doctor to stay healthy.
- They can get hurt and feel pain.
- Pets need gentle care and handling and lots of affection. They aren't toys.
- Some pets, like dogs and cats, like to play but don't always want to.



INSTEAD OF SPANKING

Disciplining children means teaching them, not punishing them. It's an ongoing process or helping kids understand what behavior is acceptable with what you – and the world – expect.

- Make sure you have your child's attention before you talk to him. Say his name, touch him, and look him in the eye before you give instructions.
- Spend time with your children. They need undivided, personal attention on a regular basis.
- Use more "do's" than "don'ts." Tell you child what you want him to do.
- Make a few rules, but make them count. Rules should be reasonable and appropriate for your child's age, and they should be enforced all the time.
- Set a good example. Children imitate what they see around them.
- Change the environment. Put away things you don't want your child to get into and have places that are safe for kids to explore; kids younger than 4 just can't resist touching things.
- Prevent boredom with interesting playthings. These do not have to be expensive toys. Rotate play materials so kids always have something "new."
- Give choices when you can – we all want some control of our lives, kids included. Nobody's perfect; don't sweat the small stuff.
- Give warning time; tell the child 5 to 10 minutes before one activity will end and another will begin.
- Stay away from "backhanded praise" and make sure your praise is purely positive whenever you can.
- Make a commitment to not hit your child. Learn more about alternatives and anger management. Give yourself a "time out" when you feel angry, and walk away for a few minutes while you calm down.

STRESS REDUCTION TIPS

Being a parent is the most demanding job in the world, and we learn “on the job.” With so many demands on our time and energy, we often get stressed out.

- Try some tension relievers when you are feeling overwhelmed. Some simple ways to reduce stress are: call a friend and talk, spend some quiet time alone, sing or listen to music, get outdoors for a while, take a nap, help someone else, tell someone “I love you,” see your child’s point of view.
- Take care of yourself! Pay attention to your need for physical exercise, sleep, and proper food.
- Prevent stress by changing your daily routine. For example, drive to work in a different way or plan a special mid-week event with your children.
- Know when to ask for help. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If you feel out of control more than you would like, if you see no way out of your frustration, or if you feel you can’t talk to your kids without yelling or hitting – it may be time for some help. Join a support group, take a parenting class, or seek counseling to help you deal with the many demands you face.
- Get a book or video about stress, controlling anger, or parenting skills; most libraries have lots to choose from. Watch TV programs about parenting and emotional health.
- Enjoy humor. Watch a comedy movie, read, or listen to jokes; stress decreases if you can find something to laugh about.



WHEN A CHILD SUCKS HIS THUMB

Sometimes, parents think they have done something wrong when a child sucks his thumb. But all children have a need to suck, and some children meet this need with their thumbs and fingers.

- Most children stop sucking their thumbs on their own; each child is different as to the time they will stop on their own.
- These strategies don't work: teasing the child, complaining about the child, or putting bad-tasting things on the thumb.
- Unless your dentist feels the child's teeth will be affected, don't worry about a child's thumb-sucking in private. Make it clear that after age 3 thumb-sucking is not acceptable in public.

HELPING YOUR CHILD LEARN

Children need both school and home to gain the skills they need. You play an important role in helping your child love to learn.

- Read aloud as a family and take time to talk about the day's events. Model reading and writing at home; let your child see you read.
- Go to the library (let your child select books he likes), museums, and other places of interest in your community.
- Visit your child's school and attend school functions; get to know your child's teachers.
- Display your child's schoolwork with pride in your home.
- Kids with learning disabilities and behavior disorders get discouraged. If you're concerned, ask your child's teacher if your child should be assessed.
- Play is how children learn. Get down on the floor and watch your child play, then join in and play with her.
- Don't use reading or learning as a punishment. Make learning and gaining new skills fun for yourself and your child.



A CRYING BABY

Hearing a baby cry for long periods of time can shatter any parent's nerves. Babies cry when they are hungry, wet, tired, or just want company – but sometimes, no matter what you try, they won't stop crying.

- Rule out any medical causes with a trip to the doctor or clinic. Your doctor can give you advice about a “colicky” baby; some babies cry a lot more than others, no matter what parents do.
- Try a few old favorite techniques: feed the baby slowly and burp him; offer a pacifier; hold her close to you and walk with her; take the baby for a ride in the car or stroller; wrap the baby in a soft blanket and put him in a quiet, dark room for a short while; go into another room and try to relax.
- Remind yourself that the baby does not hate you and is not crying to annoy you – it's the only way he has to let you know what he needs.
- Ask for help when you are frustrated – have a friend or family member help you when you need a break. Contact PFSA for a brochure on crying babies.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, it is safer to let the baby cry than to shake or punish the baby. NEVER SHAKE A BABY!

SQUABBLING SIBLINGS

It's hard to know when to step in when children are fighting. Parents feel helpless to stop this behavior that can quickly become out of control.

- Don't compare kids, and work hard to improve their self-esteem. Kids are likely to do what you expect, so make sure they know you expect good things.
- Try to ignore fighting as much as possible. If no one is getting hurt, let kids work out their own solutions. Have confidence that they can work it out.
- Separate the fighters for a while without determining who started the fight. Protect them from hurting each other!
- Let kids talk about their feelings; it's one thing to say they hate their brother and another to hit him.
- Praise for good behavior and modeling what you want from your children will help. Kids need to have conflicts in order to learn how to handle them well.

CO-PARENTING

Divorce or separation is hard on everyone in the family. Honest communication and setting aside your angry feelings for the sake of your child will help this stressful situation.

- If possible, both parents should talk to the child about the divorce (“divorce” applies to never-married couples as well) together. Children need to know that both parents love them and will stay involved in their lives.
- Tell the kids the divorce is not their fault. Children often feel they are to blame.
- Put aside your anger and do not say nasty things about the other parent, his family, or new partner. Your child wants to be loyal to both parents.
- Tell the child where the other parent will be living and when each parent will spend time with him.
- Explain that divorce is final – some children spend a lot of time hoping their parents will live together again.
- Watch for signs of trouble – younger children may regress to earlier behavior; there may be more fighting between siblings; older kids may become moody or depressed. Talk to your kids – often – and get counseling help if things don’t get better.
- Have fun. Spend time with your children doing things you both enjoy. Encourage grandparents and friends to see the children more often.
- Don’t turn kids into friends. You need someone to vent to, cry with, and lean on – but it shouldn’t be your kids.
- Keep the lines of communication with the other parent open. Let them know about health issues, school progress, and other important matters. Remember – your child needs both of you!



THE ABSENT PARENT

Having one parent who is not involved with the child can cause a lot of hurt. There is no easy way to handle it.

- Answer your child's questions as honestly as possible, taking the age of the child into consideration.
- Avoid saying negative things about the other parent. You can comment on his behavior ("Daddy would see you if he could, but it can't happen right now. He is too sick to be safe around you," for example) but don't make a judgment about the parent.
- Find other role models of the opposite sex for your child – this is important for children of both genders. An uncle or aunt, neighbor or teacher may be able to fill this role.
- Take care of yourself so you can care for your child. Pay attention to your own need for proper nutrition, exercise, rest, and adult companionship.
- Be careful about introducing new partners to your child; make sure the relationship is truly long-term before you bring a new person into your child's life.
- Remember that even though the other parent may not be seeing the child, he or she is obligated to pay child support and medical expenses. Get legal help if you are not receiving this support.



ABOUT POTTY TRAINING

Toilet training takes patience and time. Girls are usually ready for toilet training around age two while most boys are not ready until two and a half, but readiness varies greatly. A child will show interest in using a potty when he is ready to try it themselves.

- Don't force the issue if your child is not ready. Be patient. If there is no interest, put the potty-chair away and try again in a few weeks.
- Put a potty-chair in the bathroom several days before you start potty training so your child can get used to it being there.
- When you change your child's diapers, talk about why you are changing it: "Bobby went potty;" "Cindy went pee in her diaper," for example, so children can learn to say words that let you know they need to go to the bathroom.
- Dressing a child in loose fitting training pants allows her to pull them off and on easily.
- Take your child to the bathroom each time he wants to go but do not insist he stay long or do anything.
- Do not give your child a lot of toys to play with or books to read. Too many distractions can keep a child from remembering the purpose of being in the bathroom.
- Sit with your child the first couple of times. After that, leave for short periods of time and come back. This will help him get used to going to the bathroom on his own.
- Be patient. Praise your child for success – hugs work! Don't punish for "accidents."



OUT OF THE HOUSE

To many kids, shopping and errands are boring and tiring. If you're trying to juggle driving, your to-do list, and keeping an eye on your child, errands are hard for you, too.

- Before you leave the house, discuss where you will be going, how long the trip will take, and what you will be getting while you're out.
- Go over the ground rules before you leave home. Some rules for the car: wear a seatbelt, use your indoor voice, and keep your hands to yourself. Some for the store: don't run, stay where a parent can see you, and use your indoor voice.
- Be prepared with diapers, change of clothes, needed food or bottles, a snack (for you and your child), medications, and a pacifier. Figure that the errands might take longer than you expect.
- Give your child something to do. You can play games or sing together. Your child might want to bring a toy or stuffed animal along.
- Reward good behavior. If your child behaves well on the trip, encourage and praise him for following the rules. Plan to do fun things at home.
- Keep errands short and time them when your child is not hungry or tired.
- Tell him what to do rather than to stop doing something. You can ignore some misbehavior, but if your child gets out of control, take him to a quiet place and stand there quietly for 30 seconds. If you're in the car, and the bad behavior continues, pull the car over when it is safe and stop for a brief time-out.



BE A BETTER PARENT

Be a Better Parent – Take the Pledge!

- **I Pledge to Listen to My Children** – Take time to really hear them. Look them in the eye and feel what they are saying.
- **I Pledge to Communicate With My Children** – Ask them hard questions and get into their business. They won't like it, but it's your responsibility.
- **I Pledge to Teach My Children Right From Wrong** – Since children pay far more attention to our actions than our words, practice what you preach.
- **I Pledge to Pay Attention to My Children** – In today's world, we're often racing against the clock, but we've got to create opportunities to focus on our children and make them the center of our attention.
- **I Pledge to Educate My Children in Mind, Body, and Soul** – As their first teachers, parents have the obligation and the opportunity to set the stage for lifelong learning.
- **I Pledge to Work to Provide a Stable Family Life** – Stability is one of the most important factors in a child's well-being. Keep as much continuity in your children's lives as possible, and if and when change occurs, think first about their needs and teach them to cope in healthy ways.
- **I Pledge to Vote to Ensure Children Fair Treatment and Opportunity** – We must keep their needs in mind when supporting and selecting our political leaders. Pay attention to what candidates and representatives do on behalf of children.





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Harrisburg, PA 17102
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Fax 717-238-4315
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