Alternatives to Smacking

Children can sometimes be noisy, restless or difficult. This can be very stressful for parents/carers. Smacking may stop behaviour for a moment, but it does not teach your child how to behave. It can also harm your relationship with them. This guide gives you safe, practical alternatives you can use straight away. These strategies will help you keep calm, guide your child, and build a more positive relationship.

In the Heat of the Moment

- **Step away briefly** – put your child in a safe place and give yourself a minute to calm down.
- **Clap your hands once** – use it as a reset signal before speaking.
- **Take 3 slow breaths** – count as you breathe to reduce the anger.
- **Speak softly or lower your voice** – this often makes children listen more.
- **Get down to your child's eye level** – makes you less frightening and helps them listen.
- **Say a short, firm phrase** – "Stop now" or "Look at me."
- **Give two simple choices** – "You can sit here or there."
- **Redirect** – distract with a new activity or object.
- **Guide your child to a quiet corner or chair** to calm down for a few minutes.
- If you feel overwhelmed, **make a quick call to a friend or neighbour** for support.

Teaching and Preventing

- **Show your child what they can d**o instead of only saying "don't."
- **Keep rules simple and the same** each time so your child understands.
- **Explain natural consequence**s (for example, "If you throw your toy, it might break").
- **Praise** your child's good behaviour straight away – notice the positives.
- **Accept mistakes** and show your child how to put them right.
- **Stick to simple routines** so your child knows what to expect.
- **Prepare your child for changes** or transitions before they happen.
- **Turn everyday tasks into games** to make cooperation easier.
- **Practise calming strategies** with your child, like counting or deep breaths.
- **Model calm behaviour yourself** – your child will copy you.

Managing Everyday Challenges

- **Notice if your child is hungry, tired or overstimulated** – many meltdowns start here.
- **Take your child outside for a run around** or physical play.
- **Keep precious items out of your child's reach** to avoid arguments.
- **Be firm, fair and friendly** – calm authority works better than anger.
- **Ignore some tantrums if it is safe** – not every behaviour needs attention.
- **Spend one-to-one time each day** with your child, even ten minutes helps.
- **Use humour** to ease tension and reconnect with your child.
- **Offer comfort and reassurance** after a difficult moment.
- **Give your child small responsibilities** to build confidence.
- **Share ideas and support with other parents** – you are not alone.

Best Immediate Actions When You Feel Like Losing Control

Leave the situation – short break (safely)
Step away for 30–60 seconds. Keep your child in sight or place them somewhere safe (playpen, cot, or with another adult). Put distance between your hands and your child.
You could say: "I need a minute. Stay here."

Breathe with intent
Take three slow, deep breaths – inhale for 3, hold for 1, exhale for 4. Repeat until your body feels calmer.
Say nothing until you feel calmer – just breathe.

Use a single attention signal
Clap once, hold up your hand, or use a short word like "Stop." This interrupts both your and your child's escalation.
You could say: "Look at me. Wait."

Put your child somewhere safe and supervised
If necessary, guide your child to a safe area where they cannot hurt themselves while you calm down. Stay nearby and check often.
You could say: "I am going to sit down for a minute. I will be back in a moment."

Name your feeling out loud
Say a short sentence to release the pressure: "I am very cross right now." Naming the feeling helps you regain control.
You could say: "I am feeling cross and I need to calm down."

Use a grounding action for yourself
Splash cold water on your face, hold a cool object, or press your feet firmly to the floor. These physical actions help reduce the urge to lash out.

Call for help/phone a friend
Ring a partner, neighbour or friend for a quick, calming voice. Even one minute of supportive words can stop an impulsive act.
You could say (on the phone): "Can you stay on the line for two minutes? I need to calm down."

Count or use a short calming script
Count backwards from 20, or repeat a short phrase such as "Calm. Breathe. Safe."
Say to yourself: "20, 19, 18..."

Distract or redirect your child
Offer a toy, a song, or a simple choice to shift their attention while you calm yourself.
You could say: "Do you want your red ball or your blue car?"

If you feel completely out of control – get immediate help
If you fear you might harm your child, call someone straight away, or ask another trusted adult to step in. Safety comes first.

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About this Resource

This Alternatives to Smacking guide has been created for parents and carers who may struggle to stay calm during challenging moments with children. It offers practical, safe, and positive parenting strategies that can be used immediately when you feel like losing control.

Instead of resorting to physical punishment, these alternatives focus on:

- Calming techniques for parents – such as deep breathing, grounding exercises, and short breaks.
- Positive discipline strategies – like clear rules, simple choices, and redirecting behaviour.
- Building stronger parent–child relationships – through praise, comfort, and consistent routines.

Smacking/corporal punishment may stop behaviour for a moment, but it does not teach children how to manage their feelings or make better choices. Research shows that positive parenting approaches are far more effective in guiding behaviour and supporting a child's emotional wellbeing.

This resource is designed for use by social workers, teachers, parenting practitioners, and family support workers, as well as by parents and carers themselves. It can be shared in parenting programmes, family support sessions, and one-to-one work with parents who have used smacking in the past.

www.SocialWorkersToolBox.com