



## A JOINT PROJECT

The Scout Association of Australia expresses its thanks to the Kids Help Line and Parentline for their assistance in the production of the material for this publication.

Published by the authority of the  
National Executive Committee of  
The Scout Association of Australia.

No Part of this publication may be reproduced  
or utilised in any form or by any means,  
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,  
recording or by any information storage,  
mailing or retrieval system,  
without written permission of  
The Scout Association of Australia.

Cover design by Associated Graphic Art

Copyright © The Scout Association of Australia & Kids Help Line

First published in Australia February, 1997

National Library of Australia Card No. and ISBN 1 875 783 22 9  
National Scout Catalogue No. 50288

Printed in Australia by Littlewood Printing

# RELATIONSHIPS

## A PARENT'S GUIDE



A  
JOINT  
PROJECT



THE SCOUT ASSOCIATION  
OF AUSTRALIA

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication was able to be produced through the generous financial assistance of The Australian Scout Education and Training Fund. The book has been produced as a joint project between The Scout Association of Australia and Kids Help Line & Parentline.

The material was prepared by Michelle Keel, Mary-Denese Holmes and Di Beckett; all employees of Kids Help Line and Parentline. Illustrations supplied by Pearl Holmes.

## INTRODUCTION

Being a parent is a mixture of stress, confusion and enormous joy. For centuries people have spoken and written about how to develop good relationships with your children and I am sure people will continue to do this ad infinitum. The people who put this book together are not experts - we are people who have all been children and been parented and some of us have parented our own children. We are fortunate to be involved in counselling kids and parents and therefore have been able to draw on these experiences.

### Family and Peer Relationships

Kids Help Line (KHL) is a national telephone counselling service for young people aged 5 to 18. Of the 10,000 calls that counsellors respond to each week almost 20% are related to issues between the young person and their family. Given that family is the primary group of significant others, it follows that a young person's identity and existence is strongly influenced by the family system. It is not surprising that, for many KHL callers, family relationships are a prime concern and indicator of well-being.

Many factors affect family stability and well-being:

- 43% of Australian marriages end in divorce;
- 50% of these involve children;
- a proportion of these will eventually live in step-families.

*(Australian Institute of Family Studies)*

Many children contact KHL after attempts to speak to parents or family members have failed, either through being ignored or minimised. Other children find it difficult to raise problems with their family. Others need to help clarify their concerns before approaching family members. Some phone because there is no-one else to turn to. In each case the positive aspects of the caller showing commitment to resolving their concerns is validated and reinforced.

The family unit is central to society because it is where social behaviour is learnt and transmitted from one generation to another - it is the unit in which both personality and society are forged.

It is widely accepted that peer relationships play an important role in the social and psychological development of adolescents. Specifically,

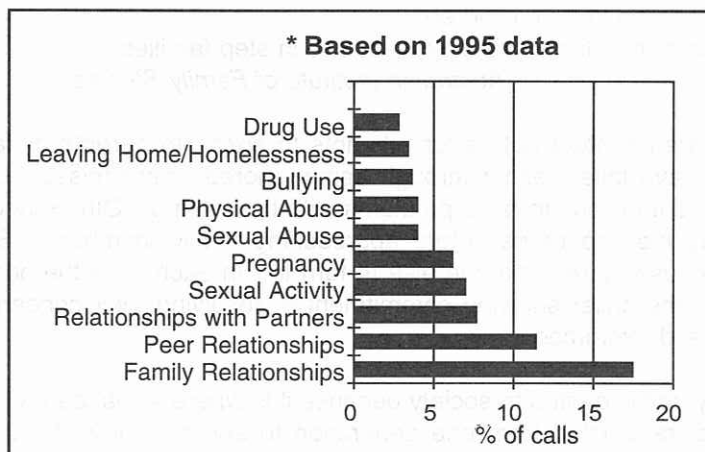
children tend to depend upon parents during middle through late childhood. This is followed by an increasing degree of dependency upon peers during early to middle adolescence. During late adolescence, individuals resist peer pressure and have a greater capacity for autonomous behaviours.

Although the influence of peers increases with age, most research shows that this influence is situation specific. Peers provide adolescents with a reference group for information and also with opportunities to explore new roles. Dating, social events, types of dress, drinking, drug use, sport, and hobbies all take place largely in the company of age mates. Peers are a critical part of the adolescents transition to independence outside of the family. As such, issues of friendship consistently receive high rating of importance from teenagers.

Parents are more typically consulted for important decisions such as educational or occupational plans. For many adolescents, the move towards a peer social orientation does not necessarily involve a rejection of parents opinions and values.

Kids Help Line answers approximately 12,000 calls per year relating to peer relationships. This accounts for around 10% of all problem calls and is the second major reason young people contact the service.

The graph below shows the ten main problems (of a possible 36) about which young people contact Kids Help Line.



**REFERENCES:**

Sabetelli, R.M. and Anderson, S.A. 1991, "Family System Dynamics, Peer Relationships, and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment", *Family Relations* 362-369.  
 Sabetelli and Anderson, 1991: Wilks, 1992

# CONTENTS

Introduction	Relationships - 3 Family - Peer - 3
Section 1	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <p><i>What is good communication? - 7</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling heard</li> <li>• How do you know people are listening?</li> <li>• Feeling valued</li> <li>• Enhanced relationships with you and self</li> </ul> <p><i>Blocks to good communication - 11</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Aaaagh - my mother's/father's voice just came out of my mouth!'</li> <li>• 'Aaaagh - my voice just came out of my child's mouth!'</li> <li>• Who has all the answers anyway?</li> <li>• Guilt, shame, blame and other useless concepts</li> <li>• Leaping hurdles</li> </ul>
Section 2	<p><b>Turbulent Times - 15</b></p> <p><i>Negotiation - 15</i></p> <p><i>Conflict - 16</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conflict with others</li> <li>• Conflict with you</li> <li>• Consequences:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>logical consequences</li> <li>natural consequences</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>Thought and choice - concepts for life - 19</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sure this all sounds great in theory</li> <li>• 'Oh that's right, I'm only human!'</li> </ul>

- Section 2 - **Adolescence (say no more) - 20**
- Aladdin's lamp - finding the Genie

- Section 3 - **F..... is for Feelings - 22**
- Part of the whole person
  - Good or bad?
  - Sign posts
  - Allowing time for feelings
  - How many feelings are real?
  - More than one at a time
  - Feelings are not gender specific
  - No age limit
  - Safety and acceptance
  - So what?
  - Benefits

**Anger - 27**

- What is anger?
- Taboo or terrific?
- How is anger helpful?
- When is anger not helpful?
- Unacknowledged anger

- Section 4 - **Re-Learning How to Play - 31**
- Remember when - recollecting childhood
  - Fun and joy
  - Making time

- Section 5 - **Time Out - Looking After You - 36**
- 'What about me?'

- Section 6 - **Resources - 38**

# Section 1 Communication

Relationships with others can be fun, fulfilling and give us a sense of belonging and acceptance. They can also be frustrating, disappointing and challenging. The parent/child relationship, while one of the most fulfilling, is also perhaps the most challenging relationship of all. After all, as the parent you are the role model for your children. There is no more difficult job than parenting and there is no tool you will need more in this task than good communication.

## **What is Good Communication?**

The short answer is that good communication occurs where both parties come away from an interaction feeling heard, valued and where the relationship with other and self (self-esteem) has been enhanced. Obviously this is an ideal and may not always be possible, particularly where emotions are running high. This ideal, however, gives us an idea of where to seek out any problems we may currently have in our relationships with others, particularly with our children.

- **Feeling Heard**

When people feel heard, even conflict can be resolved more smoothly. When people do not feel heard, communication can quickly deteriorate into defensiveness, shouting and anger. While listening may seem like an easy skill that we do every day with style and flair, it is one of the most difficult skills to do well. Most of us hear things but we do not always really listen to them. Children need to be listened to. This gives them a sense of being important and lets them know that their opinions and ideas matter to you.

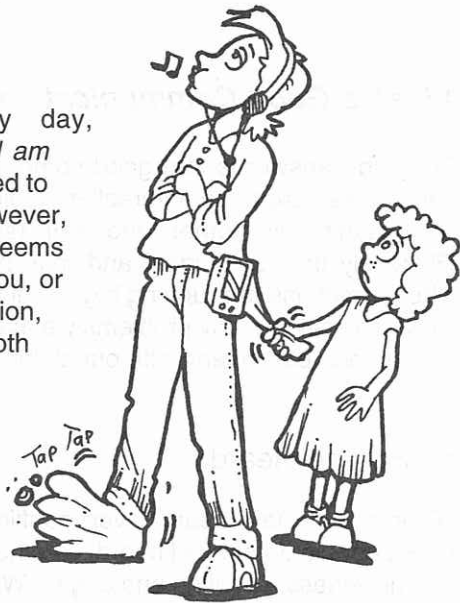
Think about your own experience of interacting with others. How do you feel when someone is not really listening to you? Frustrated, angry, unimportant? This is how children feel as well. You will find that children remarkably resemble adults where communication is concerned.

## • How Do You Know People Are Listening?

Think about ways in which other people might indicate that they are listening to you. A checklist might include:

- *giving you their full attention (not preoccupied with other things)*
- *eye contact*
- *interested body language and posture*
- *interested tone of voice*
- *allowing you to finish your sentence before responding*

The first one on this list is a tall order for parents who may be caught up with housework, preparing meals, feeding babies, helping other children with homework, chasing escaped pets up the street or doing any of the million other things that need to be crammed into a day. You need to use your judgement. Obviously if one of your children comes in and says, as they do every day, 'I have finished my homework and am off to a friend's house', you don't need to provide the full treatment. If, however, something needs time because it seems important either to your child or to you, or it is something that requires negotiation, you need to find a time that suits both of you to talk. Explain why now is not a good time and negotiate a later time to talk. Saying 'later' is probably not as useful as giving a more definite time like, after dinner or during bath time.



Your tone of voice and what you say is also important in negotiating a new time. Imagine you approached another adult with something you were really excited about or thought was really important and they said to you in a short, sharp tone, 'Look, can't you see I'm busy, I'll talk to you later'. How would you feel? Imagine the difference if that same person said to you, 'I can see that this is really important to you and it is important to me too, so let's make a time when we can really have a good talk about it. Is after lunch a good time for you?'.

Can you feel the difference? In that short interaction the person has conveyed to you that you and your information are important, and they have given you a choice about another time. Do not underestimate the importance of giving children choices about simple things like time. It teaches them to negotiate and empowers them.

## • Feeling Valued

Apart from negotiating time and space for you and your children to spend together talking, there are other important ways to ensure that they feel valued in their interactions with you. Think about an interaction you have had with someone where you have come away feeling really good about yourself and what you had to say. What did they do that made you feel that way? A checklist might include:

- *being non-judgmental*
- *asking open questions which encourage you to talk*
- *having a caring tone of voice*
- *not telling you what you should do*
- *not leaping in and fixing the problem for you*
- *not blaming*
- *not being defensive about what you're saying*
- *not shouting or threatening*
- *giving positive feedback about what you've said*

These things are much harder to achieve than those on the previous checklist. Being non-judgmental is particularly difficult when one of your children tells you something that makes your hair stand on end. However, no amount of judging, ranting and raving is going to make the situation better. It may simply make your child regret telling you and will ensure that she/he is more guarded about what is told to you in the future. Instead of spontaneously combusting, you



might consider being honest and saying that you are finding it really difficult to deal with the information you have just been given. Ask for a couple of minutes to think about it, if you need it.

### • Enhanced Relationships With You and Self

Apart from the two areas covered, there are other things you can do to enhance your relationship with your children in any interaction. For a start, check how many times per day you ask your children to do something compared to how often you simply talk with them. You may be surprised. The key word here is *'with'*. There is a big difference between talking *'with'* someone and talking *'at'* them. Talking with is about a mutual sharing of ideas and opinions, rather than about one person being the expert and the other having no wisdom of their own. All children have wisdom and a way of looking at the world that is fresh and new. Many parents have been amazed at the incredibly astute things that come out of their children's mouths. Give yourself the opportunity to be amazed.

Another thing you can do to ensure good communication is to own your feelings. Rather than saying to a child *'You make me so angry, get out of my sight'*, you might consider using an *'I'* statement. For example, *'I am feeling really angry right now and I need time to myself to think about what has happened'*. Taking time to calm down is a good idea and ensures that you will respond rather than react. The first example here also tells children that there is something wrong with them because they have a mighty and awesome power to make you feel bad. It is important that children understand that it is the behaviour that is unacceptable, not them. Unconditional love is extremely important to children.

There are some things that are never helpful to say to children which can damage their relationship with themselves and with you. These include:

- *don't be so stupid*
- *I told you so*
- *don't talk rubbish*
- *because I said so*
- *if you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about*
- *I don't love you / I hate you.*
- *I'll love you more if you*

Lying to children is also rarely useful. If you want them to be honest with you, you are going to need to demonstrate honesty to them.

## **Blocks to Good Communication**

There are some things that conspire against us in our efforts to communicate well with our children and create happy, healthy human beings. These are the blocks to good communication. They include such things as:

- *your own childhood (poor communication in your family)*
- *illness*
- *tiredness*
- *clash of values/morals*
- *feeling that we have to have all the answers*
- *feeling blamed*
- *fear of what other people (known or unknown) will think*

### • **'Aaaagh, my mother's/father's voice just came out of my mouth'**

Your own childhood is particularly important. You may have recognised some of the unhelpful phrases listed previously as having been said by your own parents. Ask yourself whether you are repeating these phrases and whether they were ever helpful to you in the long-term. Most of us repeat our parents' parenting because we have not seen other ways to be parents. There are many different ways to parent and you may consider having a look around at how other people are doing it. If someone else's children appear genuinely happy, healthy, confident and secure find out why. Talk to other parents. There is a vast pool of wisdom and creativity out there besides what came out of your own family if you are willing to tap into it.

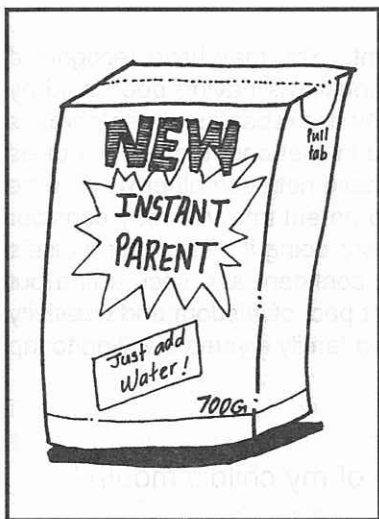
### • **'Aaaagh, my voice just came out of my child's mouth!'**

Sometimes your own words come back to haunt you from the mouth of one of your children and you realise you don't like what you hear. What messages do you want to send to your children and are you getting those messages across? If not, why not? Sometimes, because of our desperation to have all the answers and to be perceived as a *'good'* parent by others (whatever that means!), our words and actions do not always match up. A classic example of this would be where a parent says to a child *'I'll teach you not to hit'*, and then smacks her/him. All that has been

learnt here is that there are times when hitting is acceptable. Is that really the message this child was supposed to get?

Your children will learn more about being an adult themselves from who you are and how you express yourself in the world than they will from anything you say or from any amount of lecturing. Are you happy with who you are? If you are not it will be harder for you to encourage your children to be happy with who they are with any degree of credibility. Do not be afraid to focus on what you need to change about yourself. Admitting that you are not perfect and working on areas of dissatisfaction is a brave move and sets a good example for your children. It shows them that no-one is perfect or has all the answers, that mistakes happen, that change is possible and that they have the power to make change happen if they want to.

- Who Has All the Answers Anyway?



There is one thing all parents need to know. You do not have all the answers. Your kids know you're faking it, and so do you. Nobody has all the answers. Sometimes parents assume that what they think, feel and believe has to be right because they are adults and that what children think, feel and believe must be wrong because they are children and, therefore, immature, but this is rarely the case. What happens when two people differ in opinion is that they have different perspectives, not ones that are more right or more wrong. You can save yourself a lot of frustration if you just recognise that your children's world is different from

yours and seek to understand it. After all, you have been a child and you have some point of reference and experience to draw on. Children have yet to be adults so it is much more difficult for them to put themselves in your place.

Listen to your children's perspective and try to imagine what it feels like to believe that it is true even if you don't see it the same way. When children say 'it's not fair' or 'you don't love me' do not react with glib answers like those listed previously. Instead, try to believe that they really feel the way they say they do, and imagine what it would be like if you felt that way. Ask them questions to find out why they feel that way. Ask them to think about what would need to be different for them not to feel that way. While some of the answers may seem unreasonable to you, it gives you a place to negotiate from and encourages your children to really think about what they want and what they need to do to get it. Teaching children to think for themselves is extremely important and it takes the pressure off you to have all the answers. Acknowledging your children's perspective also establishes you as someone who really listens and cares.

- Guilt, shame, blame and other useless concepts

One of the greatest blocks to good communication is where parents feel that they are to 'blame' for the way one or more of their children behave and that they have done something 'wrong'. This can lead to feeling guilty, ashamed and isolated. Often, rather than accepting that they have a part in the problem, these parents become defensive and angry, blaming the child alone for the communication breakdown. They may seek to prove that there is something innately 'wrong' with the child physically, emotionally, intellectually or mentally to justify their position and their own behaviour so they won't have to feel bad any more. While diagnoses are sometimes made which provide relief for some parents, other parents will need to accept that there is simply a breakdown in their communication somewhere. They are trapped in a cycle



where they and their child go back and forth blaming each other for everything from who is the worst person on the planet to world hunger.

Rather than seeking to blame anybody you need to recognise that communication is something that happens in the space between two people and that there are hurdles in that space to be overcome. Blame is a useless and immobilising concept. Get rid of it! Accepting responsibility for your part in maintaining or breaking down hurdles, and recognising that your own behaviour may need some work, does not mean that you are admitting to being the source of all evil on the planet. It means that you accept that you are the adult in the interaction and change can only begin from your end.

- **Leaping hurdles**

The best way to overcome hurdles in communication is to ask yourself what needs are being expressed. Children, and many adults, are often unable to express their needs with words alone. Children's behaviour is as much a language as the words they use. What need are they trying to express in their interactions with you? Are they seeking love and approval, independence and freedom, a sense of power or comfort from pain? Once you identify what the real need is under any behaviour, you can respond more effectively. You will also need to identify your own needs in your interactions with your children. Are you seeking love and approval, power and control, appreciation or space? Once you identify your needs you might be able to reassess some of the blocks that you are helping to maintain.

## Section 2      Turbulent Times

### *Negotiation*

Negotiation skills are particularly useful where household rules are concerned. There are many times when children will not agree with the rules and regulations you have set down for your household. If you work outside the home you may have experienced having no say in how you do your job even though you are the person doing it. This can be very disempowering. You may also, if you are lucky, have had the experience of being consulted about work practice and participated in renegotiating conditions. Consider how different this feels from the first example. Perhaps, as members of the community of your household, children have the right to work with you to renegotiate some of their rules.

Children of most ages can be taught to negotiate. This does not mean that you are a weak parent who is giving a child the opportunity to manipulate you. It means that you are confident enough to trust in the child's ability to make good choices for themselves. The way that we view our children, either positively or negatively, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Negotiation is particularly important for adolescents who are adults-in-training, requiring independence and guidance at the same time. It does not mean that you throw all the rules out the window or agree to everything they want, but children will be much more likely to follow rules they have helped to create. This again gives them a sense of their own power in a positive and constructive way and helps them to feel heard and valued. These are the ingredients for good self-esteem.

Negotiation requires commitment, time and patience, and while it may seem easier and a lot more expedient to take a more authoritarian approach, it will serve you and your children better in the long-term to make the extra effort now.

## Conflict

### • Conflict With Others

Other than in extreme circumstances or where one of your children has expressly asked you, do not assume it is in your job description to put on your combat boots and go marching off to war for your child. This is robbing your child of the opportunity to come up with strategies for herself/himself. By all means discuss the issue with the child, brainstorm ideas together (no matter how ridiculous the ideas may seem), check out the consequences of these ideas (*"How do you think Robert and his mother will feel if you go over there and flush his head in the toilet?"*). It may even be useful to share your experiences or those of other family members with your child, about a similar experience. Just be careful that you don't come off sounding like you know more than God (a good way to know when to stop is when your child's eyes glaze over). After all, what worked for you may not work for your child. Encourage children to head off with their chosen solution and put it into action. If it does not work, be available to help turn the disappointment into a learning experience rather than a defeat. Work with your children to figure out why their solution did not work the way they wanted it to and whether their expectation was reasonable. Then, armed with this new information, repeat the brainstorming process again and encourage them to try a new idea.



### • Conflict With You

Conflict does not have to get ugly. Arguing backwards and forwards, getting progressively more abusive, name-calling, bringing up things that happened when children were two and reminding them of what a difficult labour you had is simply exhausting for everybody. Nobody feels good and change is rarely achieved. Stop arguing with them and stop defending yourself to them. Use the strategies discussed earlier to really listen to their side, acknowledge it and state your own case, owning up to your feelings and allowing opportunities for negotiation. The bad news here again is that you are the adult and will have to make the first move to resolve conflict in a constructive way.

### • Consequences

When there is conflict and a consequence for inappropriate behaviour is necessary, there are two types of consequences which maybe useful.

#### Logical Consequences

You can use negotiation skills to help put into place logical consequences. This means getting your child to tell you how she/he is going to rectify the problem that has been created rather than telling her/him what to do. The outcome should be a logical consequence rather than a punitive one. For example, if they have spray-painted a wall, perhaps they will need to use their pocket money to buy some paint and re-paint the wall. If they do not get pocket money, they might have to earn some money by mowing a lawn. This is a logical consequence for the behaviour and will work better in the long-term than being hit or grounded. Remember not to come up with the logical answers for your children. Try to get your children to think of these kinds of ideas for themselves.

## Natural Consequences

Sometimes there are natural consequences to inappropriate behaviour. An example would be for not doing homework. Children are eventually going to get into trouble at school. There is not much doubt about that. When they do, use it as an opportunity to communicate. Find out how it feels to get into trouble and whether they have any ideas about what they might do differently next time. Find out also if there is anything you can do which would help them to get their homework done. This gets them thinking and lets them know they have choices and power to change the situation. It also lets them know that you are available for support and not just as the 'homework police'.

Natural consequences can also be applied to everyday conflicts. If you find yourself saying things like 'I've told you a million times to put your dirty clothes in the wash basket', you can again employ natural consequences rather than continuing to repeat yourself. Tell your family that from now on you will only wash those clothes that are put in the basket (remember, it is important that you follow through with what you say, so you need to be prepared to do it). The natural consequence here is that they will not have what they want to wear and will have to wear it dirty or wash it themselves. It is their choice and you don't have to say anything further about it once you have told them about what you will be doing. When they complain, use it as an opportunity to get them to generate ideas about how they are going to rectify the situation. Nagging, harping, lecturing and whining at children has the same effect on them as it does when they do it to us. They switch off. If you just take action they will figure it out for themselves eventually.



## Thought and Choice - Concepts For Life

Many parents, and other adults, lament children's lack of responsibility, yet children are often not encouraged to take responsibility for their actions in a logical, thought-provoking and constructive way. Encouraging children to think about and generate different choices regarding their behaviour and consequences, while guiding them by demonstrating your own willingness to accept responsibility for your behaviour and exercising good choices, teaches children to take responsibility and learn from their experiences without diminishing their self-esteem. Yelling at them, hitting them and/or sending them to their room does not. It makes them angry, resentful and, in some cases, vengeful.

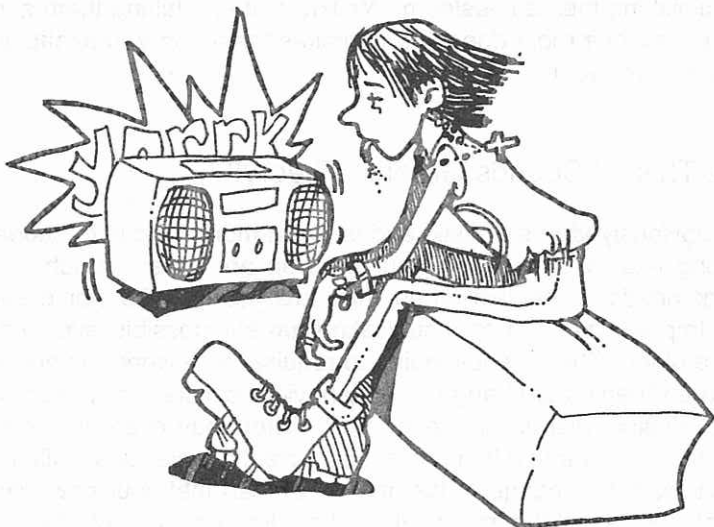
- 'Sure, This All Sounds Great in Theory!'

This is all obviously very simplistic and is much more difficult to suddenly begin putting into practice when your children are older. Much of the groundwork needs to be laid when they are young. Do not despair, however. Improvements in communication are still possible even where children are older. They are just going to require more work on your part. When a parent begins to change their behaviour children may react with surprise, confusion, distrust and even fear. They may even up the ante and escalate behaviour you find particularly objectionable for a while in an attempt to thwart the change. This does not mean that your new way of being is not working. It just means that, like a lot of people, children may be reluctant to accept change. They may also be sceptical about whether the change will last, particularly if you are someone who previously yelled a lot or who has been threatening. In this case you will need to prove that the changes are for real and that you are going to be consistent about them.

- 'Oh That's Right, I'm Only Human!'

Having said how important consistency is, let's not forget that you are human and are likely to make mistakes. Change does not happen in a nice, neat, linear progression. It is often back and forth. Children will also make mistakes and change will not happen immediately for them either. Don't use the changes you make with the expectation that you will get what you want every time. Remember that relationships with children are long-term and you need to be focussed on the long-term goals that you have for

how you want your children to be as adults. Long-term goals should be about how your children feel about themselves. It is most parents' goal that their children grow up to be happy, healthy, confident, productive members of the community. All of the communication skills discussed so far have been offered with healthy, happy, loving, long-term relationships in mind. While other ways may be easier in the short-term, they can sometimes be detrimental to the long-term relationship.



### **Adolescence (Say No More)**

You will need to remember your commitment to a long-term goal particularly in adolescence. Adolescents may actively adopt different value systems to you for a while. Can you accommodate and respect the differences or will it be a constant source of conflict? As a bit of encouragement, most adolescents come back to the core values of the family as they get older. If you think adolescents are so much worse today than they were when you were young, consider this quote: *"Children now love luxury. They have bad manners and contempt for authority. They show disrespect for their elders and love to chatter in place of exercise"*. Sound like your adolescent? This quote comes from Socrates, 500BC!

Not only have adolescents, generally speaking, not changed that much, but it would appear that neither have adult perceptions of adolescents. Sometimes it may seem to you that adolescents are from another planet. They have a different language, bizarre customs and rituals, strange hair and clothes and listen to incomprehensible music at an alarming rate of decibels. Try to remember that you too once lived on their planet and were anxious to be liked and respected because of who you were inside rather than criticised for what you looked like, who your friends were and what music you listened to. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to disapproval and criticism even while they are pretending that they don't care. When you find yourself being critical of your adolescent, ask yourself whether your comment really helped your long-term relationship with them. Ask them about their world but be prepared for the fact that they may not want to share some aspects of it with you. Privacy is extremely important to adolescents and you will need to trust that you have given them a solid grounding from which to negotiate their new world and an open door to communicate with you if dilemmas arise (as they no doubt will).

- **Aladdin's Lamp - Finding the Genie**

Now that you are fully prepared to give up criticising, lecturing and arguing with your children, it is time to appreciate them for who they are.

While it is sometimes difficult, you need to find the positives and opportunities for praise in any situation. OK, so one of your children may have written a note to a friend in class that had words in it that even you didn't understand, but maybe the spelling and grammar was great, or the accompanying picture was anatomically correct and very representative. Think about how you can build on these skills and talents and get your child to utilise them in more positive and constructive ways. Ask her/him to think about it. Each child is unique and there is something special about your child if you look for it. To look for it, you will need to spend fun time with your child just communicating about ordinary things in the same way you would with anyone else whose company you enjoy.

If you use good communication skills every day and appreciate your children for their uniqueness, problems won't seem so big when they do arise. You will be able to communicate, negotiate and resolve conflict much more easily. It's all a matter of balance, of finding comfortable compromises on both sides of consistency, of creativity, of the ability to know yourself and of unconditional love.

## Section 3 F..... is for Feelings

- Feelings are a part of the whole person

Feelings are important, they are a part of the whole person. A person has a spiritual, physical, emotional and psychological dimension.

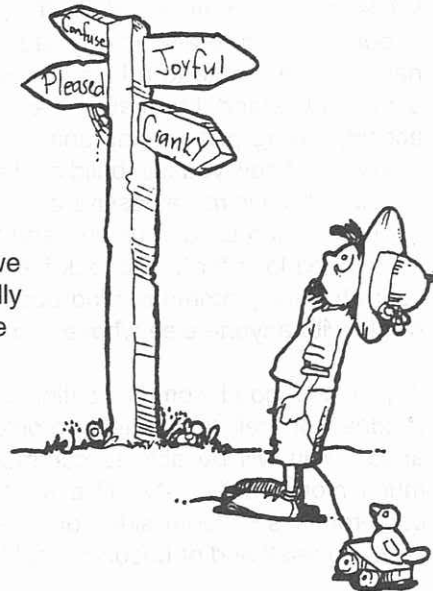
- Feelings are not good or bad

Feelings are feelings, they are neither good nor bad. They are a part of the human experience. They deserve respect and acknowledgment and to be left free of judgment. It is important that when a child talks of a feeling they are not hurried forward and encouraged to replace that feeling with a more acceptable one. If the children say they feel sad because their pet died, it will be more helpful to emotional well-being to explore that feeling with them, than to cajole or suggest that they 'cheer up' and not think about it. This suggests that some feelings are more appropriate and valuable than others.

- Feelings are Signposts

Feelings are like signposts to a person's internal world of emotions.

Our external world is highly visible. If we cut ourselves, we can see how badly and where the cut is; we can see if we are about to run into a brick wall; we smell smoke to warn us of danger and can search out shade if the sun is hot. In a multitude of ways, we watch our world and make decisions to keep ourselves safe and well.



The internal world of feelings is less tangible, harder to read, and it is no less real and impactful on a person's well-being than that of their external world. We need these emotional signposts because they help us identify what is happening on the 'inside' and help us make decisions to enhance our well being.

- Allowing Time for Feelings

It is significant that we allow children time to experience their feelings.



When children are happy and excited, we do not rush in to protect them from these feelings. Equally important is our willingness to allow children to experience feelings that may be sad or uncomfortable, in the belief that they can experience and survive feelings that cover the whole range of human emotion.

In our anxiety to protect children from uncomfortable and anxious feelings, we sometimes rush in to 'make it better'. When a child is feeling unhappy, angry, anxious or sad, rather than have someone 'fix it up' that child often just wants someone to listen and acknowledge what is being felt. If you are not sure what's required of you, ask the person and pay attention to the response.

- How Many Feelings are Real?

If we rush to protect children from unhappy or uncomfortable feelings, a hidden message is passed on. The message implies that life is always meant to be happy and anything other than this is not normal. This creates an unreal expectation that only comfortable feelings are okay. The range of feelings that people experience throughout their life is rich and diverse. Life is a dynamic process, one of constant change, so too with feelings.

- More Than One Feeling at a Time

People have the capacity to experience several conflicting emotions at the same time. This is normal and an indicator of the complexity of a person's emotional life. A person can be excited and apprehensive about a new venture and also feel sad at what is being left behind. Rather than this being seen as an indicator of confusion and inconsistency, it is a reassurance that people have the capacity to feel many things at the same time and for that to be okay.

- Feelings are not Gender Specific

Feelings are not gender specific. Boys can feel sad and want to cry, girls can feel angry and want to yell. Boys can feel tender and care for someone else's pain, girls can feel powerful and want to change the world. For many years society gave out messages that boys were not into feelings, while girls were into nothing else. This made females responsible for the emotional well-being of the species and implied that males were the 'doers' and had little time or capacity to feel. This has served neither gender well. All people *feel* and deserve to have this acknowledged by others and to accept it about themselves. It also invites people to be responsible for their own feelings and to take care of their emotional well-being. One of the tasks of parents is to encourage and model this skill to their children.



- Feelings Have No Age Limit

The capacity to experience a range of emotions is not restricted to certain age brackets. However the ability to express these feelings will differ with a child's development. It is worth remembering that the depth and intensity of feelings is not always reflected by the person's ability to name and express what is happening.

- Safety and Acceptance

To express openly what one is feeling, requires a sense that the disclosure will be safe and the person will be accepted. This requires that parents check their own responses about what is happening in the discussion, and to be aware how that may be impacting on the children's need for safety and acceptance.

- So What?

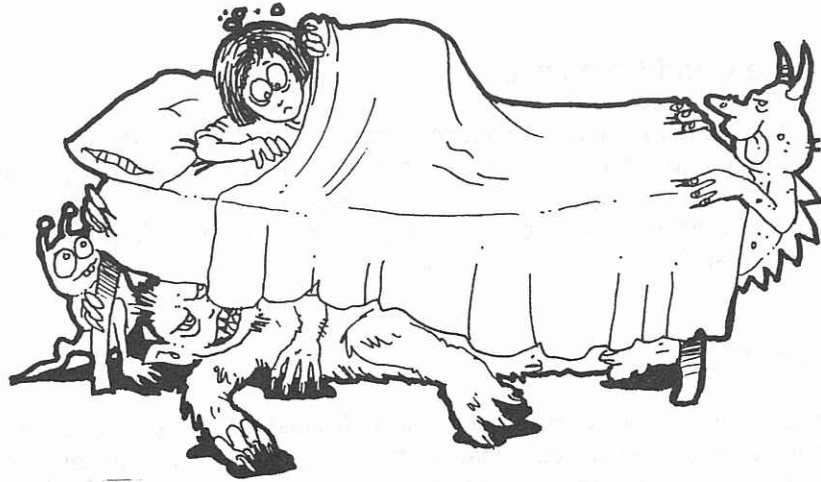
If parents are willing to be present for their children, while they learn to identify, explore and discuss what is happening in their internal world, the children in turn can learn to accept their feelings and make deliberate and active choices about what to do next. Experiencing feelings and then acting on those feelings are two different things.

If children are not helped to explore their feelings and to learn how to name those feelings, it is like travelling through their internal world with a blindfold on. How do people make a decision about what they need to do next if they don't know what they are feeling?

A child reading a scary book before going to bed, finds that in the dark some of the characters loom larger than life causing the child anxiety and perhaps tears. With time, patience and practise, parents can help the child identify the feeling of fear, where it came from and what the child needs now to feel safe.

A student doing Year 12 is starting to feel swamped, angry and worried about the results and prospects for the future. Unless the student has some skill and a sense of safety about naming these anxieties, pressure can continue to build and help and support remain a long way off.

Recognising and naming feelings is a skill that parents can help their children develop. This involves the parent in a lifetime of modelling these behaviours, of listening and accepting what is going on in the internal world



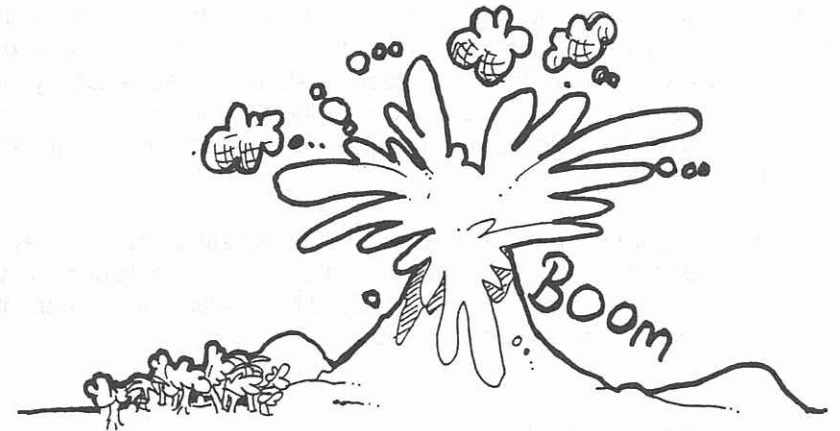
of their children, and of valuing feelings as real and important. When a person can name and discuss these feelings, the intensity is reduced and the person can move on to responding to choices for their health and well-being. Feelings that are left unacknowledged and disowned will increase in intensity as a person's emotional state clamours for recognition. A person will start to feel driven by feelings that have gone underground and are swirling around like a whirlpool. Seemingly unrelated incidents will cause a knee-jerk reaction, and the person will become reactive to situations rather than responsive. This will leave the person feeling confused and out of control, while those around will distance themselves from the charged and tense atmosphere.

## • Benefits

Some of the benefits of expressing one's feelings include:

- *reduction of intensity of strong emotions*
- *acknowledgment to self of the right to have feelings*
- *helps self to be responsive rather than reactive*
- *helps others to know and support a person's needs*
- *moves the self onto ownership of feelings and subsequent behaviours*
- *promotes emotional health and well-being*

## Anger



In a discussion of feelings you may wonder why anger has been singled out and been given a section of its own.

Does this mean anger is more important than other feelings? Is anger stronger and more powerful than other feelings? Is the prominence given to this feeling a comment about the feeling itself or the capacity it has to arouse such a variety of reactions in the people who come in contact with it?

- What is Anger?

Anger is a feeling that registers the knowledge that something is not okay. This can be experienced as helpless anger at how the environment is being destroyed, anger at an internal conflict of personal values versus group values, anger at being locked into something that we need to remove ourselves from, ie a relationship, or anger at ourselves for having felt fear or having made a mistake.

- Anger, Taboo or Terrific?

Anger has often been seen as an unacceptable feeling by society. There are many reasons for this discomfort. When a person is angry there is always the risk that the feeling may get out of control and result in behaviours that are destructive, dangerous, frightening and embarrassing. However, society gives us mixed messages about the acceptability of anger. It has given a certain amount of credibility to the violent expression of anger, for example, violence in football matches, video and computer games and film.

Expression of anger may remind people of conflictual situations they have been in previously and which they experienced as uncomfortable or anxiety producing. Parents can feel they will be judged by others as inadequate if their children openly express anger in public.

- How is Anger Helpful?

Whatever the cause, anger is a feeling that can help us recognise what needs changing and helps provide the energy to bring that change about. As such it is worth taking notice of, worth the effort of interpreting and worth respecting as a signpost inviting us to be courageous and address the issue at hand.

When we take the time and give ourselves permission to feel angry, we have already started a journey of discovery. Anger can help us be aware of what issues we are passionate about. Anger can heighten our awareness of personal danger and act as an agent of safety. Anger can act as a catalyst and help us move forward when we've been struck.

Anger acknowledged, respected and appropriately expressed can be a valuable aspect of our emotional health.

Parents can give children the opportunity and the skills to live with anger as a positive force in their lives. If a parent is able to acknowledge that a child is angry without seeing this as a reflection on self, it gives the angry child a space to express and explore what is happening. This in turn can lead to a reduction of intensity, identification of the cause and the exploration of choices for change and subsequent behaviours.

- When is Anger Not Helpful?

Anger is not helpful when it is acted out on other people. Anger is not helpful when it is expressed as physical, verbal or emotional abuse. Anger is not helpful when a person is driven by the feeling, is reactive instead of responsive and responsible. Anger is not helpful when it is used inappropriately to resolve problems ie physical attack, blaming, intimidation, withdrawal.

- Unacknowledged Anger

While inappropriately expressed anger can be destructive or frightening, unacknowledged anger has the potential for massive emotional damage.

Suppressed anger can be experienced at many levels. A slow deep anger not expressed, can be present as tension and stress. Buried anger, which was meant to be a signal or alarm for emotional stress, if not given the light of day, requires a powerful amount of energy to keep it buried. Substance abuse can be an agent in narcotising this pain. This pain may refuse to stay buried and will sneak out seeking release often in self destructive, self mutilating behaviours. Rather than judging these behaviours and the person as pathological, it would be more helpful to create an environment where this deep rage and hurt could be addressed safely.

## Conclusion

Parents and children alike deserve a safe place to feel their feelings. A kind and respectful environment which acknowledges the value of feelings will promote the development of balanced emotional well-being.



## Section 4 Re-Learning How to Play

One of the great costs of *'becoming an adult'* is forgetting how to play.

If you take the time to watch young children play, you can clearly see how they learn so much through their ability to be uninhibited and have fun. They are constantly learning how to communicate, how to resolve conflict, how to problem solve and the whole time they are chattering away to each other developing their relationships. All of this learning is taking place whilst these youngsters are having fun.

Once we move through childhood and take on adult responsibilities, we seem to let go of the joy of play - the willingness to be *'silly'* and revel in it!

In this section we will look at the benefits of playing to the parent/child relationship.

- Remember When.....Recollecting Childhood

What games did you love playing when you were a child? Remember those ones you loved the most - the ones you just didn't want to finish even when Mum or Dad had called you for dinner 3 or 4 times. These games change with each generation - where we may have been almost **addicted** to skipping ropes or hopscotch, for our children it may be roller-blading or computer games. Regardless of the game the joy remains the same. Have you tried playing the games your children play? Have you asked them to teach you? Children need to know that you think they are competent and worthwhile. Asking them to teach you their games is a good way to foster these feelings of self-worth and the bonus for you is you get to have fun as well as spending time with your children.

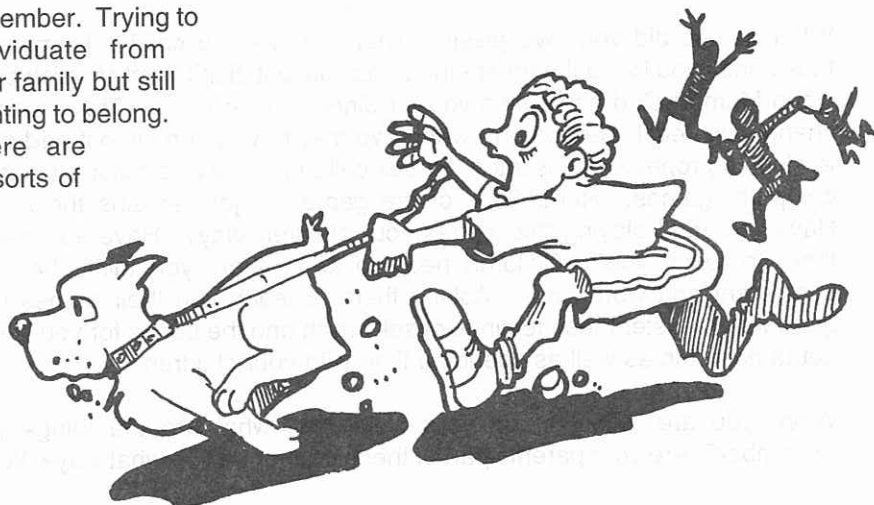
When you are reflecting on your childhood, what are the things you remember? Are your parents part of these memories? In what way? What

would you like your kids to remember about their childhood and about you? These are interesting questions to ask yourself and may help to shape the way you relate to your children.

Life in the 1990's is hectic and we have no reason to think the new millennium will be any different.

After a long day working inside or outside the home, children can seem very demanding. Often we do not prepare ourselves for coming home to our children or for them coming home to us. If we try thinking about our children whilst we or they are on the way home, this helps prepare us. This time is the perfect time to play with your children. It gives both you and your children something special to look forward to. If you are feeling particularly tired, negotiate some quieter activity. Children love stories - especially stories about what you did when you were a child. Relating these stories to your children opens some great opportunities for communication. When you are recalling stories, don't be selective - don't try to paint a rosy picture. This sets up some very high expectations for you as a parent and for your children to live up to. If your life was so wonderful all the time, why isn't theirs? Children get enough propaganda about families from television.

Tell about some of the problems you experienced, some of the 'mistakes' you made. You can then ask them what would they do in the same situation - how would they respond. This is also a very valuable thing to do with your adolescents. That turbulent time that we all remember. Trying to individuate from your family but still wanting to belong. There are all sorts of



sticky situation that adolescents find themselves in and these are common across generations. Talk about what it was like for you and ask your children what they think you could have done differently. This can all be done in a sense of fun and playing with them but at the same time you are helping them develop their problem solving skills and their ability to think critically.

It can be more difficult to do these things with adolescents than with younger ones, but persevere. Parents of teenagers often spend a lot of time driving them to and from places. These are good opportunities to learn about what your adolescent likes and what you have in common. It doesn't matter what age your children are, they still need your attention.

### • Fun and Joy

Be surprising! A great way to have fun with your family is to do unexpected things occasionally. If you have had a tense or torrid evening, try being silly at breakfast - serve ice cream or pizza or mashed potato coloured blue for breakfast. This will relieve the tension and start the day with a smile.

Are the children hanging around looking bored? Start a water fight or a pillow fight; paint your face, then theirs; race outside and play in the rain; try finger painting with half set jelly; have a jelly food fight in the back yard; come to dinner with your clothes inside out. Go ahead - make a fool of yourself (but not in public with an easily embarrassed child or adolescent).

If there are undone chores, try using a rhyming note or cartoon as a reminder.

*Remember to HAVE FUN - laughing together is a great way to strengthen family bonds as long as the humour doesn't harm or belittle anyone.*

### • Making Time

'Make time for your kids' is almost a cliché. As parents we read, hear, are told that this is what we need to be doing for and with our children. This is, however, not often followed up with ways to do this. For many adults finding time in a busy, pressured life is quite difficult. So let us prioritise our time. We all have work responsibilities, be they inside or outside the home or both, and these take up the bulk of our time and often leave us feeling

exhausted. So where do we find time to devote to our children? The first suggestion is - start small. If you have an established pattern that you have fallen into then it can be difficult to change your behaviour and the consequent expectations of your children, so small steps are the most achievable.



Are you a morning or an evening person? Do you exercise regularly - walk or jog? Could you ask your family to do this with you? This would give you a chance to share your time with them and listen to them talk.

If you are an early morning riser, could you spend a half hour or more doing something with your children? Could you make breakfast together? The kitchen has always been a great family gathering place - use it! Ask about the day ahead - what are their plans, tell them about yours. This gives them a glimpse of your world and also lets them know that you are interested in theirs.

If you are an evening person, this is where to focus. How about a walk around the block? Sitting in the yard looking at the stars? Discussing how everyone has spent their day whilst having dinner? Cooking dinner/washing up together? All good opportunities.

If you have more than one child, try and spend special time with individuals when you can. With older children you could have them meet you for lunch during their school holidays. If you work outside the home, could they meet you where you work and have a tour of your workplace?

If your children are involved with school activities that are open to parents, it is important that you attend these whenever possible. This demonstrates to them that they are important and that you are proud of and interested in what they do.

Talk with your children about what they want and what you want and/or can do. Explain your time restrictions to them and ask them how they think you can both have your needs met. Children can be amazingly creative and supportive when resolving dilemmas, particularly when they know that you genuinely want their help.

Critically examine your routine and see if there are some things that can occasionally be overlooked. The world won't end if the car isn't washed, the grass isn't mown, the floors aren't vacuumed, the furniture isn't dusted **TODAY**. If it is imperative that these things are done, negotiate with your children. *'We can go to the beach but I have to mow the grass first. Can you help me so we get it done faster?'* Engage with your family as to how you can spend more time with them - let them be part of solving the problem.



## Section 5 Time Out - Looking After You

All the discussion and suggestions that have been made sound like a lot of work and if these are new things that you want to try with your children, they may be difficult at first - any new behaviour takes energy, resilience and practice - but the enhanced relationship between you and your children will be worth it. However it is also important for parents to care for themselves. Give yourself some of the love and nurturing that you give your family. If we as parents don't care for ourselves, both physically and emotionally, then we are unable to do this for anyone else.

- 'What About Me?'

In the same way that you negotiate other issues with your family, you also need to negotiate some time for you. You don't need **permission** to care for yourself, but if you explain to your family why you need this time, you can then negotiate how you can be supported in meeting your needs.

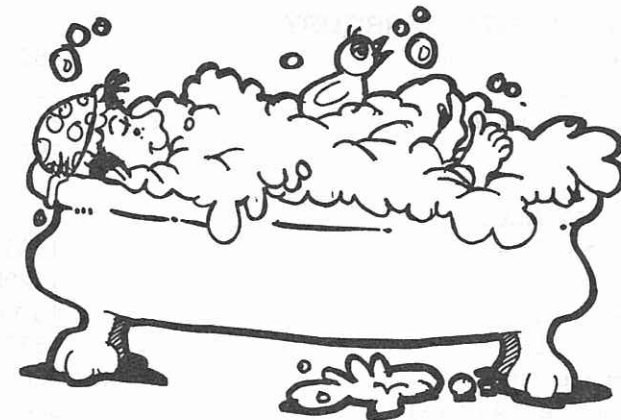
You may have had a particularly harrowing week and all you want to do is spend Sunday lying around doing nothing. This is somewhat of a luxury for a parent. But if you do generally spend time talking and playing with your children, then you probably have the kind of relationship with them where you can explain what has happened during the week, how you are feeling, what you want to do and how they can help. This is modelling very responsible behaviour to your children. If they see you caring for yourself in this way then they will also learn to do this. You need to be aware that children are under a lot of pressure as well, particularly at secondary school. If they occasionally are too tired to get up in the morning and you know they have had a really busy week, then perhaps you can support them in caring for themselves and staying in bed.

The following are some simple things that we can do for ourselves when we are feeling overwhelmed:

- *take a long, scented bath*
- *go out for a coffee*
- *go for a walk*
- *go to a movie*
- *have a massage*
- *browse your local library*
- *wander the local park or gardens*
- *ring a friend just for a chat*
- *play your favourite music*
- *rent your favourite video*
- *stay in bed all day*
- *have breakfast in bed*
- *take a drive to your favourite spot*
- *eat chocolate for breakfast*
- *draw/paint/write - create*
- *do some gardening*

There are many, many more simple things you can add. Make a list and keep it on the fridge for all the family to use and add to.

**Remember that you can't always be available for everyone. Take time to parent yourself so you can better parent your children.**



# Section 6 Resources

This publication, *Relationships*, is the fifth title in a Parent's Guide Series which has been developed by The Scout Association of Australia as an initiative to support young people and their families. The Relationships book has been produced as a joint project by The Scout Association of Australia and Kids Help Line.

## Kids Help Line

Kids Help Line [KHL] is a national telephone counselling service for young people aged between 5 and 18 years, KHL receives over 10,000 calls per week almost 20% are related to issues between the young person and their family

## The Scout Association Internet Site

The Child Safety Network of Australia Internet site aims to provide families, young people, teachers and professionals with information which prevents child abuse and neglect. The site draws together community organisations concerned with the safety of young people and looks at ways of preventing all forms of abuse.

To contact the site on Child Safety Network - [www.childsafe.net.au](http://www.childsafe.net.au)

## RESOURCES

### AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Lifeline (24 hours)	13 1114
Parent Support Service	247 0519
Youthline	257 2333

### NEW SOUTH WALES

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Parentline	132055
Lifeline ( 24 hours )	13 1114
Youthline (24 hours)	9633 3666
Message Home Line	9267 8171
Salvo Youth Line (24 hours)	9360 3000

### NORTHERN TERRITORY

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Lifeline ( 24 hours )	81 9227
Salvo Youth Line (Free Call)	008 020 512

### QUEENSLAND

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Parentline	1300301 300
Lifeline (24 hours)	13 1114
Salvo Care Line	3221 1233
Youth Hot Line	3260 7713

### SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Parent Help Line	8303 1555
CountryAreas (FreeCall)	1800 188 082
Lifeline ( 24 hours )	13 1114

### TASMANIA

Kids Help Line (Free Call)	1800 551 800
Lifeline ( 24 hours )	13 1114
Lifeline Family Counselling	28 0313
Salvo Youth Line ( Free Call)	008 251 008

### VICTORIA

Kids Help Line ( Free call)	1800 551 800
Parents Anonymous	9654 4054
Country	1800 134 008
Lifeline ( 24 Hours )	13 1114
Message Home ( 24 hours)	9650 9129

### WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Kids Help Line (Free Call )	1800 551 800
Family Help Line	221 2000
Country	1800 643000
Parent Information & Referral Service	272 1444
Lifeline ( 24 hours )	13 1114
Salvo Care Line ( 24 hours)	227 8655
Message Home ( Free Call)	1800 808 433