

## Week 1: Behaviour Expectations - SAMPLE



Welcome to this free sample from my course **Sharing Control: A Course on Discipline Across the Ages**. This course is designed for families who are interested in learning about how to effectively discipline - or teach - our children without punishment. Many of the gentle methods don't work for many families because they are based on utilizing skills children don't have and thus it's a recipe for failure. Not in this course. I hope you enjoy this free sample.

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Welcome to Week 1 of Sharing Control: Discipline Across the Ages where we will focus on Expectations for Behaviour. I'm going to start with a pretty big proclamation here and it's one I hope you'll learn is almost always true (there are always exceptions) when it comes to our children's behaviour:

*The root of problems with our children stem from a mismatch in our expectations and what they are capable of.*

If it was easy to fully grasp this and know how to use it to implement discipline and boundaries and expectations, then I could end this course right here, but sadly there is a need to unpack this more and really get to where we need to be to have a healthy, happy, and generally harmonious relationship with our kids, no matter their age. But please do keep this in mind throughout the next month as we work to see how various factors impact our expectations, their capacities, and then our relationship with them.

This week, we will start with a fuller look at expectations for behaviour based on our children's development including what we can expect in certain common domains, what situational factors influence these behaviours, and of course a bit about what is going on with those mystery "well-behaved" children. We end with an examination of the common problems and how we may set expectations across development.

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### Section 1: Your Child's Development

Obviously it should go without saying that depending on your child's age, the expectations you have will vary. However, in our culture, much of what we expect from kids is actually well beyond what they are capable of and this leads to some very difficult times where parents struggle to "control" their child's behaviour and if this doesn't work, the type of control can end up escalating or we see parents giving up and feeling like failures. So the first question is where is your child from a developmental perspective?

### Section 1a: Neurological Development

Neurological development is what will often dictate other forms of development. Most of us don't realize how the brain develops over time and although this is a topic for an entire university course (or degree), we will briefly summarize what is relevant for you, as parents, here.

#### *Building and Pruning.*

Most people think of brain development as simply a building of synapses and connections, but it isn't quite so simple. Development actually refers to both the building of synapses and connections, but also the *pruning* of synapses and connections. During the first three years of life, a child's brain is making tons of connections based on the environment he or she is in. So, for example, the more you respond to your child when distressed, the stronger the connection becomes between you and a sense of safety or security. At 3 years, a child's brain has approximately 1000 trillion connections. Seriously. Now, at 3, although the brain continues to form connections, it is now in a "pruning" stage as well where it starts to get rid of all those connections that aren't very strong. This means that if we've only experienced something once or twice, that event is likely to be pruned away and not have a long-term impact on the person we will become. So much pruning happens that by the time we reach adolescence that estimates of the number of connections is down to 500 trillion, but some think even lower.

What does this mean? The main take-home message is as follows: Experience matters. How you set up the strength of these connections is wholly dependent on how regularly you do certain things. The more you love your child, the more you connect physically with them, the more you comfort them, the more their brain is built upon those connections. The more you punish, yell, get angry, or ignore them, the more their brain is built upon those connections. And of course, how we see the world as adults is shaped by the connections we have. Now, mistakes happen for all of us and in the vast majority of cases, they will not have a long-term impact because of this issue of pruning.

One key point: The brain does continue to learn so even when we make mistakes, we can take advantage of the fact that we are able to change these connections (something called "neuroplasticity"), but it can take much longer and more effort than doing it in the first three years.

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### *Order of Development.*

The other area that is highly relevant is the order in which the brain develops. You see, the brain is not just one unitary organ, but rather it is made up of various parts that develop at different rates. In fact, the brain develops much like it has developed on an evolutionary scale so we can kind of see the neurological development of babies to adults as the evolutionary model for how us humans got the brains we did. Now, the following is very basic and focused on the parts of the brain, not the differential types of development within each area, which also has implications for behaviours, but I believe this level of understanding is enough to get us forward-moving in talking about discipline.

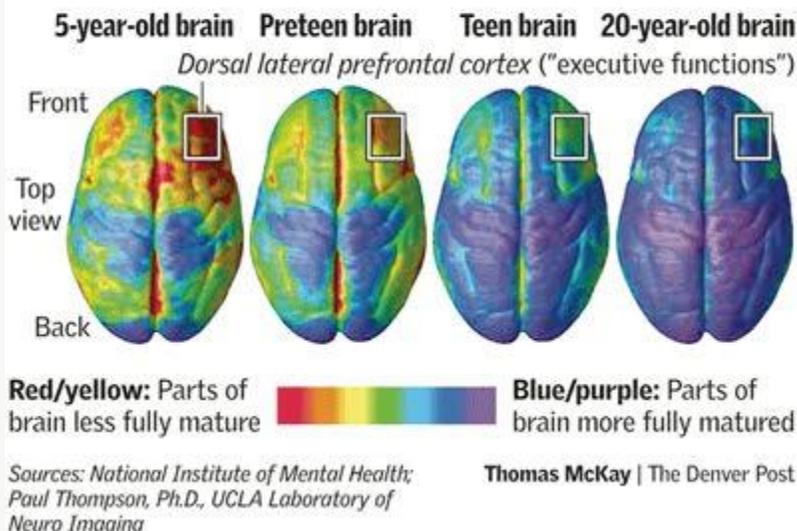
The four main parts of the brain are (in order of most basic to most complex): the brain stem, the cerebellum, the limbic system, and the cerebral cortex. The brain stem is the most basic part of the brain and is responsible for our most basic functions, like breathing, heart rate, etc. When there is damage, it is often incompatible with life. This part of the brain is predominantly developed at birth. The cerebellum is next and is responsible for reflexive movements like eye blinking and the various reflexes we see at birth, so again, the cerebellum is well-developed at birth.

Then comes the limbic system and it is more developed than the cerebral cortex at birth, but far less so than the brain stem and cerebellum and has a lot of maturation to do over many years. The limbic system is responsible for our emotional processing, some behaviours, long-term memory, and motivation, but it is predominantly known for our emotional life and development of memories, both implicit and explicit. Starting at birth, children experience emotions and as the brain builds connections they will form implicit memories of these emotional events, even if they cannot later access them or speak about them due to their lack of language at the time of consolidation. As the limbic system develops, it allow for emotions to help motivate us and drive behaviours, and helps us form longer-term, explicit memories.

The last area to develop is the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for our more cognitive processes, including language, abstract thought, inhibition, and more. We see very small developments take place early (think language), but this is the part of the brain that is highly immature at birth and even by age 5, it has a long, long way to go, as you can see in the image below from Dr. Thompson at UCLA:

### Judgment last to develop

The area of the brain that controls "executive functions" — including weighing long-term consequences and controlling impulses — is among the last to fully mature. Brain development from childhood to adulthood:



Notably, the developmental trajectory of the prefrontal cortex is actually a bit in debate. While some have thought there is general immaturity until our mid-20s (which would explain a lot of adolescent behaviour as they are often what we deem to be impulsive and reckless), others suggest that the evidence does not support this as many studies find adolescents actually do know the risks, but choose to make them anyway. Instead, what is immature are *systems* related to *processing* information, particularly as it pertains to risks and rewards, and it is these areas that are developing between adolescence and early adulthood.

It thus shouldn't be surprising that after the first three years of development, adolescence is the next period of rapid neurological development. This means that while the neurological development of our youngest children is highly susceptible to the effects of their environment, so too is our teens; the key difference is that our teens often have a greater capacity to discuss things *if we have the relationship with them that allows them to see us as a safe person to go to*. If we view the changes in adolescence as being related to information processing, we have to realize that how they perceive the world around them, and what experiences they *expect*, will be highly relevant to their behaviour and how they respond to us as adults which leaves us with a lot to do in terms of making those perceptions and expectations positive.

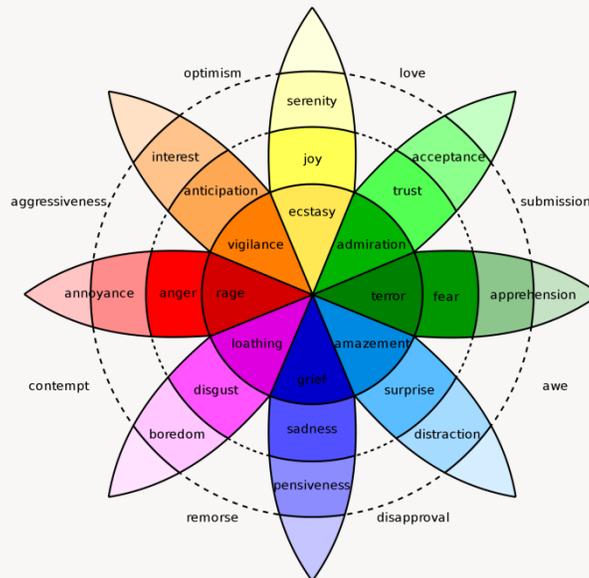
What does this mean? I think there are three main takeaways from this section:

1. Your child is capable of experiencing and having deep memories of events that they may not consciously recollect or discuss later. It does not mean these events don't impact the way they develop and how they interact with the world.
2. Inhibition – the ability to stop something – is incredibly hard for kids. At the root of most discipline issues is us asking kids to stop things and watching them fail.

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3. The teenage years are also especially important for neurological development and the likelihood that we can help during that time will be partially dependent upon how we respond to our children when they are younger and being aware of the unique situation they are in from a processing perspective.

### Section 1b: Social and Emotional Development



The Emotion Wheel  
Copyright: Robert Plutchik

We could really talk about the development of social and emotional skills separately, but because our emotional lives impact our social lives and vice versa in ways that we don't always see with cognitive skills, we tend to lump them together. Our emotions matter so much because they impact how we behave towards and with others and of course our ability to engage appropriately with others has a huge impact on our emotions. This means we have to examine the development of understanding emotions, emotion regulation, and social skills.

#### *Understanding Emotions*

In terms of development, our *understanding* of emotions is actually far more advanced than most of our other systems. In studies looking at our ability to identify other people's emotions based on visual cues or context or even non-linguistic vocalizations, children do astonishingly well; however there is some variability and some nuances that continue to develop through young adulthood. Specifically, our understanding of happiness, fear, surprise, and disgust has been found to increase with age, but our understanding of sadness and anger seems to peak by about age 6 (yes, 6). From an evolutionary perspective, sadness and anger may be thought to be the most important emotions because they highlight social information about how to respond to others (think empathy or asking forgiveness) (one would assume fear should also be there from an evolutionary perspective, but in reality it is one of the harder emotions to identify for children). Sadness and anger are central to group cohesion and this may be the reason for their prominence, and the fact that fear is not as prominent but can have a key role in safety, should tell us how important our social lives are to our evolution. So in terms of

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emotion understanding, children's abilities are good – even for those emotions that are still developing, children are doing quite well at younger ages.

This means that our children are capable of reading faces quite young – an important skill in social groups – and their early, automatic responses to others' emotions set the stage for later emotional skill development. That is, early reactions to sadness can include one's own experience of sadness (the first stage of empathy is called 'emotion contagion' because infants seem to catch the sadness from others) and early reactions to anger include sadness to elicit empathy (and are the first stages of restitution). Thus understanding emotions lays the framework for the development of appropriate social skills.

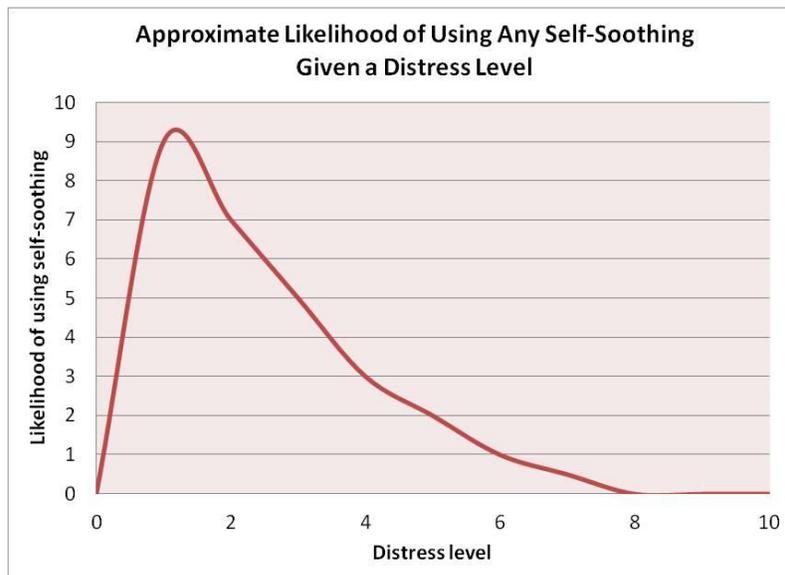
### *Emotion Regulation*

For the purposes of discipline, the more important factor is the issue of how our children handle these emotions, a process called *emotion regulation*. The development of emotion regulation is a wonderful way to better understand how important social skills and experiences are to the developing affective system. The first stage of emotion regulation is really no regulation at all; our infants are unable to regulate and even their cries for us are not based on an active attempt to seek help, it's just what they do. After this stage comes co-regulation and this is a crucial part to emotion regulation and one that is often overlooked in mainstream parenting discussions. Co-regulation refers to the active attempt of the child to seek comfort from a caregiver; this is your child crying for you specifically, coming to you for cuddles when upset, and so on. The infant or child now knows that you have the capacity to calm their system so they are seeking that input as they still lack the capacity to do this on their own. After this stage comes attempts at actual self-soothing, or actions that help a child calm their own system on their own. This is something that is an ongoing process for years and years and years to come. In fact, it's something most of us adults continue to work on as well.

It's important that I stress that this process isn't wholly linear, but rather interacts with the *degree* of stress a given situation causes a child. That is, for minor stressors that cause the child some upset but not a lot, they will be able to engage in self-soothing much earlier than for events that cause greater stress. This is why you can see an infant place his hands in his mouth and seem to have some calming effect from it, but still require a lot of parental input and assistance in most other situations.

*I cannot stress enough how important it is to realize that our children's capacity for self-soothing is limited by how they experience the event.* The more stressful it is, the harder it is to self-soothe. This means comparing children or even the same child between situations will be moot. (This also has implications for the orchid child who is known to have heightened responses to stress.) Often when presented with a child who struggles emotionally, we are not looking at a child *without skills*, but a child who experiences negative events much more deeply than others. And thus that experience of co-regulation is crucial. I have used the following image before (created by me, nothing scientific, just an example) to help illustrate this:

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The other factor that is important here in setting emotion regulation expectations is *who* causes the distress. This is a factor that has been discussed by neuroscientists and studied in younger children. In short, it seems that distress caused by people we trust and love – and especially those who we would turn to for co-regulation – is far more difficult to self-soothe from than distress caused by others. When people we rely on cause us stress, we find it *far more stressful* and thus struggle to respond with our maximum skills. I think here of parents who tell a crying child to be quiet or just expect them to silence themselves as actually adding fuel to the fire instead of working with the child’s emotional capacity to help calm the system.

When we think about these skills, there is not just the development of skills that relate to self-soothing and our ability to remember to use them and use them, but also how we experience and perceive events, and finally who we see as causing our harm. These nuances makes it very difficult to set reasonable expectations based on age alone and why some older children can seem so immature when it comes to emotion regulation. As a general rule, the older one is, the more we can expect some emotion regulation and coping skills; however, this will vary based on some of the following variables:

- The degree of co-regulation that has occurred up to this point that has helped the system develop
- Individual differences in stress reactivity (as mentioned, high-needs kids often respond stronger to situations and thus experience greater stress)
- Who caused us harm
- Who is there to support us if we need it (yes, kids often try self-regulation on their own, but do better if someone is there as a back-up, like a safety net)
- Self-awareness of emotions
- Cognitive limitations, like low working memory (as this can cause us to be more likely to get overwhelmed)
- Other factors that would impact our ability to cope such as being hungry, tired, left out, etc.

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### *In Brief: The Role of the Vagus Nerve*

I briefly want to mention the vagus nerve because it is central to our coping skills. The vagus nerve runs throughout our body and is central to our response to stress; it can cause us to go into the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response or it can calm us entirely. It develops early in infancy and certain things have been linked to its optimal development; specifically, things like breastfeeding, human contact and cuddles, massage, and parent-child positive interactions. Notably all elements of responsive parenting.

Now, sometimes something like a tongue-tie can actually negatively affect the development because the tongue on the top of the mouth is one way we activate and develop the system. If your child has had anything that may have impeded early vagal development (e.g., ties, NICU for extended periods, a parent with post-partum depression, and so on), then you may have a child that is just a bit behind in terms of emotion regulation development. It's not all over though and you just may have to be more patient in terms of building and using these skills.

### *Social Skills*

The final area to discuss in terms of social and emotional development is the role of social skills. Much of our interactions with our children depend upon us understanding each other – what we want, how we feel – and these require certain skills that aren't always available. Perhaps the most important of these skills is Theory of Mind, which is a fancy way of saying Perspective Taking or our ability to know what other people are thinking and feeling. If we think about it, obviously our ability to engage meaningfully with others depends upon our ability to understand their needs and behaviours; if we can't do that, we may behave inappropriately.

Theory of mind develops over the first five years, but is something that we can always struggle with, even as adults. Without going into too much detail (I wrote a dissertation on this after all), children start to show reliable early signs of theory of mind around 18 months when they identify that others have preferences different to them. They can start to offer people things they want, not what the child wants (this is the classic broccoli-cracker experiment which you can look up if interested). Around age 3, children start to be able to identify false beliefs in the context of jokes. They know they can trick people, and some research suggests they may understand the idea of a false belief, but seem unable to respond behaviourally as if they do. By age 5, most children are good at identifying when people have false beliefs and can work with that information in making predictions about other people's behaviours.

Of course, there are things that inhibit the use of these skills and we can see deficits in theory of mind in adults when we are taxed. This is because our brains seem to be hardwired to think first and foremost of our experiences as our anchor for other people's minds and then we modify accordingly. Depending on how taxed we are at the moment, how well we know the other person, and how strong our experience has been in this regard, we are more or less good at making these predictions.

One thing worth talking about here is called the 'Curse of Knowledge' and I think it's something parents have in abundance, especially when dealing with our older children. The curse of knowledge refers to the fact that if we know something, we are more likely to assume more people know it than actually do. As parents, when we think about our expectations for our older children and teenagers, we can often fall into this trap. We know the

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perils of too much TV and so we behave as if they must know and appreciate them as well, but they don't. We aren't as bad with our younger kids because they *seem so different* that we better appreciate those differences, but as our kids get older, we are more likely to see them "like us" and assume they have the same information. This leads to erroneous expectations and then conflict.

The second element that is worth discussing here is the role of social inclusion. Our entire lives are based on being part of a group – a social group – as this has been what has allowed us as a species to thrive and for our children, at an individual level, to survive. Our children are reliant upon us and thus work hard to be a member of social groups. This is an incredibly strong urge that we see in young babies who form very strong attachments to caregivers, but it also exists in older children and definitely adolescents. They have the family unit as a social group, but they are also seeking inclusion into other groups – namely peer ones. This strong drive to belong can lead to behaviours that are less than ideal and too often parents dismiss this need to belong as trivial yet it's so much more.

Now, one thing that has been noted by many psychologists and researchers is that children and adolescents who struggle with a feeling of belonging at home will be more invested in finding and belonging to another social group (however, virtually *all* children will aim to find this inclusion with peers so don't feel that you can somehow prevent it entirely or that their search for it speaks to your parenting). As peers are often not the best source of guidance, this can lead to many problems. It is normal for our children to want to belong and strive to belong, but as parents, we want the family unit to supersede the drive to belong in a peer group so that if the peer group is asking our children to do things they aren't comfortable with, or feel anxious about, they don't override those feelings in that quest to belong. If they already belong somewhere they like, they can then keep seeking a social group that better fits them and their needs.

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This is the end of the free sample from **Sharing Control: A Course on Discipline Across the Ages**. Thank you for reading and if you would like more, you can register for the entire course at [EvolutionaryParenting.com](http://EvolutionaryParenting.com).