

Parents in the middle

The primary years are not time to take a pause, writes **KATE WALSH**.

THE time between toddler tantrums and the trying teenage years might seem like an oasis of calm for parents.

There are fewer arguments about having to share or take a bath, and the battles over friends, curfews and what to wear are yet to begin.

But though they are free from these wars, the primary school years come with their own unique set of challenges.

Sydney clinical psychologist Anna Cohen says this is the time when children start to test their parents' boundaries to see how hard and fast they really are.

"Parenting is hard work and it can challenge all of us. It really, really questions our ability to establish clear and consistent boundaries," she says.

"Often what I get is parents who aren't being the type of parents they want to be, they're shouting or hitting or making threats and not following through, so one of the big things for me is helping parents to develop positive relationships with their kids with a big goal of improving self-esteem."

In her book *Parenting Made Easy – The Middle Years: A Bag Of Tricks Approach To Parenting The Six- to 12-Year-Old* (Xlibris, \$19.95), Dr Cohen points out it is not reasonable to expect children this age to behave like adults, and therefore the way parents interact with them needs to be adjusted for this.

"Children are not mini adults. They are egocentric, and their behaviour is at times thoughtless and impulsive. It is a myth to think that they should be well-behaved and always do as they are told," she writes.

Among the "bag of tricks" she wants parents to have up their sleeves for trying moments, Dr Cohen hones in on the need for parents to give effective instructions to their children and avoid falling into the "escalation trap", where giving your child a choice quickly leads to frustration and raised voices.

It's crucial to eliminate phrases such as "can you" or "will you" from the conversation.

"Parents think they're being polite, but in fact they've asked a



Psychologist Dr Anna Cohen says children are not mini adults, they can be egocentric, thoughtless and impulsive.



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Clinical psychologist
Dr Anna Cohen

question, they have a choice to say yes or no and then the parent's angry," Dr Cohen says.

She advocates being an "in-charge parent" – one who is open to what their child has to say, but ultimately takes responsibility for making the big decisions.

Setting boundaries, acknowledging and encouraging good behaviour, avoiding

arguments with your child and following through with consequences are all important parts of achieving this when your child is young.

Nailing things during these years will set up positive relationships between children and their parents for later on, making the transition into adolescence and independence that much easier.

The end goal is to create well-adjusted children who have high self-esteem, are confident, happy and loved.

"I think it's really critical, if we can get this stuff cemented and solid for families in the middle years and even earlier on, six and under, it sets the scene for the teenage ones, but that said it's never too late for the average kid and average family," says Dr Cohen.

Children will also be able to make better decisions for themselves when it comes to peer pressure and other challenges if they have internalised the lessons their parents taught them.

But Dr Cohen says it's important to realise that not every problem can be solved immediately, and that what works for your eldest child may not work for your youngest.

"We have to view each child as very individual."

Screen time not as dire as assumed

PLAYING video games, including violent shooter games, may boost children's learning, health and social skills, according to a review of research on the positive effects of video game play, to be published by the American Psychological Association.

While one widely held view maintains playing video games is intellectually lazy, such play actually may strengthen a range of cognitive skills such as spatial navigation, reasoning, memory and perception, according to several studies reviewed in the article. This is particularly true for shooter video games that are often violent, the authors said.

A 2013 meta-analysis found that playing shooter video games improved capacity to think about objects in three dimensions just as well as academic courses to enhance these skills, according to the study. This enhanced thinking was not found with playing other types of video games, such as puzzles or role-playing games.

Playing video games may also help children develop problem-solving skills, the authors said. The more adolescents reported playing strategic video games, such as role-playing games, the more they improved in problem solving and school grades the following year, according to the long-term study published in 2013.

Children's creativity was also enhanced by playing any kind of video game, but not when the children used other forms of technology, such as a computer or cellphone, other research revealed.

Simple games that can be played quickly, such as Angry Birds, can improve players' moods, promote relaxation and ward off anxiety, the study said.

AP



Playing video games can increase children's creativity.

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