

The 20 Second Hug & More

Quick Reads for Parents



TUSLA



**PARENTING SUPPORT
CHAMPIONS PROJECT**
Empathise | Energise | Empower



Dear Parents

Welcome to our publication of **The 20 Second Hug and More**, a collection of short, easy reads for parents. This booklet is a collation of the articles that have been submitted by the **Limerick Parenting Support Champions** for the **Positive Parenting Feature** printed in 3 newspapers – **The Limerick Leader**, **The Vale Star** and **The Observer**. The purpose of the articles is to provide parents with evidence informed high-quality; interesting, advice and support.

We hope that you get plenty of ideas for lots more positive and supportive interactions with your children and maybe an idea or two on making some time for yourself too!

Sit down with a cuppa and enjoy the read!
Tusla Parent Support Champions Limerick

Enjoy the read!



Special thanks to the children and staff from **Foroige** in Newcastlewest, **Croom Family Resource Centre** and **Limerick Youth Service** who contributed some amazing art pieces for this publication.



The **Tusla Parenting Support Champions** in Limerick are part of a national project that brings together practitioners who are already involved with parenting and family support. The project has the aim of promoting and supporting parenting and the implementation of the **Parenting Support Strategy** within **Tusla** and partner agencies and organisations. Working together as a team, the Parenting Support Champions bring a coordinated response to how parents are supported and enables the sharing of resources.

They strive to keep the voice of the parent to the forefront of their work and facilitate parents to get involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services. They aim to enhance parents' participation in their own child's care and education and ultimately increase family wellbeing and improved outcomes for children.

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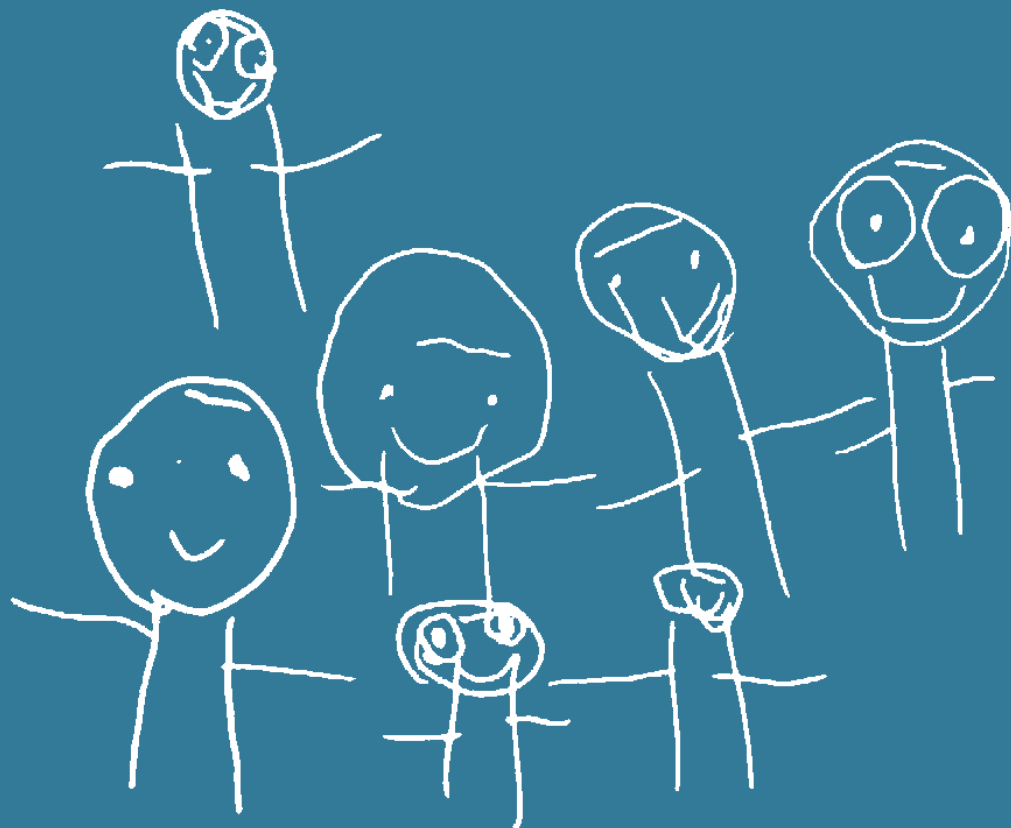
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Parenting Limerick is a network of organisations that provide parenting and family support in Limerick. Parenting Limerick is part of the **Limerick Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC)**. Limerick CYPSC is part of a national initiative that brings together senior level representatives of agencies to enhance the coordination of services and improve outcomes for children and families.



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The 20 Second Hug

Dictionaries define the word “hug” as holding another person close for affection, comfort and warmth and aren’t these all such lovely words. Even saying these words bring with it an inner glow that we all need. Perhaps one of the things that we missed the most recently was physical contact with those we love and care about. We missed the freedom we had to hug people. This means that the hugs and cuddles we can have within our households, particularly with our children, have become more important than ever. As children move back to school and our time together is somewhat less, it is vital that we continue spending some cuddling, snuggly hug time together. Did you know that the USA has a national cuddling day every year? While it is great that cuddling gets a day of recognition it is important that we make time for hugging our children every day. As well as being a very enjoyable thing to do, hugging your child is of real benefit.

Every hug and physical touch counts; however, hugs that last for 20 seconds or longer are the ones that can be the most powerful. We are so used to the 20 second hand washing rule that 20 second hugs will be easy to time! Apart from being a really enjoyable activity, these longer hugs have been scientifically proven to have physical effects on our bodies.

Hugs and cuddles trigger the release of the hormone oxytocin, which is also known as the feel good or love hormone. The effect of oxytocin on our bodies is complicated but its release in our brains aids physical development from a young age. Firm hugs stimulate the pressure receptors in our skin and this sends a message to the vagus nerve in our brains. This nerve plays a big part in slowing down our heart rate and blood pressure so combined with the feel good hormone; hugs help us calm down and relax.



Hugs also have an impact on our stress hormone cortisol, reducing it and at the same time stimulating our bodies to release serotonin which helps us deal with pain. This is why you can feel an immediate relief from stress and pain when you are embraced in a hug. And why our children come running into our arms when they are distressed and you automatically surround them with your arms and draw them into a loving embrace. Reduced blood pressure and lower stress levels are beneficial to the health of our hearts, to helping our bodies fight infection and to relieving pain. Who would have thought that a 20 second hug could be part of our daily fitness routine!

Hugs help build and maintain the connection between you and your child, communicating your love and helping children feel secure and safe. Hugs tell your child that you love them and that you are there for them and not a single word is needed! Start the day by giving your child a hug and always have a bedtime hug as the calming effect will help sleep. Remember to hug yourself. Did you realise that giving yourself a hug is beneficial, safe and comforting. Wrap your arms around yourself, hug tightly, and tell yourself that you love YOU!

When children are very small we have ample time for cuddling and hugging as they are often in our arms or on

our lap. As children become older and naturally move a little further away from us, going to school or out to play, we may not get the same opportunity for hugs. We have to create the opportunities for closeness. Try to make time in the day for cuddling and hugging. Remember it is not the quantity that counts but the quality. Think about adding hugs and cuddles to activities you are already doing. When watching TV, snuggle up close and put your arms around your child. Cuddle in together to read a book. While it is tempting not to interrupt your child when they are doing their homework, reach out and give a hug as you walk past. It will not disturb them but let them know you love and care for them.

Teenagers can shy away from your physical attention or think it is not cool! This is normal teen development. Respect their feelings and continue to hug your teens but perhaps not in public or in front of their friends!

Hugs give immediate joy and comfort and have significant impact on health, now and later in life. Few things cost so little and provide so much. Cuddles and hugs are good for you and your child so stop what you are doing right now and reach out and hug your child. Make hugging the New Year resolution that you will keep!

Parent Self Care

Parents always work very hard and in recent times have had to take on the roles of many different people in their children's lives. You have been teachers, playmates, confidants, counsellors, and online experts, shoppers, cleaners and carers. However, you probably have had very little time or opportunity to just be YOU or to focus on looking after yourself. We know that being a parent is the most important job of all but it is certainly complex, challenging and tiring, with anxiety and worry added into the mix.

In order to navigate this important job it is vital that parents look after their own needs too but you are probably thinking, where will I get the time or the energy to look after me and what does it look like anyway? When parents are working on getting routines in place for their children, remember to include time for you in the routine and try to stick to it. This time could be used to make one small change that focuses on you. Perhaps a change that would help you stay active, eat healthy food or get some rest.

Changing the scene by getting out for a short walk or changing the tempo and mood by putting on some music and dancing around the kitchen can really recharge your batteries.

When time is limited we tend to grab a quick snack and this is often not the best food choice. Make sure to have your own meal and sit down to eat it. Keep some healthy snacks within easy reach. Fruit can be really handy. How many times have you made a cup of tea and never taken the time to drink it? Commit to giving yourself 5 minutes to have a cup of tea and maybe a not so healthy treat! Feelings, thoughts and behaviour are all connected so if you finish that cup of tea then you may feel a little calmer which may help your thoughts be less irritable and you may behave in a more patient way with your kids. One small change!

Establish a bedtime routine for yourself. Have a regular bed time and a wind down time before you hit the sack. Choose something you find relaxing, a bath, read a book or try some relaxation or breathing techniques. Have some screen free



time before bed and avoid screens in the bedroom. Often as soon as your head hits the pillow your brain goes into over drive and fills with thoughts and things you need to do. Consider having a notebook beside your bed and jot down the thoughts that are whirling around inside your head. Then you can forget about them until tomorrow.

Social media is a catch 22 situation - we are encouraged to use it less but it has become a lifeline and connection to society and our family and friends. So be selective and choose links that make you feel good. Link with people that help you feel positive about yourself. Parents certainly don't need any help knocking themselves down as they can be good at that all by themselves!

Getting a babysitter and having a night out with our partner or friend can be difficult. Stay In dates can be enjoyable even if it is just a date with yourself. Watch a film, listen to music, and enjoy a chocolate bar - whatever works for you. Allowing yourself this time will give you renewed energy for all the other things that are still waiting. Reunite with things you enjoyed before becoming a parent, old habits you have forgotten about but enjoyed.



Treating and looking after yourself isn't being selfish. It's being aware that you're important too and deserve to be cared for just as much as anyone else. You cannot pour anything out of an empty cup so fill yours up regularly.

Celebrate the good things in your life particularly if you feel overstretched. Take time to remember the positives however small. It can be helpful to make a list of things you thought went well. If everyone enjoyed the meal you cooked praise yourself. Think of keeping a gratitude diary and jot down 3 things each morning or evening that you are grateful to have in your life. Never underestimate the power of starting and ending the day recalling the positives in your life.

Part of taking care of ourselves is being in touch with our feelings and needs. You owe it to yourself and to the important people in your life to do things, however small, to make yourself feel good. So Make One Small Change for YOU!

Good Enough Parenting

You may have heard the term “*good enough*” parenting before, but it’s not always clear what it actually means. And, good enough when we are feeling strong, healthy and in control can look and feel very different from good enough when we are feeling exhausted, stressed or anxious. “*Good enough*” parenting recognises the fact that being a parent is an incredibly challenging (though often very rewarding) role and that no one is perfect and gets it right all the time.

It is an acknowledgement that most of us are doing our very best to be the loving, nurturing, secure parents that we know our children need. It is also an acknowledgement that we are only human and sometimes life, whether through illness, relationship difficulties, worry and stress about jobs and money, anxiety or depression, etc. can leave us feeling depleted and really struggling to parent the way that we want.

This is when “*good enough*” really comes into play. Here are some things to consider when you find yourself in those really difficult parenting moments and you are not sure that you can do it.

Give yourself a break

Take a deep breath and let yourself feel your feelings. You aren’t the first parent to feel this way and you won’t be the last. Try to find some time for you - whether that is a bath, a chat on the phone with someone who makes you laugh or an early bed time with a good book.

Take shortcuts

When you arrive home after a long day, launching into an evening routine of homework, dinner, baths and bedtime may seem insurmountable. Try to break it down in to what must be done, what should be done and what could be done. Set the kids up at the table to get on with some homework, while you chat to them and prepare a simple meal. It’s not for every night, but a simple picnic of sandwiches and fruit while snuggled on the couch might give everyone the break they need.

Get cosy and cuddle

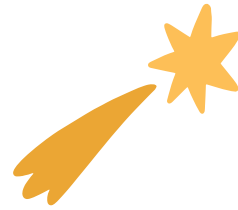
When you or your children are feeling stressed and overwhelmed, taking some time out for lots of cuddles and down time can make a difference. Making a nest on the couch, cuddling in and watching a movie can give you both lovely time with your children and a chance to relax and unwind.

Go to bed

Try to get as much sleep as you can - it makes such a difference to your energy and your ability to manage stress and to make healthy choices.

Tomorrow is another day

If things didn't go to plan today, take a deep breath, acknowledge what happened and know that you have another chance tomorrow.



How To Keep Communication Open And Positive With Your Teenager

Our relationships with our children as they move into their teenage years can sometimes be challenging. The positive active communication we enjoyed with them when they were younger changes, and we can find ourselves not chatting with them freely and informally as often as we did when they were little. We may start to find ourselves falling into the habit of having brief conversations with “Yes” or “No” answers that can start to feel like an interrogation! This may happen as other commitments and activities such as work, afterschool study, external activities, time with friends and the inevitable screen time make it more difficult to set aside time within the home to just sit and chat as a family.

As our children get older and they start to prioritise time with their friends and activities outside the home over home life, we can find ourselves firing questions at them just to get a sense of how they are and what they are doing. For example, *‘How was school today?’* *‘Where are you going?’* *‘Who’s going with you?’* or *‘What are you going to be doing?’* This can give rise to the possibility that your teenager will not tell you things that their friends are doing or, more importantly, what they may be worried about.

You may not know, if you lose the casual chats, what they care about, what they dislike or what they’re thinking. You may not be that familiar with their friends and any issues arising within their peer groups.

When we chat informally at home we create opportunities to really share what is happening within the home and school on a weekly basis. Creating this space within your home needs to be prioritised and planned. Try making time to have meals together (device free for everyone in the family) so that there are better opportunities to communicate fully. If you don’t make time to talk about the everyday normal activities your teenager is involved in, it will be much more difficult to start a conversation when issues arise such as experimenting with drugs/alcohol, peer pressure, worries about school, bullying etc.



When communication remains open it is natural to ask if something is wrong without your teenager fearing that you are judging them or wish to limit their movements and choices. Making the most of your time together at meal times, limiting your phone use in their company, driving them to activities, having their friends over, planning family trips and holidays are all important ways to keep the relationship connected. Try to keep special family traditions such as birthday or holiday celebrations

going even when they are teenagers and even when they seem bored with your efforts. These are the things that keep you all together, working out issues and stresses in a supportive way by making time together as positive as possible. When issues arise it is important to reflect on possible misunderstandings and mistakes made. Acknowledge them and move on to ensure that your parent/teenager relationship continues to grow and develop positively into adulthood.



Giving Our Children The Gift Of Gratitude

Well, we've survived Black Friday even if our bank accounts haven't. It was impossible to avoid the hype of this American import this year, with the constant temptations all packaged in the once in a lifetime opportunity to save, save, save. A good bargain on something you really need or want is a great thing; but all the hype can create desires and needs we didn't even know we had. This can be especially true for children who haven't fully learned to distinguish between what they want and what they need and may not fully understand the value (and the limitations) of money.

So, while Black Friday was everywhere, that other American tradition, Thanksgiving, was rather less visible. Spending time with people that we love (or are at least related to), reaching out to those who may be alone or in need and really focusing on the good things in our life is much more likely to bring us happiness than rushing around shops buying lots of things. So, how do we instil this sense of gratitude in our children, especially as we head in to the busiest shopping season of the year?





Count your blessings

Spend a few minutes each day talking with your children about what you are both grateful for. This may include their new PlayStation, but ask them to think about other things such as your family, a warm house, a special friend, the chance to take music lessons, a kind teacher...



Manage expectations

Make sure that your child knows that a Santa list is a wish list. It doesn't mean that Santa will bring them everything. Start a conversation about what your child really wants and why. This will help them figure out those things that are important to them.



Model gratitude

Practice expressing gratitude yourself and catch yourself if you are focusing on the negative or things that you don't have. This doesn't mean ignoring the real problems or challenges that you may be facing. It just means telling your children regularly how grateful you are to have them in your life and noticing the positive things.



Focus on experiences rather than things

Of course there will be presents, but the things that children will really remember are the special things that you all did together as a family. Create some special traditions in the run-up to the holidays. These don't have to cost much or anything at all: hot chocolate and a special Christmas movie, an evening walk to look at the lights, special music and food as you decorate the tree; the possibilities are endless.



Let your child give something back

Whether this is giving money to charity, participating in a toy appeal, visiting neighbours or giving your time to support a good cause, let your child understand that they are part of a wider family and community and that they have important contributions to make. Let them experience the real and lasting joy that giving can bring.

Pressing The Pause Button

Do you ever find yourself on the way to collect the children from school or driving home from work with the endless tick, tick, tick of your endless to do list churning through your mind - what you need to do, what you need to get, where you need to be churning over in your mind? Have you ever found yourself trying to make it through the list before you can finally, finally sit down and relax for a few minutes? And, then, well, it's time to get to bed!

Parenting requires us to multi-task like we have never multi-tasked before and, sometimes, it can become all about getting things done rather than enjoying what we are actually doing. Many parenting guides use some variation on the idea of "Pressing the Pause" button. This means that when we find ourselves reacting to our children with anger, frustration or simple exhaustion, we take a moment before we respond. This might mean just taking a few deep breaths, it might mean walking in to another room for a few minutes,

or, if emotions are running really high, it might mean deciding to address the issue at a later time or date. It involves acknowledging our own emotions, taking the time to think about how we are feeling and recognising that reacting in anger or frustration won't help us or our child. Taking this time allows us to calm down and react with the love and patience that we and our children need.

This idea can be applied to many situations - not just when your teenager comes home late again or when your toddler hops out of bed for the 15th time in a row. It can also be useful when that list starts to tick, tick, in your mind on your way to collect the children. Instead of thinking, "we need to get to soccer, then to music class, ugh, I forgot to bring the raffle tickets, what will we make for dinner, the kitchen is a disaster, lunches need to be done, where is that Irish book...", press the pause button, take a few deep breaths and stay in the moment. Let yourself find a moment of enjoyment - if you're



in the car alone, put on your favourite music. If you're with the kids, find a crowd-pleaser and all belt along. If you're trying to get the dinner ready, while making lunches and keeping little ones happy and entertained while underfoot, and the chaos threatens to become overwhelming, try pressing the pause button. Give yourself a moment, acknowledge that this is a lot to manage and let yourself relax. Think about something positive in the moment - share a joke with the children, give them a hug, savour what you are cooking... whatever you need to do to make this moment enjoyable.

That list will still be there, and there will still be moments when everyone flies out the door with breakfast half eaten and books forgotten. Giving yourself time to pause, to enjoy this moment rather than worrying about all the moments to come, however, can make a big difference in how everyone in the family reacts to stress and let you all enjoy your time together.





Tips For Children With Autism And Their Families Over The Summer Holidays

The summer holidays have arrived! Many families are looking forward to the move away from routine and consistency that school provides. As schedules are interrupted and routines broken, families of children and young people with autism can find it challenging. Each child has unique strengths and needs. With a little preparation, holiday stress can be reduced. Here are some practical tips on supporting children and young persons with autism who are facing changes in routines during the summer break.

Preparation is crucial for children and young people with autism. When a new event or outing is coming up, you can:

- **Use a calendar:** a visual aid showing when an event is scheduled can be used to prepare your child. It is important not to plan too much in advance. For some children, a few days' notice makes all the difference. For others, a few hours' notice is required. Either way, talking about an upcoming event in advance greatly reduces anxiety, and supports the transition to a new environment.
- **Use visual aids:** these can support communication regarding routines. You can use them in your own home or when planning trips outside the home. Depending on your child, visuals can include drawings,

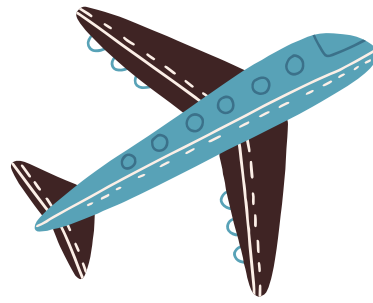
photographs, and pictures on phones. It is important to consider your child's attention to detail, as the picture you use might be different to the actual place, which can cause upset.

- **Tell a story:** developing social stories can assist your child's understanding, and prepare them for an upcoming event or outing.

If visitors are calling to the home or if you plan to go visiting other people's homes, you can:

- Show photos in advance of relatives and visitors who will be calling in during the holidays.
- If your child struggles in noisy or busy environments, find a quiet go-to place within your home or wherever you are visiting.
- Have games, activities or favourite toys on hand.
- Prior to visitors calling in, consider possible triggers to a meltdown. Some of these can be sharing of toys, other children using their belongings, and noise levels. Preparing for such situations can reduce anxiety for your child.
- Having to interact with visitors might lead to meltdowns. When visitors are coming to the home, it is sometimes best to allow your child to follow their own lead.





If you are flying abroad for holidays, you can:

- Have your child's favourite foods, books or toys available during the flight
- Check if your airport has a **Special Assistance Programme**. Many Irish airports have developed visual schedules on their websites, and have special assisted processes to support the transition through the airport.



The key message is: plan in advance. Preparation is key to success during the holiday season. Remember the words:



First, Next, Finished.

These provide a structure and sequence to activities. Identify your child's triggers and prepare a plan, should your child experience a meltdown or a sensory overload.

Check Autism parent forums on Facebook and Irish Autism websites for Autism-friendly days at various locations around town.

Finally, focus on the successes, and celebrate them!



Giving Children The Gift Of Special Time

There is little doubt that our earliest years are the most important ones of our lives. It is during our childhood that the foundations are laid for the development of individuality and our attempts to adapt to the world around us. It is around this time too that our responses to life experiences are beginning to get moulded.

As young children we are almost entirely dependent on adults for food which is essential for healthy growth. Similarly we are also dependent on another essential ingredient vital to our emotional development - the attention of caring adults.

Given the importance of this factor it is surprising how little time we spend being truly attentive to children.

As a result, children sometimes find different strategies to have this need met. Most of us are aware of some of these: temper tantrums, acting out, or being disobedient and clingy.

To be heard and appreciated is essential to a child's growth and development. With increasing social, digital and economic pressures often outweighing the needs of the individual, it leaves less and less opportunity for active listening to

occur. It is clear that we must find ways of creating space in which adults are able to give children the gifts of time, when real attention can be paid to them.

“Special Time “or a “Special Listen” provides a vehicle for this to take place. During this Special Time an adult gives undivided attention to one child. The boundaries are set within a safe environment and are age appropriate. The special time could be for 10 minutes special reading time at bedtime or an hour of other activities during the day. The child takes the lead in initiating the activities. The child guides the play, makes their own decisions and mistakes without fear of adult dismay, corrections or condemnation.

The verbal and non-verbal feedback to the child conveys that total attention is being paid. It is in the form of “running commentary and recapping” on the activity taken place. You might say - “you have pushed the red car,” “you’re smiling talking to Paddington Bear”, “you are able to swing really high”, with your non-verbal behaviour matching the verbal.





When the special time is coming to an end, give your child plenty of warning that you are going to return to normal tasks soon. This doesn't mean, however, that you won't still have moments of connection and "special time" throughout the day.

Once the child grasps the concept of the "special listen" or "special time", they are usually overjoyed at this new experience and will look forward to it happening again and again. It allows the child to be herself/himself without having to employ strategies to gain attention. The process of being fully attentive and accepted is in itself a healing and enriching one.

The Special Time without doubt has many advantages. It is a source of individual growth and happiness to all children. The parent-child relationship will be greatly enhanced and negative behaviour and frustrations can decrease and tensions lessen. The child's self-esteem increases and their inner security grows. They are more able to deal with the many conflicts and frustrations which are part of everyday life. Special Time is free. The overall aim is to foster a strong connection with your child and to ensure that they know you are there to listen to them and support them.

MY FAMILY



Talking To Your Teenager About Safe Sex

Did you know that every year there is a World Contraception Day? This is a day to support people with information and advice on making positive, safe decisions about contraception and the prevention of unwanted pregnancies.

For some parents, talking to children about sex, sexual relationships and sexuality can be challenging. We may not have had the best sex education ourselves, so we might be unsure what to say and how to say it. We might also be unsure if we have all of our own facts straight or if we might even be encouraging our children to have sex early if we are too open about the subject. In addition, many young people are overexposed to pornography so we may think they know more than we do.

Young people, however, still need information and support from the caring, responsible adults in their lives. The evidence tells us that young people who have parents who communicate openly and honestly about all issues sex-related tend to make more positive, less risky choices. And, when they do make mistakes, they are more likely to find the help and support they need. These conversations should include how to keep themselves and their potential partners safe from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies; how to keep themselves and their potential partners safe emotionally; what a healthy relationship feels like and a robust discussion of consent. Here are some tips on how to get the conversation started.



- If you can, start the conversation early in an age appropriate way. Young children are naturally curious about their bodies so name their parts for them and answer any questions they have in simple language. You don't have to go in to details, but try not to let them feel any shame or embarrassment in asking the questions.
- Get your own facts straight. There is lots of information out there about sex and contraception, so take some time to update your own knowledge. Have a look at www.sexualwellbeing.ie to find evidence-based information and support. Find out what resources are available locally (the GP, the Family Planning Clinic, the nearest Sexually Transmitted Infection Clinic). You don't need to know everything, but try to show a willingness to help your son or daughter find the information they need
- If they do ask for support in accessing birth control, stay calm and talk to them openly. Help them access appropriate medical advice. Let them know you are there to help them think through the best, safest option for them
- Try not to have "The Big Talk". Instead, have regular, casual conversations as issues arise. If you are watching something together or if your son or daughter tells you something that happened to a friend, ask him or her open questions about what they think and share your own thoughts.
- Remember that talking about sex with your son or daughter, including how to use and access contraception, doesn't mean that you are actively encouraging them to have sex. Talk to them about contraception in the context of positive, consensual relationships and make sure they know they have options, including to not have sex until they are ready.

Parenting In The Present; Dealing With The Past

A new baby brings new hope. As we cuddle our new little baby, our thoughts might wander and we imagine the endless possibilities stretching before this child; we imagine the moments of joy and fun we will share with them. While the reality of parenting is often full of moments of pure joy, it can also be one of the most challenging things that we will ever do.

If your own parents were supportive and kind and if you lived in a secure home with healthy relationships, you will likely have a strong basis for raising your own children. If, however, you grew up in difficult circumstances with lots of challenges and conflict, this may be less clear. You will be as capable as any parent of loving your child, but you might not have as clear an idea of how to deal with conflicted and difficult emotions. When your child is frustrated, angry or upset, it may be more difficult to stay calm and respond gently and positively.

The good news, however, is that every parent can learn to manage their own emotions, support their child to manage theirs and develop loving, positive relationships, although it does take some time and effort. Here are a few things to consider if you find yourself in this situation.

Recognise & acknowledge it

Try to find the time and space to reflect on how you react in certain situations and why that might be. For example, if your child becomes very angry because they are not allowed a certain snack and they start to throw things, how does this make you feel? Does it cause you to panic and get very angry yourself? Are you tempted to shout at your child or just leave them in their anger? These are difficult circumstances for any parent, but if you find your child's behaviour overwhelming and if you are not able to cope, it may be a signal that you are reacting not only to your child's behaviour but to something that has happened to you.

Forgive yourself

No parent gets it right all of the time. If you make a mistake, talk to your child about it and apologise. Let them know that you will try to act differently next time. Apologising to your child isn't a sign of weakness; it lets them know that you're human and make mistakes and that you are committed to the relationship.

Reach out

All parents need support. If you are trying to manage difficulties from your own past, you may need some extra support. Parent and toddler

groups can be a great way of meeting other parents and getting some informal support. You may also want to speak to a health care professional (GP, Public Health Nurse) and let them know what you are struggling with and see if they can refer you for supports such as counselling or family support.

Find moments of enjoyment

Whatever the age of your child and whatever issues you may be dealing with, try to find time every day to enjoy your child. This may be cuddling in to watch a programme together; taking the dog for a walk; talking about a happy holiday or day out you had; or just chatting about something that happened that day.



Getting Back Into Routine

School holidays often involve letting some of our good routines slide. If you are like me your teenage children are sleeping in until all hours and are often the ones turning off the lights at an ungodly hour! Others will admit to the fridge constantly being open with a 'help yourself if you're hungry' approach. For others screen time, play time, bath time and sleep time are all over the shop. BUT, the return to school is coming fast. If you are like me, this fills me with dread as I now have to address all these established habits. So what can we do?

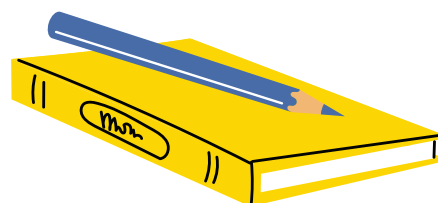
When routines are in place children feel more secure. Parents feel calmer and more in control. By adjusting our routine, it will help children understand that the summer is coming to an end and help prepare them for the return of school. Easier said than done right? Where do you start?

Begin by having a plan in your own head about what routines you would like to see happen. Agree this with your partner to ensure you don't have mixed messages. Set a time to have the chat about routines with your child. Get their views on this and agree a plan together. Make sure that

they understand the plan. Remember Rome wasn't built in a day so put the plan into place gradually, making small adjustments daily. Talk to your child to see if the plan is working and make changes if they are needed.

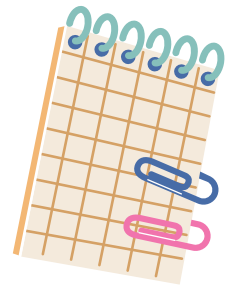
Bedtimes will be the first on my list. It won't be easy but it needs to be done. Start by adjusting bedtimes gradually. Two weeks before the first day of school, start to move your child's bedtime earlier at night. Wake them a small bit earlier each morning. Continue this process every night until your child is waking at the same time that will be necessary once school starts.

Aim to create a relaxing wind-down routine. For about an hour before you want the lights turned off for the night encourage calming activities. For younger children this might be taking a bath or reading a book together. For older children this could be listening to music, taking a shower or meditation. By repeating this every night in the weeks leading up to the first day of school it will help your child to anticipate sleep time, making it easier for everyone once school starts again.

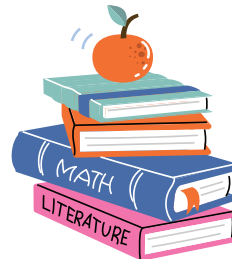




Next up, **screen time**. We know that less screen time before bed will improve the quality of their sleep. Yes, they love playing with their friends on line and who doesn't enjoy a game of Mario Cart? They can still do this, but - earlier in the day. Aim for no screen time an hour before your child goes to sleep. Avoid screens in their bedroom. Watch those smart phones too. Agreeing a plan in advance on technology will prevent problems and fighting in the long run.



Last but not least, **mealtimes**. Plan to adjust mealtimes gradually in August to match up with school lunch breaks. Chat about the importance of eating well. Encourage your child to think of food as fuel for their body. Involve them in decisions about what they eat, the weekly shop, meal planning and preparation.



So we have a plan. One day at a time and the hard work will pay off. Don't forget that you are doing a great job.

Good luck!



Bring It Back To Basics

Spending so much more time at home has meant that we are spending more time with our children. They most likely love this! We parents have a special opportunity to spend more quality time with our children and play a part in creating positive, fun memories for them.

Thinking of new things to play with our children can sometimes be very difficult. Advertising and social media put parents under pressure to have the latest store bought toys but spending quality time with our children does not need to cost money, just our time. It will be time well spent so how about trying something different and bring it back to basics!

The best types of games are the ones that involve the whole family. Whether this is a board game that you already have, telling stories (the ones we make up as we go are great), outdoor games, card games, playing dress up or singing songs doesn't really matter as long as the children are in charge and everyone is having fun.

Let your imagination run wild! Cast your mind back to when you were a child - what games did you like to play? Talk to your children about these, they will really love hearing your stories and will even want to

give some of these things a try. They will feel safe, loved, secure and important as you share fun memories from your childhood with them. As you play these games with them they will feel even more connected to you as you both will have this childhood memory in common.

Children learn so much through play. As they roll around on the ground, play pretend games or paint and draw, they test their physical strength, they set up problems and they find solutions; "Teddy has a broken leg, we must find ways of making teddy better". As they talk, move and have fun, children are constantly learning. Their imaginations are expanding and they are learning how to relate with others.

When a child feels understood and appreciated by their parent during play, their negative behaviour decreases, their confidence increases and this in turn makes them better able to make and keep friends. The most important first step when playing with your child is to follow their lead. Let yourself be guided by their ideas and imagination but still get involved yourself. You'll find that when you sit back and follow your child's lead, you give them the chance to use their imagination and express themselves through play.

Once we, as parents, are interested and attentive to our child's play, they become much more involved and interested, which supports their creativity.



So run and whoop and holler as you play cowboys and Indians, make lots of noise and beat those homemade drums as you pretend you are part of a very famous band with the instruments you just made. Enjoy the magic of princesses, knights and dragons in the forts you build and revel in the conversations you have with your children as you go for walks because they really do see the wonder in everything.



Up Snakes And Down Ladders!



It might surprise you to know that playing board games provide numerous benefits for our children. Board games make learning fun because children don't even realise they are learning. Younger children can learn about colours, shapes, patterns, and maths and as many games involve moving pieces around the board, hand eye coordination benefits too. Patience, waiting, turn taking and team work are all skills that children get to practice and master playing board games. Language develops, not just from the vocabulary and spelling involved in the game but from reading the instructions or game cards and more importantly from the chats we have while playing together. Who knew spelling could be fun? Try a game of Scrabble with your children and see how learning and fun fit snugly together.

For older children we know strategy games have a positive impact on the development of the frontal lobe of their brains. Playing games improves memory, cognitive and communication skills. The planning, organising, remembering information, strategic thinking, problem solving and decision making involved in games are skills that can be applied throughout life. Children gain information about real life from games that involve factual information. They get insight into how other people think or see the world. Playing games together gives parents

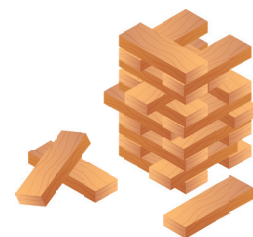
the opportunity to model, coach and encourage the social skills and behaviours that will make everyday life easier and have a benefit throughout your child's life. Notice and praise the behaviours you want to see more of such as staying calm when frustrated and waiting patiently.



Board games can help children to get along better as they have structure and rules. Structured games can be an asset for children that have difficulty playing with or beside another child. Everyone has a turn and generally there is a specific way to do things. But remember games are fun and you can shake things up by changing some of the rules. Our family always played Up Snakes and Down Ladders because there was a long snake's head at 99 and no one wanted to almost win and land right back at the bottom of the board. Children under the age of 7 years are not developmentally ready to understand game rules so keep it simple when young children are playing.

Although games by their nature are competitive, board games also require us to cooperate and this builds a sense of connection that brings families together. As you play, you chat, share ideas and opinions and build family bonds. Often things get discussed and decided that may have proven difficult in other family settings.





All players are equal and parents are not in charge so children get to see their parents in a new light creating a different balance.

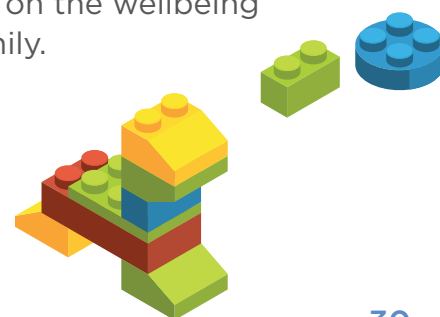
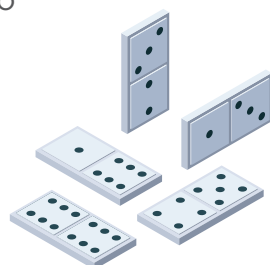
Playing together creates a relaxed fun atmosphere that encourages communication and builds trust that lasts beyond the end of the game. The fun we have together laughing and joking causes our bodies to release chemicals known as endorphins, the happy hormones that lowers our blood pressure and reduces stress. Research tells us that positive feelings and thoughts can boost our immune system which is something we all really need.

Avoiding interruptions and having no screens, TV or phones can help keep all of us focused on the game! Sticking with it until the end lengthens children's attention span. They learn to stay at things that are enjoyable even if difficult and disappointing. If children are not used to playing board games start small with short, easy games. Save the ones that can go on longer, like Monopoly, until you have all adjusted to playing together. Monopoly, one of my childhood regulars gave great enjoyment but also caused some family disagreement because my brother, always the banker, embezzled! Interestingly, he became an accountant so perhaps playing a financial based game contributed to

his adult career. Last Christmas, like many other families, we were apart so I sent him the Limerick version of Monopoly as a reminder of past family times. Although I did include a note for my nephew suggesting they never allow Dad to be the banker!

Some children and even some adults have difficulty losing! Games help you coach your child's coping skills and their ability to manage their disappointment when things don't go their way. Be careful not to fall into the trap of always letting your child win. They soon see through this and it denies them the chance to learn from small failures. Better to praise their efforts and help them learn ways to succeed the next time you play. Encourage them to congratulate the winner and praise their efforts bearing in mind that losing is a skill we all struggle with.

Remember most games benefit from the occasional treat. Bringing some sharing food to the table is enjoyable and helps limit distractions. Popcorn or a pizza to share fit the bill nicely. Consider setting a regular slot for your family game night making it a ritual and giving you all the chance to share each other's company. Playing board games together is fun and can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of your entire family.



Sharing Family Traditions & Heritage With Our Children



Roasting chestnuts on an open fire, decking the halls with boughs of holly, kissing under the mistletoe, cuddling up for stories and hot chocolate in the glow of the fire and the twinkle of the Christmas lights are just some Christmas traditions and rituals carried out by many. Sharing these rituals and traditions with our children can really add an extra sparkle to what is already a magical time for them. Gathering together with family and friends has its challenges whether they live in the next street, the next county or indeed in a different country! So embracing as many of our traditions as possible will be all the more important.

For children, participating in family traditions enhances their sense of belonging and really makes them feel like they are a part of something very special. You may not think your family history is fascinating but your child will. The decisions made in the past contribute to the people we are today and the holidays are an opportunity to enrich your child's life with stories, memories and anecdotes from your childhood and indeed the lives lived by your parents and grandparents. If you are lucky enough to still have grandparent or even great grandparents in your lives

then make time for their stories and tales to be shared with your children. All the better if this can be in person but stories can be shared over the internet, in letters or just chatting about your memories.

People have been moving to different parts of the country and the world for generations so it stands to reason that children will find their family history interesting. Maybe there was a famous person in their family or perhaps someone took part in an important historical event or maybe their great aunt was famous for making big splashes jumping in puddles!

The stories and memories shared over the Christmas holidays can form part of your family tree. Think of using some of the time available to work on a family tree with your children. Gather old photos and label who is in each snap. When you look at old photographs share special memories. Tell your children all about the other people in the pictures. Add all the information you have about what family members did, liked and who they loved! Each generation is made up of the previous generation's efforts, failures, successes, travels, struggles and accomplishments.

Our history helps us be who we are today. Maybe start a new photo album or scrapbook with your children and explain that they will have this to share with their children in years to come.

Cooking and sharing food is such an important part of Christmas and cooking with your children is another way to celebrate your family heritage. Cook some recipes from your past and share the stories behind them as you do. Remember to also cook present day family favourites as these dishes will be the heritage of the future generations of your family.

Sing an old song, teach children to play a tune or curl up and read a favourite book from your childhood to them. It can be easy to take your history for granted and we can often assume that our children understand why we value a particular item or activity. It is so important that we talk to our children and share the stories behind our traditions. Why is one song so important to your family and not to your neighbour's family? Your heritage and traditions illustrate the importance and meaning of family. Remember each family has their own. What are yours? Will you share them?



Top Tips for Family Wellbeing



The parent-child relationship is key

A strong, loving relationship with a parent or carer is the most important thing for a child. It helps them to be healthy, happy and resilient. Remember it is never too early or late to start spending special time together.



Buy well, eat well, be well

Healthy food is important for all the family and is especially important for children's growth. Include them in planning the menu, shopping and cooking meals. Try to eat at least one meal as a family each day. This is a simple way for everyone to connect.



A positive parenting style works

Give your child positive attention, lots of affection and specific praise. Set routines, rules and boundaries and try to be consistent — children thrive with a routine. Try to remain calm and model positive ways (deep breathing, taking a walk) of dealing with powerful emotions such as anger or frustration.



Child safety is key

Toddler proofing your home, using car seats, teaching road safety, learning basic first aid, supervising young children and knowing where older children are and who they are with all helps in terms of reducing child injury and raising happier children.



Baby see, baby do

Be the role model your children deserve. Children learn by watching their parents. Modelling appropriate, respectful behaviour works much better than telling them what to do.



Name it and tame It

Communicating with your child is so important at every age. Parents and children who can talk to each other, share problems and address challenges together will have strong, healthy relationships. This will help you to cope with any challenging behaviour or crisis in a positive way.



Parents need good social networks

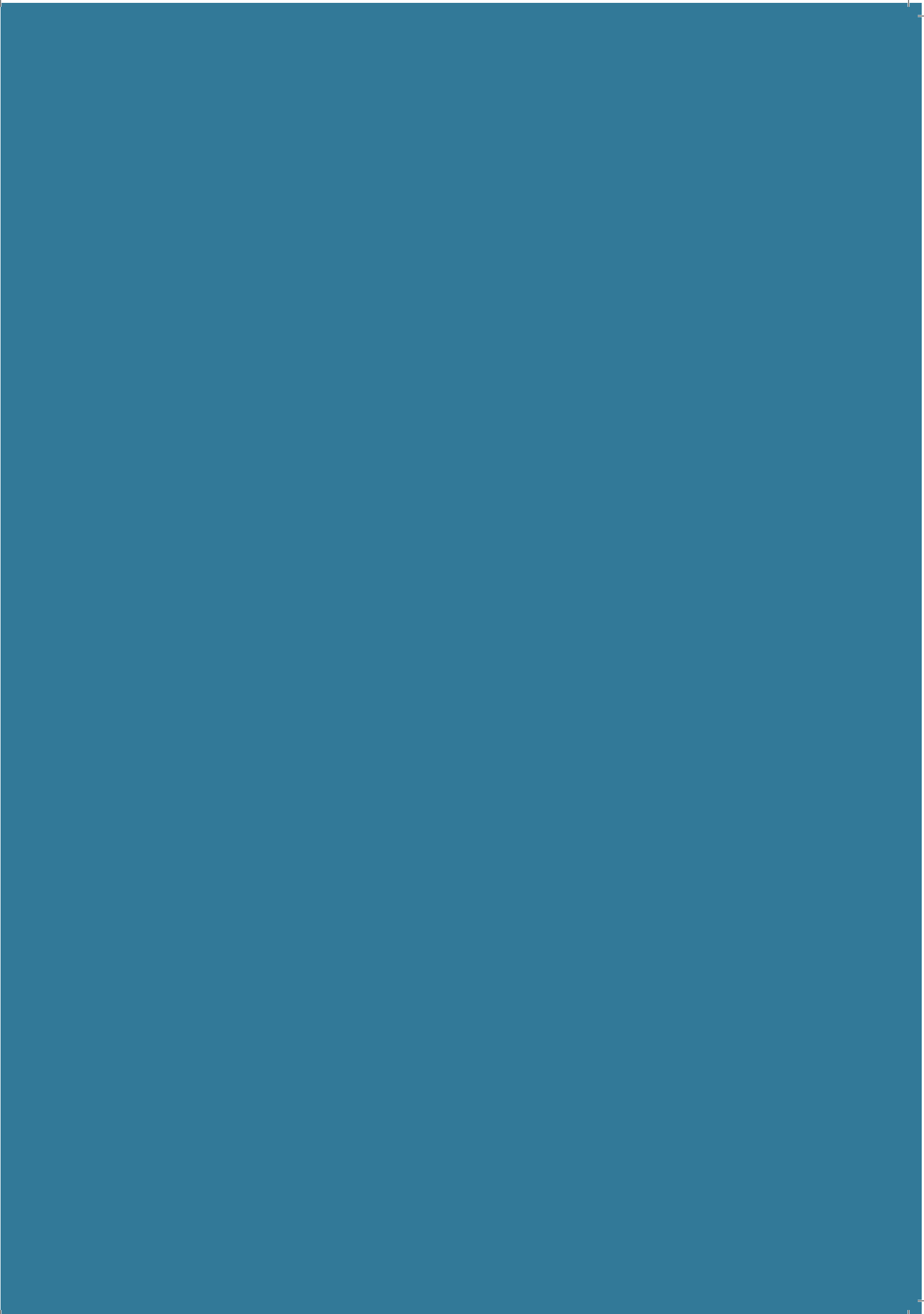
Parenting is easier when you can talk with others or spend some time looking after yourself. If you are really struggling, talk to your GP, PHN or other trusted professional or friend to get some support.

These key messages were developed by **Tusla, Child and Family Agency**.

For more information, please see www.parenting24seven.ie



www.parenting24seven.ie



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