Sometimes they arise because of an event that they do not know how to cope with such as a death of a dear grandparent or even a pet. Sometimes issues happen because of difficulties at home e.g. arguments or worse between their parents. They may need to look after an ill parent; that can be really stressful even if they attempt to hide this. There may be bullying in school. They may find the school work just too difficult without the teachers or parents realising that they are struggling. Children may be born with difficulties that make them more vulnerable to mental health issues.

Sometimes, early life stresses may leave a lasting legacy of irritability and a tendency to over-react to minor stresses.

1. How can I see the issues?

Issues can show themselves in many different ways. Very broadly speaking, children can show very

Parenting a child with issues

Find out about

1. How can I see the issues?
2. What can I do?
3. How is it different from ordinary parenting?
4. The child who withdraws or is very anxious
5. Negative Cycles
6. What do I do about anxious behaviour?
7. The child who is difficult, badly behaved
8. The Child who is overactive
9. What are my responsibilities?
10. How do I help my child’s brothers or sisters?
difficult behaviour that troubles parents, the child, teachers and/or peers. Alternatively, they can behave in withdrawn, anxious or unusual ways. They may experience distress inside but this may not be obvious to you. Of course there are other ways they can worry you with complex behaviour. See the session Common Problems for more information.

2. What can I do?

Firstly you need to decide whether you are right to be concerned or not. You can get good ideas on this by looking at our introductory material: “Should I be worried?”.

If you know that your child has issues there is good advice in “What should I do if I am worried?” and more information in “Common Problems”.

Usually, it is a good idea to speak to your child’s teacher or to speak to your GP about your concerns. You may have been referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services already.

If you think the problem has become more urgent, check our material: “What do I do in a crisis?” This will guide you to the level of urgency and gives advice about what to do next. Sometimes you need to help people to realise that the situation has changed, that it needs a more urgent response. Occasionally, it will suggest that you may just need to take your child to A&E.

You may well worry about what you should do about your own parenting. We suggest that it would be a good start to look at our topic on “Everyday parenting”.

3. How is it different from ordinary parenting?

In the topic of Everyday Parenting, we referred to a style called “authoritative parenting”.

What does this mean?

Well, firstly it means really trying to understand where your child is coming from, their point of view, what are their worries. This can be helped by using a technique sometimes called ‘active listening’.

Secondly, it means setting thoughtful boundaries for your child, what is acceptable behaviour from them, what is wrong and why. “Because I say so” is not generally a good option! It does not help the child learn why.

Thirdly, any punishments should be non-violent, suitable but not over the top. Encouraging what you want to see more of in their behaviour works best.

A key phrase to remember here is ‘be kind, be firm and be consistent’.

So, in summary authoritative parenting means setting clear standards, checking what your child is up to in a very ordinary, caring way. That is a skill in itself.

How do you do it without letting them get away with too much or becoming very intrusive?

There is no complete answer to that but it needs you to be balanced and calm to manage it well. It means supporting your child’s developing self-reliance and independence at a level that is right for their age. It is a child-centred style of parenting.

This must not be mistaken for anything goes! Parents need to remain clear about right and wrongs, safe and unsafe etc.

Letting your child go their own way completely does not help them. Your opinion as a parent with their best interests in mind must carry more weight but they need to understand why. Equally, making them do what you want without reason and just because you say so is also not very effective.

4. The child who withdraws or is very anxious

With a child who is withdrawing into themselves, sad or self-harming, or who becomes very anxious, or showing unusual behaviours like habits or rituals you are likely to need some ways to vary ‘authoritative’ or firm parenting.

Be very careful not to be authoritarian – “You do this just because I say so” or the “Anything goes” style these styles of
6. What do I do about anxious behaviour?

**Relaxation**
Similar cycles can occur in young people who become over anxious. Helping your child to relax, to learn methods to relax is helpful. It helps to provide a tool to manage and an opportunity to rebalance. Breathing exercises are an essential component.

**Distraction**
Helping your child to move on from being stuck in repetitive thinking and behaviours can be very helpful.

Distraction should be constructive and positive. For example, you can help them change physical activity. You can do something different together; you can change the direction and topic of conversation. This can explain to them what you are doing. You might say that they seem out of sorts. You have noticed that they are thinking too much or worrying too much.

Distraction is one of many ways of dealing with a problem, of moving on.

**Listening**
Doing something different will help. Being stuck doesn’t help. This is not the same as not listening to them.

Listening carefully and understanding are crucial. They are the starting points.

**Further Advice**
For further advice see “Keeping ourselves strong” and “Talking to our children”, “Risk, overdoses, self-harm, suicidal threats and running away.”

If their mood has changed and become much lower, more depressed and this carries on, you may want to look at the Core MindEd material “Sad, bored or isolated” (particularly page 16 in the presentation).

5. Negative Cycles

In general it is helpful to look out for negative cycles. Look for ways to interrupt them. You may need to tell your medical professionals about what you have seen.

So, for example, children can lose their focus and concentration when they become low and depressed. They then struggle to do school work; this gets them into trouble at school. They are told off and get low marks; this just increases their upset and low mood. So understand this negative and self-reinforcing cycle; do something about it.

You can speak to the teachers. You can provide more support for your child to help them cope. This can break the negative cycle and start relieving the upset.

Parenting can be harmful.

You will need to listen to what is upsetting them or their worries very carefully to understand these as much as you can.

You can help them to test out their worries in a graded way. Try experiments of things that they find difficult to do. Start with the easy stuff and gradually work up to things that they find more difficult.
7. The child who is difficult, badly behaved

Badly behaved children can be hard to help; you can become frustrated and angry at times. Try to remember how much you love them and how your love can help them. Focus on your thoughtful, kind but firm and very consistent parenting!

You can use techniques to help yourself calm down and stay calm.

- Try building the positive side of the relationship with your child. Just spending time with them will really be appreciated.
- What safe activities that they enjoy can you share?
- Encourage positive behaviour and demonstrate this by doing it yourself.
- Use the authoritative parenting style.
- Be careful about using punishments, physical discipline teaches them to use aggression, do not argue or negotiate over a punishment and once the punishment is over take some time to sit down with them and try to understand what was going on for them and how you can avoid it in the future.

8. The Child who is overactive

An overactive child needs help to slow themselves down. Try not to get sucked into a rapid and frantic to and fro with them. Try to help them learn techniques to manage forgetfulness (using lists and pictures).

Remember that these children often think that this is their fault; often it is not and they need professional help. You can talk to your GP about referral to CAMHS or to a paediatrician.

9. What are my responsibilities?

Is it my fault?

Stop thinking it is all your fault. You may have done things to contribute, usually without ever intending to do so. You may quite possibly be doing things that tend to make the issues continue. There may well be things that you can do to help it get better and quite possibly cure the problem.

So what should I do?

Don’t ignore the issues. Usually, they won’t go away by themselves. Use other material from MindEd to help you both in your own behaviour and parenting but also to learn more about what may be going on.

Talk with your partner and/or trusted friends. Have the courage to discuss your worries with your child’s teacher or perhaps the school nurse. They may be able to throw more light on your child in school and they may have helpful advice. Speak to your GP if you are worried.

Look for reputable sources on the internet. See “Finding helpful information and using it well” Manage yourself well. For example:

- Manage your own worries and anxieties. If you become unwell get help and support; if you don’t look after yourself, you will struggle to give the care you want to give to your child
- Don’t burden your child with your worries
- Don’t treat you child as if they were an adult friend
- Do spend time with your child or teenager – find activities to do together that you will both enjoy. Ordinary activities can be the most rewarding, especially when they have been forgotten and are remembered.
- Try to make sure that there is family time as well including mealtimes – this can be a challenge in busy lives but is shown to really help and improve things.

10. How do I help my child’s brothers or sisters?

Remember your other children also have needs.

Brothers and sisters can very easily feel forgotten, left out and ignored. They may be very worried or frightened about their sibling’s difficulties.
Remember to find out their points of view. Sometimes, they may become very jealous of the time that you are having to devote to your child who has the issues. You may overlook their reactions or that they have issues themselves.

Learn to use active listening skills in the family and with your child’s siblings. We may think that we have these and are very good at it but often we are not. So it is good to remind ourselves.

Be honest with your other children. If you don’t understand what is going on – tell them. Or if there is a reason tell them that too.

Siblings may become clingy and oversensitive – go with it and try to understand that they are worried.

It may help to sleep in the same room as some generally younger siblings for a short period (no longer than a week or two and then wean them off, e.g. stay by an open door till they fall asleep and gradually withdraw). You could consider telling the parent of their best friend what is going on so that you can ask them to help out if need be.

Not all family and friends can offer you the type of support that you want or were expecting for various reasons: they may be busy, unable to talk about feelings or worried that they will say the wrong thing.

Try not to be disappointed by people. This will use up your energy and changes nothing.

Ask support from those who you know can help you to avoid disappointment.

See our session on “top tips” for further ideas and information.