



CHAPTER ONE

HALT - what's going on for your child?



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Trish stared at the dark ceiling, trying to ignore Derek's deep-throated snores. She sighed to herself. She needed to talk with him about how they were dealing with the kids, but it always seemed to end in a tiff. It wasn't supposed to be like this. They'd waited several years before starting a family and then it was a joint decision. They both wanted kids. Of course they loved them - but nobody told them how damned hard it would be sometimes. Especially Alice. Right from the start she'd been a niggly baby - not like her older sister. Now she was nearly five years old and about to start school. If only they could get her to behave. Trish's mind wouldn't switch off, as much as she needed to sleep. Derek rolled over and nudged her hand, to stop her tapping her fingers against the bedding. Those annoying red numbers on the clock - 2:05. She eased herself out from under the duvet, trying not to disturb Derek. She slipped on her dressing gown, and headed for the kitchen. Perhaps a cup of chamomile tea would help her to settle.

She opened her iPad to glance at Facebook whilst she waited for the kettle to boil. She smiled at the cute kitten on Sarah's post and hit 'Like'. She swiped the page, glancing over entries when a comment from her friend Louise caught her eye.

A Parenting course?

Why would Louise have done a parenting course? She was so calm and steady with her kids.

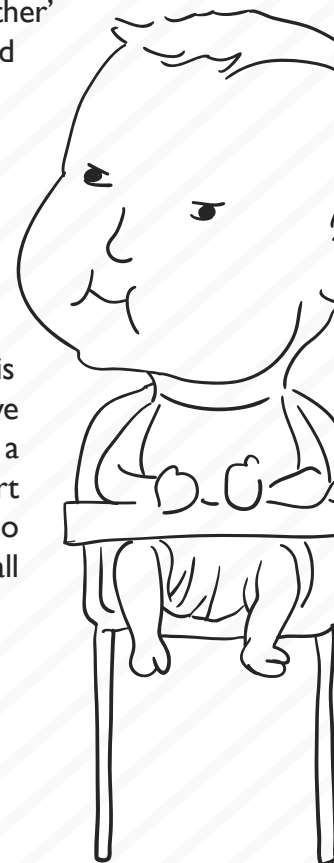
A Parenting course? And what was a 'Coaching Approach to Parenting'? Trish clicked the link. Would this give her the answers she was looking for?

Two evenings later Trish found herself and her friend Pam in a semicircle of people much like her. Regular parents doing the regular parenting thing. They spent time identifying what they wanted to cover in the course and now Joy, the facilitator, shared her story.



Being a qualified teacher I thought I knew how to raise children. While I cruised through their early years, by the time my second son was a teenager, family life was sliding out of control.

Somehow I was on a collision course with my second son. He wasn't a 'bad kid' - but I was so determined to be a 'good mother' that our relationship was being eroded. What I wish I'd known when my kids were young was how to reflect on how I was parenting. My mindset was, 'If I could only manage his behaviour!' But it's a fallacy that you can control anyone's behaviour. Parenting workshops are sometimes advertised: '*Managing Children's Behaviour*'. The bottomline is – you can't! It's not possible to manage anyone else's behaviour. Not even your child's. The only person's behaviour you can ever manage is your own. It's impossible to make another person behave the way you want them to. Have you ever tried to get a toddler to eat when he doesn't want to? His cheeks start filling, like hamster cheeks, no matter how much you coo or fly aeroplanes into his mouth. Then brrrrp – out it all comes. You can't even manage a toddler's behaviour!



*HOW TO RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S
CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR - TO GET THE
RESULTS YOU REALLY WANT*

So if you can't manage a child's behaviour, what can you do?

You can't make your child behave, but you can create an environment which will encourage cooperative behaviour. Here's how.



Are you sometimes daunted when your child is difficult, unreasonable or uncooperative? Whether it's backchatting, wails of 'You don't love me', angry 'I hate you' darts, homework issues, worries about bullying or self esteem, or one of the other myriad challenges that can wreck your head as a parent - here's the first signpost I wish I'd known - HALT. Perhaps you've come across HALT before? Stay with me because I'll

share some unique angles that might give you helpful insights into your child's challenging behaviour.

Regardless of age, when your child starts acting out, use HALT to stop and ask yourself:

H - IS HE HUNGRY?

A - IS HE ANGRY OR ANXIOUS?

L - IS HE LONELY OR ILL?

T - IS HE TIRED?

Let's look at each letter of the 'HALT signpost.

H - IS HE HUNGRY?

This might be physical hunger.

Children will act out when they are hungry.

When asking yourself, 'Is he hungry?' also think, 'Is he thirsty?' Sometimes your child can confuse thirst signals for hunger signals, when what his body needs is fluid. Encourage your child to drink water. Out of control or irritable behaviour can also be triggered by food additives, colourants or extra sugar.² Food allergies can also cause upsets.



Joy, the facilitator, was discussing the 'H for Hungry?' when Pam, who was sitting next to Trish, shifted in her seat. 'Can I share what happened with my four year old? About a month ago Peter went to a friend's birthday party. When I fetched him he ran straight onto the road, in front of a car. I couldn't believe it. He didn't stop when I shouted to him and then 'wham'. Thank God he wasn't seriously injured. But a couple of weeks later, after another birthday party, again he wouldn't stop when I told him to. This time I grabbed his arm and kept hold till I had him strapped into his car seat. Now I'm connecting the dots. I guess the sugar overload from all the party goodies upset his system so that he was not able to control himself. If I'd known about 'HALT' I would have made sense of his behaviour instead of scolding him for something he couldn't regulate.'

'Exactly,' nodded Joy, 'When you're faced with out-of-control behaviour, consider whether there is anything in his diet that needs change.'



Your child's behaviour might indicate he is hungry for food but also ask yourself whether he might be hungry for attention or hungry for love.

Sometimes parents say,

'Oh, he's doing that for attention.'

Yes, possibly he is. But if a child is acting out because he's physically hungry, you give him food. Why would you deprive a child if he's emotionally hungry? Often when I work with parents who are concerned about their child's behaviour, we soon recognise the child has faced some major upheaval in his life. Children will tell you in their behaviour what sometimes they can't tell you in words. If you focus only on how to 'correct' the challenging behaviour, without reflecting on what might lie beneath it, you might be missing your child's 'SOS'. Your child's behaviour might be telling you he is not in an 'okay' place.



The soft-spoken woman on the other side of the room suddenly said, 'My two year old has become aggressive towards me. Her Dad and I were having a hard time and he moved out a couple of weeks ago. Gemma hasn't seen him since. I thought she was too young to understand.'

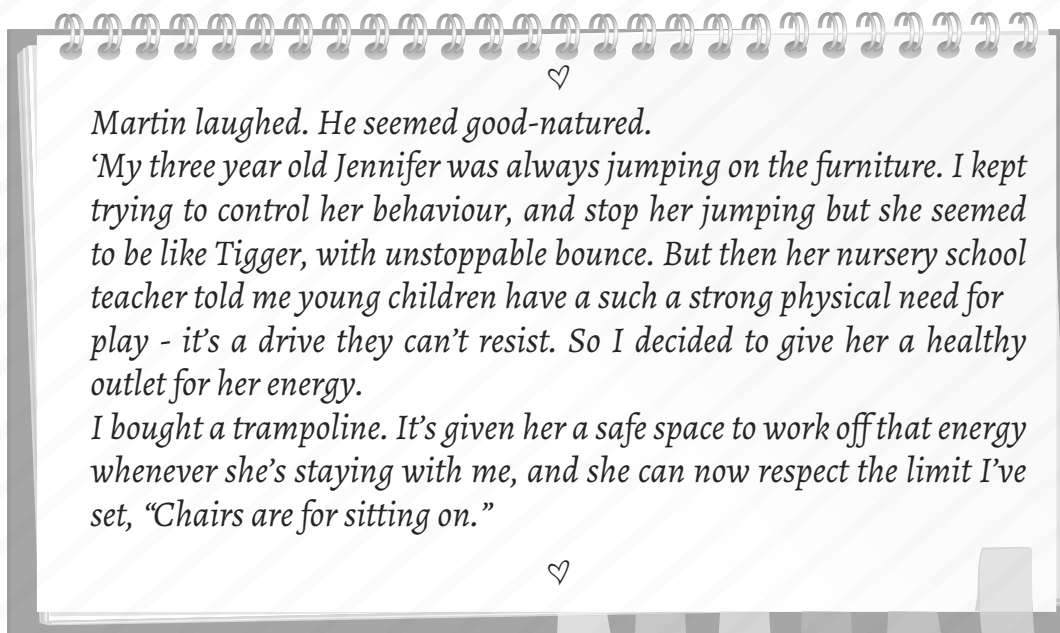
Joy nodded.

'It makes sense that when a child is 'hungry' for a loved one, she will act out. Thanks for sharing because it illustrates what we're discussing. If you focus only on trying to 'stop the behaviour' you might miss a key opportunity to connect with your child, when your child most needs your reassurance and connection.'



Also consider, 'Is he hungry for play?'

Children have a strong drive to play³ and if they have not had enough opportunity to work off their natural energy, they will let that energy out any way they can. This is a key one to consider when you are dealing with homework issues. Children have been sitting in school, having to hold in their hunger for play. It makes sense they need to expel this energy before they can settle to a task.



It's more helpful to figure out how to create safe play opportunities for your child than to try to eliminate playful behaviour. Children need to play and work off physical energy. Until a child's hunger is satisfied, whether it's physical hunger or emotional hunger, or play hunger, he will try to get his needs met. When you stop and think about it, this is healthy behaviour! How else would you know his needs - whether they are physical, emotional or play needs?

Play is Nature's way of preparing young creatures, including children, for adult life. Baby seals swim and dive, lion cubs stalk and pounce. The skills learnt in play are essential for living a grown-up life successfully. Your child's play helps him learn physical skills but also helps him to discover how we cooperate and work together in community. But it makes sense that sometimes you feel annoyed when your child's fooling around when you have a busy agenda; or you have to deal with his frustrated behaviour when his need to play isn't met. Your stressed reaction will probably melt when you recognise your child's behaviour as a message. And your child is far more likely to cooperate when his physical and emotional needs are met. So first ask yourself, 'Is he hungry?'

A - IS HE ANGRY OR ANXIOUS?

Your child needs emotional support to learn to deal with strong emotions. She is likely to act out when angry or anxious feelings overwhelm her. The key to dealing with aggressive behaviour is to recognise and acknowledge the anger behind it. Anger is always a signal something needs to change.

Angry and anxious feelings will dissolve when your child feels listened to and acknowledged. Instead of scolding your child about how he should behave, you will find your child more cooperative when you respond to what he is experiencing.



Some parents in the group looked puzzled when Joy shared this.

'Let me give you an example,' she said.

'I was visiting my friend who was home from the maternity hospital. Everyone was making a fuss of her and the baby. The doorbell rang and the four year old ran to open the door. As she got to the door, her twelve-year-old brother opened it to let the visitor in. The child went into meltdown, bursting into wails and floods of tears. She wanted to open the door. I figured I needed to do something.

I gave a nod to the visitor to hold on for one minute and I closed the door again.

Then I said, "Oh, you want to let the visitors in. You open the door."

She immediately recovered from her meltdown and opened the door.

The visitor went into the room to see the mother and baby, and I knelt, took the child gently by the shoulders, and said,

"You can use words to let us know what you need."

'But isn't she getting away with bratty behaviour!' exclaimed Martin.

Joy reflected that there had been significant change in the home. It makes sense a young child will need support when she's overwhelmed.

By responding to what the four year old needed, rather than trying to CONTROL her behaviour, Joy helped to regain her sense of being of value and to feel competent in the situation. When we connect and communicate our children are more likely to cooperate.



The 'A' in HALT is also a reminder to ask yourself, 'Is she anxious?' Your child might become clingy, bossy or demanding at times when she's feeling anxious. Different children react differently. It's easy to focus on trying to stop your child's behaviour but if you attend to the anxious feelings, the irritating behaviour is more likely to abate. Like other strong emotions, anxiety needs to be heard. The more you learn to listen to your child the more you will know what's needed.



*A tired looking lady joined the discussion.
'Our daughter Samantha comes home from school and gorges herself on cake. I'm always giving out to her about putting on weight but that make matters worse. Now that I hear you say: "Is she anxious?", I'm wondering whether she's comfort eating. Perhaps instead of focusing on my child's weight, I need to think about what's going on for her.'*



L - IS SHE LONELY OR ILL?

As a parent, part of your role is to help your child develop the skills to create the friendships she needs to thrive, as well as to learn to be comfortable with her own company.

'If you don't accept yourself fully, you won't live fully, and if you don't live fully you'll need some other way to get full.' Victoria Moran



*'So if Samantha's eating cake because she's anxious, what might that anxiety be telling you?' asked Joy.
'I think she's lonely. She doesn't have friends at school,' replied Samantha's mother.
'So what's needed?' asked Joy.
The discussion unfolded. Samantha needed a strategy to develop friendships. Her parents needed to focus on the longer-term challenge of supporting their child to develop stronger self-esteem and social skills to*

handle the school situation.

'HALT matters whatever age your child,' Trish realised. Samantha's mother relaxed into the chair, nodding. Obviously it had registered with her that 'Lonely?' was the issue troubling her daughter.



It's important to recognise the difference between being lonely and being alone. Some children are content in their own company. Or they can feel lonely even when they're in a crowd. When we're lonely we feel isolated and dejected even if there are people all around. But we can be alone and feel fine. We can feel 'all one' - complete in ourselves.

The 'L' of HALT is also a reminder to check whether your child is becoming iLL. Often children sickening with something start acting out because they aren't feeling 100% and may need care and special attention. At the same time, it's important not to be putting ideas of illness into your child's head. When you say,

'Have you got a sore tummy?' your child will agree with your diagnosis! Rather, ask her to tell you about how she is feeling. Sore tummies or headaches can be symptoms of anxiety. A listening ear may be a better remedy than a tablet. The more you connect and communicate with your child, the more you will be in tune with what is needed.

Emotional upsets often manifest as body discomfort. If you speed in with the 'spoonful of something', you may be creating a life-long pattern of dependency on medication, instead of helping your child to learn to listen to what her body is telling her. (And of course this is equally important for boys). The 'spoonful of something' may appear to be the quick fix if you have a busy agenda, but what do you model when you reach for pills at the slightest complaint?

A spoonful of medicine isn't going to take away the issue concerning your child. If you become aware of a pattern, find the space to connect and ask,

'I notice you have a sore tummy on Monday mornings.

What might this sore tummy be telling us?'

Your response can help your child to learn to choose healthy options. You can develop your child's personal awareness and her ability to communicate about things which trouble her. Help her to learn to

articulate what she needs.

And of course there are times when crankiness can be a sign of illness. You, as parent, intuitively know your child. What I mean by 'intuitively' is the blend of your conscious knowledge and your intuition. When you take the time and space to consciously hear her and to intuitively tune in with your heart as well as your head, you will intuitively know what response is needed.



T - 'IS SHE RUNNING A TEMPERATURE?' OR 'TIRED?'

If your child is running a temperature, her behaviour may be difficult; but behavioural issues can also arise if she's too hot or too cold. Young children don't always recognise they are over-hot and need to be reminded to take off their extra clothing.

Sometimes you may overlook the obvious with an 'out of sorts' child. Overtired children, who don't get enough sleep on a regular basis, can be difficult. A regular routine where your child is settled in bed is key to getting enough sleep.

Your child may resist having a set bedtime, but over-late nights and crankiness are often bed-partners. If 'Tired' seems to be the issue,

dealing with the long-term cause is going to get better results than dealing with the symptom. The cranky behaviour may be a signal to establish a more consistent bedtime routine.

'Tired' also refers to children being tired of sitting still too long – in a restaurant, in school or doing homework. Or tired of being shut in the house all day. As Martin observed, children have a 'hunger for play' - when they respond to their play drive they are not being naughty. They are doing what children are intended to do. Letting you know they need to play. The challenge is to balance your adult agenda with the needs of your child.



Trish was looking forward to the next Parenting session. She was excited to share her experience.

'The car trip after school is a nightmare. Often Alice starts it, but the kids niggle and squabble all the way home. The twenty minute drive wrecks my head and I'm frazzled and shouting by the time we pull into our driveway. But after learning the HALT signpost last week I figured they were probably hungry. So each morning this week I've prepared a snack-box for each child for the trip home.

And I've even done the healthy bit - they're munching fruit and nuts. It's worked. The fighting on the way home from school has reduced by about eighty per cent!'



TO SUM UP

When you react to your child's challenging behaviour, without stopping to think, it's like braking on an oil slick. Things easily slide out of control. When you HALT and reflect on what might be behind your child's behaviour, you will find a helpful way forward.

So here's a quick overview of 'HALT'.

H IS HE HUNGRY? OR THIRSTY?

IS HE HUNGRY FOR PLAY?

OR FOR ATTENTION?

A IS HE ANGRY OR ANXIOUS?

L IS HE LONELY OR ILL?

T IS HE TIRED?

Sometimes it's hard to be the parent you want to be, even when you have the best of intentions. So, in the next chapter we'll look at HALT – regarding yourself as Parent, and why this matters if you want a calmer, happier home.