



Strengthening competence –
Protecting children



Information for Parents

A project aimed at fostering children's social competence

Englisch/anglais/inglese

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This brochure is available in 13 languages. They can be ordered, or downloaded in PDF format at: www.comp-act.ch

CompAct is a programme of Kinderschutz Schweiz (Swiss Foundation for the Protection of Children). Active throughout Switzerland, the non-profit foundation's aim is to make it possible for all children to grow up in an environment free of violence, in which their safety and dignity are safeguarded, and ensure that their rights are respected and their integrity protected.

Illustrations: Marianne Kauer, Kinderschutz Schweiz

Strengthening competence – protecting children

Almost without exception, parents' most ardent desire is for their children's future to be a good one. This desire usually encompasses the wish that children be able to develop their abilities to their fullest potentials and constructively shape and positively experience the lives they share with others. Every day, parents play a significant role in promoting the development of their children's social skills, contributing to the achievement of these aims by doing so. By giving their children affection and attention, by recognising their needs and wants and taking them into account adequately in daily life while also setting the necessary limits, parents exert a positive influence on their children's development. However, giving children the attention they need or keeping a cool head is not always easy in the sometimes hectic life with small children day to day. The

following pages address stressful situations of this kind, encouraging parents to choose a non-violent approach for dealing with challenging situations, one that fosters children's development. As a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Switzerland has acknowledged that children should be able to develop their personalities to their fullest potential and have a right to grow up free of violence, among other things. Violence is not limited to physically striking a person: psychological punishments, like humiliation, intimidation, verbal

abuse and the neglect of a child and its needs, are also forms of violence. No two conflicts with children unfold in the same way, nor is there just one "right strategy" for dealing with conflicts or other challenges constructively. Violence, however, is never a solution. This is because children who repeatedly experience rejection or violations of boundaries are unable to develop into strong and self-reliant personalities, of the kind that are able to cope with life's challenges so successfully, which is what their parents actually want for them.

As a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Switzerland has acknowledged that children should be able to develop their personalities to their fullest potential and have a right to grow up free of violence.

Reasoned requests – not corporal punishment

One way that children acquire their behaviours is by observing the behaviour of others. This is true in the case of the considerate treatment of other people and with respect to violent behaviour. Thus the approach most likely to result in the effect parents seek is to resolve conflicts not by hitting a child, but by helping him or her to understand the reason for a request and the consequences of his or her actions.

Children can certainly take quite a toll on their parents' nerves at times. An entire tube of toothpaste squeezed out, yards of unrolled toilet paper, a stubborn child who completely ignores what he or she is told: this can all be hard to cope with sometimes. Nonetheless: corporal punishment, e.g. striking, shaking, pushing, slapping

or pulling hair, is a violation of children's rights and is ineffective as a child-raising tool in the long term. Though fear of further violence may cause the child to suppress the unwanted behaviour, he or she will not learn why the behaviour is disruptive, or what he or she could do differently. What's more, violence breeds more violence because children learn by observing the behaviours of others. There is a high probability that children who see that corporal punishment or other acts of violence are accepted and can be used to resolve conflicts will themselves engage in aggressive behaviour someday, directed either against other people or against themselves.

When parents explain to children in a respectful tone why their behaviour is not acceptable and what is expected of

them in its place, a different effect is achieved. Once children come to understand the reason for a requirement and learn to gauge the consequences of their own behaviour, they will, in time, be able to adhere to the rules that underpin family life on their own. Involving children in setting right the results of their actions supports their learning processes. Children also learn through repetition. They have to experience rules and consequences that are always the same over and over again in different situations, and also learn that there is always a way to solve a problem that does not involve violence. Although this approach to conflicts does require a great deal of patience, it pays off in the long run.



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Criticising behaviour – not belittling the individual

What children hear said about themselves affects how they see themselves. Children who see that their opinions matter, that their wants and needs are considered and that they are fundamentally valued are able to develop positive self-images. Repeated humiliations have a negative impact on children's self-image though.

Children want to do many things for which they may not yet have the necessary abilities. This is a motor for their continual development: it helps a crawling infant transform into a running, climbing, bicycle-riding, jumping schoolchild. Along with the many successes though, there are also failures, mishaps and sometimes moments of frustration for the child, and occasionally for the parents as well. Regularly hearing themselves called

“dumb”, “incompetent” or “annoying” in such situations affects children's self-image, they themselves begin to believe that they are of little value as persons and lose some of their faith in their own abilities. This is because everything children hear about themselves influences the way that they see themselves.

Humiliating moments like these cause some children to become anxious, develop physical symptoms and become withdrawn. Others develop hostility and become aggressive. This can result in a vicious circle, with undesirable behaviour on the part of the child giving rise to anger and disappointment, and renewed verbal abuse by the parent or caregiver. No child should ever be disparaged as a person (“You are such a clumsy child!”); instead, the child's behaviour should be addressed

in a respectful manner. Hearing what is expected of them, rather than only what they have done wrong, helps children to orient themselves and modify their own behaviour (“I want you to sit quietly at the table so that nothing gets spilled.”). The child's age should always be taken into account: a younger child, for example, cannot be expected to sit quietly at the table for any great length of time.

Good self-esteem is an important and valuable asset that parents send with their children on their path through life. Children with a high level of self-confidence are far more successful at tackling new challenges bravely and at persevering in the face of failure or disappointment, and thus at coping with life's challenges in a constructive way.



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Relating – not withdrawing affection

There is nothing children need more than to feel noticed and loved. This is true even when a child has just done something that hurts or annoys his or her parents. Only children who know themselves to be loved unconditionally are capable of building trusting and committed relationships with other people.

Many parents use the approach of deliberately ignoring their child as a form of punishment. A parent might stop speaking to a child for a while, for example, or intentionally ignore him or her. Children usually suffer far more from withdrawals of affection of this kind than adults might imagine. The repeated experience rejection teaches children that love is not unconditional. They develop the sense that they are loved not for who they

are, but for conformance or good behaviour. The belief that they have to behave in a certain way to obtain affection, or “achieve” in order to keep parental protection can be a source of great stress for children. Children who are regularly punished with the withdrawal of affection feel defenceless vis-à-vis their parents or caregivers and have difficulty asserting themselves, trusting other people and entering into committed relationships.

Children, like adults, should keep having the opportunity to learn from conflict situations. It is therefore important not to withdraw from the relationship with the child, but to keep the conversation going, whatever the child may have done. Explaining to children calmly why the way they chose to behave was inappropriate or unacceptable and clearly communicat-

ing what they could do differently the next time helps them to choose another behaviour in the future – not because they are afraid not to, but out of conviction.

Children whose parents/caregivers regularly and quite intentionally give them attention and show them that they are loved are able to build up faith in relationships and in themselves. As they do negative treatment, children internalise these positive messages, resulting in high levels of self esteem and thus the ability to maintain relationships.



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Clear rules – not threats

Family life is based on values and rules; every family has them. When, as often happens, conflicts result from a child's failure to adhere to these basic principles, harsh threats are sometimes pronounced. Children are better at accepting rules that are justified, clear and have been established in advance, but they are also better at accepting rules when they helped to formulate them. By contrast, compelling a child to do as it is told immediately under threat of draconian punishments is likely to result in a power struggle, making this an ineffective form of conflict resolution.

The times when children break a family rule or simply refuse to mind their parents are some of the major challenges associated with bringing up

children. Parents often tie their demands to a specific time-frame in the interests of keeping the daily routine running as smoothly as possible. When a child does not immediately comply, threats are issued. Not infrequently, scenarios like these culminate in power struggles between parents and children and give rise to negative emotions. Moreover, children quickly realise that some threats cannot be carried out, and thus these threats make less and less of an impression on them.

Limits and rules are important for children, because they enable children to feel secure when it comes to behaviour. It is easier for children to comply with established rules that they encounter regularly ("Bedrooms are tidied once a week."), when someone is paying attention to rule adher-

ence, and when rules are communicated in an understandable way. They also find it less difficult to comply when they themselves have helped to establish the requirements and how they are to be met ("I should vacuum tomorrow. When would you be able to tidy up? I would have some time to help you this evening."). This allows them to feel that they bear some of the responsibility for solving the problem, making them more likely to understand that the idea is to balance various wants and needs than they would be had they simply received an order ("Tidy up your room right now!"). Also, sometimes when children are intractable it is because they do not know how to tackle a particular task. In that case it helps to give children step-by-step, affectionate guidance as they perform the task.



Limits and rules are important for children, because they enable children to feel secure about the behaviour expected of them.

Respecting boundaries – not ignoring them

Children who learn to distinguish between good, bad or strange touching and are allowed to be in control of what happens to their own bodies tend to be better able to protect themselves against (sexual) assault. For this reason, it is essential that adults help children to be aware of and protect their physical boundaries.

Adults do not greet every acquaintance with a kiss or a hug either. It might feel inappropriate for the social situation. Or they might prefer to avoid body contact because they do not feel close enough to someone. Children feel the same way. Particularly in the greeting context though, adults often touch, kiss, hug or pick up a child with complete disregard for the verbal or nonverbal signals that child is sending. Yet, like adults, children

have the right to control what happens to their bodies and to refuse touching that feels inappropriate to them.

The example of the greeting context illustrates the importance of talking to children about what kinds of touching they like or dislike. Doing so helps them to be aware of the boundaries they set for their bodies and to stand up for them. What a child wants to happen at greetings or partings can be discussed in the same context. The decision may be easier if the child is presented with a variety of options: a kiss on the cheek, a long or a short hug, or perhaps just a brief handshake or simply a wave. This enables a child to behave in a way that is appropriate to the social context and at the same time to pick the option that suits him or her best.

Once aware of their own boundaries, children have to rely on their parents to help them enforce them. If a child is pressured to allow unwanted touching or an unpleasant form of greeting by a third party, parents can take a stand with their child, or on their child's behalf. Parents who make this effort to help their children be aware of and maintain their physical boundaries, and who step up to defend those boundaries when necessary, are making an important contribution to the protection of their children against (sexual) assault.



Talking to children about what kinds of touching they like or dislike is important. It helps them to be aware of the boundaries they set for their bodies and to stand up for them.

Respecting children's desires – not disregarding them

The experience of self-determination is important for children's development, because it teaches them to take responsibility for their actions. Children whose desires are repeatedly ignored, on the other hand, learn primarily to conform, which does not strengthen their personality along with all of its abilities. It is therefore essential to give children appropriate scope to realise their desires.

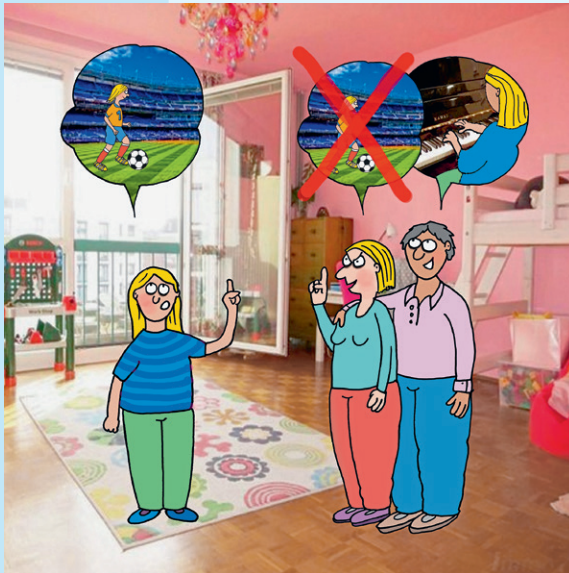
Like adults, children differ in their interests, and their desires vary in degree and form. The desire for quiet or solitude, for example: some children like to play alone for longer periods of time while others prefer to be right in the midst of things. Differences are apparent in regard to other preferences as well. Some children love to

immerse themselves in a sport, others like playing a musical instrument or working on a creative project.

Generally, parents try to nurture any special abilities their children may have. Sometimes they can find it difficult to accept their children's desires though. For instance, a parent's desire for a shy child to learn to play with others is understandable. However, routinely convincing a child into trying to fit itself into a group of children despite the child's desire not to do so is likely to hinder rather than promote that child's development. The same is true when parents ignore those of their child's interests that do not correspond to their own. Children whose wants are repeatedly passed over learn that their desires are not important and that they will only be accepted when they conform with other people's

expectations. The more a child conforms in order to satisfy other people's desires, the more that child feels like a stranger to him- or herself. The child will also lack the opportunity to learn, for instance, to make his or her own decisions and take responsibility for them.

Taking children seriously does not mean that parents should not encourage them to try new experiences or not expect them to stick with something once they have decided to do it. Nor does it mean fulfilling their every wish. It is essential, though, to take notice of and to respect the child's personality and his or her desires.



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Meeting basic needs – not neglecting them

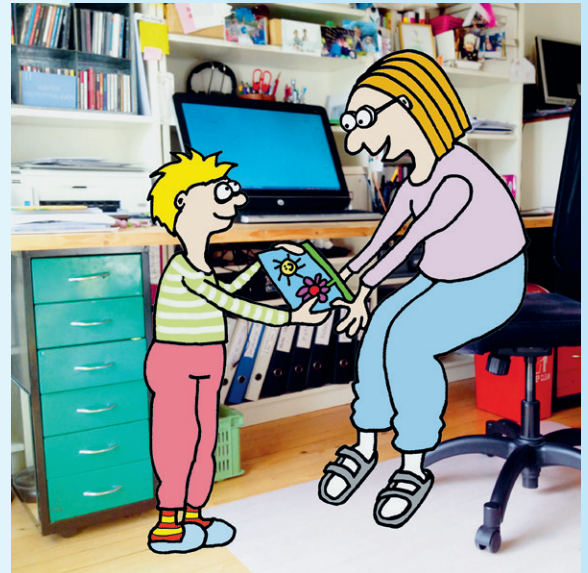
Building a stable, trust-based relationship between parents and children takes time spent together. A child's basic need for parental love and affection can only be met through interaction with parents and the loving involvement of parents in the child's interests and activities. Sweets and gifts are no substitute for this valuable time spent interacting with a child.

Day to day life in a family is often hectic, and many parents must cope with the double burden of work and family. In this situation, it is easy for some needs or desires of every family member to go unmet. Many parents suffer themselves from this situation, and some will try to compensate for the lack of time with their children by giving them sweets or toys to put them

in a happy frame of mind for a short while. Gifts can indeed serve as proof of affection, but they are entirely inadequate when it comes to meeting a child's needs for love and affection.

It is perfectly fine for parents to start taking more time for themselves or their work as children grow more independent. However, children of preschool or school age still need a lot of affection from their parents, despite their ever greater independence. They feel this affection when, for example, they receive their parents' undivided attention and notice that their parents are interested in their activities and well-being. Most children enjoy physical closeness as well and like to sit on a lap or be held. Doing activities together also conveys parents' affection to their children.

Children who have a strong attachment to their parents or other people they trust feel safe and sheltered and have confidence in themselves and their surroundings. They need this in order to boldly explore the world and be able to tackle and successfully overcome new challenges time and again.



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Respecting children's ability – not pressure to achieve

Children are inherently curious and motivated to learn. The achievements asked of them needs to be reasonable, though, for a child to learn successfully. Too much academic pressure or parental expectations that are too high can create mental blocks to learning, resulting in loss of motivation and failure to achieve. It is therefore important to respect the child's individual ability and watch for indications that the demands placed are too high.

Parents want their children to make the best of their potential to achieve. Wanting one's child to get a school leaving certificate that will keep the doors open to a wide range of career options is understandable. And it is important and appropriate for parents to be interested in how and what their

children are doing in school and to communicate that interest to their children.

Parents whose expectations about how their children will perform in school are fundamentally positive, strengthen their children's confidence in their own abilities and by doing so nurture their ability to achieve. However parents' expectations must be such that the child can live up to them. A child who is put under pressure to meet unrealistic parental expectations will lose confidence in its abilities and the motivation to learn. The result is a vicious circle, with pressure, fear and academic failure causing damage to the child's self esteem. Punishing children for school performance that parents believe to be poor or inadequate only reinforces this negative cycle.

When their natural curiosity is fostered, and challenging, but achievable standards are set for them, children have the possibility of developing their potential accordingly. School is not the only place where learning happens though. Children have a lot of learning experiences while playing during their free time as well. This is why it is so important for children to have free time, theirs to structure as they choose, in which they can explore the world, with all of its many facets, without feeling any pressure to perform, or simply to relax, and thus be ready to face new challenges.



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Stimulus for learning – not unlimited media consumption

Today, digital media are matter of course in our daily lives. Nonetheless, they should not be used without restriction, particularly not by younger children of preschool or primary-school age. Children learn primarily through direct communication and by experiencing things through their own senses. Excessive screen time keeps children from having these learning experiences and thus has a negative impact on children's social and mental development.

Parents are important role models for many behaviours, including the use of media. When parents spend a lot of time in front of a screen, their children will imitate them. Even when parents limit their own media consumption, digital devices have an irre-

sistible fascination for many children. Moreover, which of us has never taken advantage of this magical pull of the screen to enable ourselves to deal with an important telephone call undisturbed?

It is inadvisable to allow children to consume electronic media without supervision or restriction for many different reasons. Spending too much time in front of a monitor, smartphone or tablet has a negative impact on children's mental, language and physical development. Children need to experience the world with all of their senses in order to learn with lasting effect. Playing games with their parents or other children, reading stories together, painting, building or doing other creative projects, or running or playing in nature: all of these are learning experiences of this type.

Once children have reach the age of three, there is no reason to object to limited consumption of films, game apps or digital books or images appropriate for children. Primary-school children can also gather their first experiences with computers. Parents should be involved in their children's experiences with media though, because children need their help to critically process what they have seen and experienced.

Experts have recommended limiting the time available for media to no more than 30 minutes daily for children between to ages of three and six, and to 45 minutes daily for six to nine year-olds, in order not to jeopardise healthy development.



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Caring parental interactions – not couple violence

Children are very acute when it comes to perceiving how adults treat one another and the atmosphere within a family. Seeing that their parents treat one another in a caring manner makes them feel safe and secure. By contrast, having to watch or hear their parents resolve conflicts through violence triggers feelings of fear and helplessness in children. It is therefore important that parents relations with one another are also free of violence and as respectful as possible.

How adults treat one another is not lost on children. They are acute observers of the atmosphere between their parents: they notice, for example, how they argue and whether a reconciliation has occurred. It is very disturbing for children to see their parents re-

solve conflicts by violent means, threatening one another, verbally abusing, humiliating or refusing to speak to one another, or even physically striking one another. When exposed to this kind of violence, children feel helpless and become very afraid and anxious about the parent subjected to the violence. This can frequently have long-term negative impacts on their development. Sensing an atmosphere of tension, threat or oppressive power in a place where they should feel safe and secure triggers great stress in children, which can lead to depression, agitation, anxiety or aggression. What's more, parents are role models in these situations too: children keep learning, even at times when parents would rather they would not.

Sometimes violence between parents can continue in a relationship even after a separation. It is extremely stressful for a child to be exposed to the continual disparagement of one parent by another during visits and thereby be compelled to take one parent's side. Children generally have a close relationship with both parents and want to exercise their right to have contact with both. This right should only be restricted if the parent-child relationship is not in the child's best interests.

Watching parents deal with conflicts in a constructive manner teaches children how to solve their own problems with other people while also giving them the inner security they need to develop in the healthiest way possible.



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Thank you very much!



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