

ASK SMALLISH

Our panel of EXPERTS offers advice and support on your RELATIONSHIP, pregnancy, parenting and LIFE problems

Q My six-year-old daughter is so bossy, insisting on doing everything her way, that her friends end up not wanting to play with her. What can I do?

A MELISSA HOOD: This is not at all uncommon, especially if your daughter is the eldest child in your family. Eldest children are often used to being in charge at home. Many children automatically pick up that other kids don't like this behaviour, while others need to be explicitly taught these social skills.

Firstly, don't tell her off or lecture her about it. Empathise that she likes her ideas. She thinks they're the best. And she likes to have games go just the way she wants them to. Resist the temptation to lecture her on letting others have a go at this point. Once she's got the message that you understand her and she's not a bad person for being the way she is, she will be listening as you start to redirect her behaviour.

For a six-year-old to resist her own impulses and defer to what someone else wants requires some strengthening of her prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that deals with impulse control. Luckily, parents can strengthen their children's brains through emotion coaching.

When we describe what our children are feeling, as well as validating and accepting that feeling, we're making connections between the emotional centre of the brain and the impulse-control part. Her listening will be greatly enhanced if you can also point out in what ways she is already a good friend. Does she share her belongings? Can she keep a secret? Does she stick up for her friends? Is she fun to be with? If you can point to examples of these traits, then she will be more open to learning about being a better friend. Now you're ready to teach her to collaborate with her mates.

The best way to do this is in role play. You could act out

scenes with her, or you could use teddy bears and dolls. Do it the 'wrong' way but without labouring the point about it being 'her' way. Say: "Let's see how dolly feels when teddy doesn't let her join in." Make sure you do it the 'other' way too – where both toys get to contribute ideas to the game. Help her to see that the game is better when there are many ideas; it's more fun.

She may also need help recognising when others are getting sick of being bossed around. Look at pictures of different facial expressions, or watch TV with the sound off to practise reading facial cues.

Lastly, consider that her bossiness may be related to self-doubt. Build up her self-esteem with lots of descriptive praise. Notice and comment on signs of impulse-control, letting others have a turn or other kinds of sharing.

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Q I've heard immunisations could be bad for my child – is it safer to not vaccinate?

A DR ALEXANDRA PHELAN: Over the past few years, there have been news stories suggesting vaccines, especially the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine, can overwhelm a child's immune system and bring on conditions such as autism.

However, this is not true. Vaccines use extremely weak or dead versions of the illnesses they protect against. If a child was given 11 vaccines at the same time, it would only use a 1,000th of their immune system! A study of UK autism diagnosis rates found that there was no change in

THE PANEL



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the rates of diagnosis after the introduction of the MMR vaccine in 1987.

On average, 50,000 British children receive the MMR vaccine a month. And while, over the past few decades, there has been a rise in autism diagnosis, this is due to a broadening of the autism spectrum and better diagnosis by specialists.

We all want to do the best for our children. We look out for them and protect them in every way we can – baby gates, car seats, a healthy diet, a good school – but one of the best ways to protect your child is to make sure they have all their vaccinations.

Vaccines save children's lives. Vaccinations protect children from a range of serious and sometimes fatal diseases. Diseases such as smallpox and polio no longer disable or kill children in the UK. In countries where there is no widespread vaccination programme, there are an estimated 1.5 million preventable childhood deaths a year. If a child isn't vaccinated, they're at high risk of catching a serious illness and becoming very ill.

Vaccination is extremely safe. Each vaccine a child receives has been through rigorous testing, and they are only given to children after a long and careful process.

Ensuring children are vaccinated doesn't just protect them, it protects others around them too. Children in the UK still contract and die from vaccine-preventable diseases. Some children can't be vaccinated because they have an allergy, they're too young or they have a disease like leukaemia. If the other children in the community are vaccinated, it protects those who aren't.

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Vaccines may involve some discomfort; your child may experience tenderness at the injection site. It's not nice seeing a child being given an injection, but the disease-prevention benefits of immunisation greatly outweigh any side effects.

But if your child has any allergies, speak to your GP about their upcoming vaccines – some vaccinations include

albumin, which aren't suitable for children with an egg allergy, for instance.



My husband and I are going through a difficult patch, and shout at each other a lot. Will this impact our children? They are five and three, but don't seem to have noticed anything is wrong.



DEE HOLMES: All relationships go through ups and downs, and arguing is a normal occurrence. New research by Relate Marriage Care and Relationships Scotland has found that half (50 per cent) of people with children say they argue with their partner at least occasionally, compared to 39 per cent of those without children.

But it's not so much if you argue, but how you argue that matters. Seeing parents argue is not necessarily negative for children if they can see how the arguments get resolved. After all, humans rarely agree on everything, so it is important that we model to children how to deal with disagreement and conflict. As you say you are shouting a lot, it sounds likely that the arguments you are having are destructive rather than productive.

High levels of conflict between parents can damage the parent-child relationship, and affect children's wellbeing and adjustment. When parents are constantly in conflict, children are also more likely to feel anxious, depressed or withdrawn and experience behavioural problems.

You say that your children have not noticed that anything is wrong, but I wonder how they would communicate that they had? Some children appear to ignore something if they want to pretend it isn't happening, whereas others will show how they feel in their behaviour.

No one is perfect as a parent, so it is important that we communicate with our children and acknowledge the mistakes we make. If your children are around when you and your husband shout at each other, let them know that you realise you should not have shouted, and explain you were angry and did not deal with it as you should have. This is a good example to set and will help when you next tell them off for shouting and ask them to speak nicely.

I wonder whether besides the actual witnessing of the



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shouting, there are also other issues that may be affecting them? Are you spending less time as a family, in order to avoid couple time? Are they experiencing either of you as distracted or not as available to them emotionally because you are preoccupied with the problems in your relationship? Do remember that children often overhear conversations you may have with friends, so they may have heard one of you say negative things about the other.

There's no getting away from the fact this will impact in some way on your children, but be sure to also recognise the effect it is going to have on the two of you. The stress and the unhappiness this generates will be upsetting for you both. It is important to devote some time to sorting out 'the difficult patch'.

This may be simple if you can both take some time to talk, listen and create some ground rules for enabling this. It may be that you feel you need to seek some counselling and therefore making an appointment at Relate (relate.org.uk) may be a first step.

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you are in the early stages of labour, a warm bath is advisable. You can also sit in a birth pool to aid relaxation when your labour is progressing. I find that this really helps the cervix to dilate as both you and your pelvic floor are able to relax.

A portable machine, called a TENS, is available to women in labour to help reduce the pain caused by contractions. The device is attached to your back and provides small electrical pulses, which really help in the early stages of labour.

In hospital, your midwife will often offer you a combination of Nitrous oxide (NO₂) and oxygen – commonly known as gas and air – which can help to reduce the pain. This has no effect on your baby, as you inhale it straight into your lungs, and it also doesn't affect you knowing exactly what's happening to your body. She can also give you injections that can provide effective pain relief and allow you to sleep for some time.

Deep breaths and controlled breathing (taught in antenatal classes) can help you to put the pain out of your mind. Moving around and standing upright can often help to speed labour along and reduce the pain too.

More recently, we have seen an increase in demand for hypnobirthing, or the use of hypnosis during labour. Hypnobirthing can help you to feel calm and relaxed during your birth. Studies have also shown that hypnobirthing can shorten labour, and improve the health outcomes for you and your baby when measured after birth. This requires attending hypnobirthing classes from 24 weeks or so to ensure you are well prepared for labour when the time comes.

If, however, these measures do not provide adequate pain relief for you, then there is always the option of an epidural to take away contraction pain. This is inserted via a needle in your back (performed by an anaesthetic doctor), and then a small plastic cannula allows your midwife to top up your pain relief as required. It is very effective, but should be inserted when your labour is properly established as it can slow down your contractions. With modern epidurals, you are more likely to be able to stay mobile in labour, which is important to allow your labour to progress normally.

The key is to keep an open mind – medical staff can guide and help you as the labour progresses.



This is my first baby and I am terrified of a painful labour. I want to give birth naturally but what are the best options for pain relief?



DR SHAZIA MALIK: Giving birth for the first time can be daunting, and it's perfectly natural to feel a little nervous. I would advise that if you haven't already, you should attend antenatal classes, as they can help you prepare and know what to expect with the different phases of labour and pain.

There are a number of options for reducing pain during labour, and if you are worried you should talk through these with your midwife or obstetrician so you can incorporate your preferred options into your birth plan.

Warm water can be a simple way to help relieve pain as it can relax the body and reduce contraction spasms, so when

**HAVE A QUESTION? EMAIL OUR EXPERTS AT
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