

Pester Power: Families Surviving the Consumer Society

Care
for the
Family

Full-length survey report

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Pester Power: Families Surviving the Consumer Society

Tips offered by parents in response to a survey conducted by Care for the Family.

Parents providing pointers about pester power

- introduction from Rob Parsons

Like many parents, I've experienced how powerful pestering can be! Whether it's for that extra hour on the internet, or some extra pocket money, sometimes the hardest thing a parent can say is 'No.' In fact, a recent American study found only about 13% of parents felt they could withstand their children nagging them for the latest trendy 'must-have' item.

However much life changes, one thing remains the same – as a parent there will come a time when you will want to set a boundary. It might be time spent online, how short your daughter's skirt is, or which TV shows they're allowed to watch. Every child wants to be 'cool', but often cool means edgy.

Advertisers and companies know this, so they provide edgy products, which push at boundaries. And as that happens, you find it harder to set boundaries – especially when everything you do will cause your kids to complain that "it's not fair"?

The parents who have supplied the tips in this booklet have found ways to set boundaries, and ways to stick to them. I'd like to say a big thank you to all the parents who took part and shared their wisdom with us – your tips will help many, many parents.

Thank you

Rob Parsons
Executive Director, Care for the Family

Rob Parsons is the author of several books on parenting. His most recent book – *Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know* – was released in June 2007.

Listening to the people who are really in the know

- foreward by Ed Mayo and Agnes Nairn

We're used to hearing the viewpoint of 'experts', especially in the arena of family life. But who are the real experts?

It's OK for people to share their opinions on what parents should do in any given situation. But we got the sense that parents at the 'sharp end' of parenting often feel frustrated and pressured trying to do everything the experts tell them to.

This Care for the Family survey was designed to find out about the pressures parents were under, but also to collect some road-tested ideas from those parents; the things they've discovered work, and the things that don't.

There were a huge number of excellent ideas – and we were struck by how practical they were. When we started out we felt parents would be the best people to ask for ideas to encourage and support parents, and we're pleased to say we were proved right. This report is the result – we hope you find it helpful.

Ed Mayo

Agnes Nairn

Introduction to the survey report

Pester Power: Families Surviving the Consumer Society is based on a survey of parents who are trying to cope with the increasing commercial pressures in raising children. The survey was designed by Care for the Family, in consultation with Ed Mayo from the National Consumer Council and Dr Agnes Nairn, a leading UK expert on the commercialisation of childhood. Parents were asked to submit their ‘tips’ on how parents could handle ‘pester power’ and help their children navigate the consumer society.

Parents were asked to contribute their opinions through two consecutive issues of Care for the Family’s email newsletter in September and October 2006. 248 parents replied, offering a total of 1,183 tips!

81% of the parents said they “often wonder how other parents cope with bringing up children in an increasingly commercialised world”. This report gives you the chance to find out.

The general themes covered in this report relate to the six main areas of questioning, namely:

- Mobile phones
- Pocket money
- Fashion
- The internet
- Body image
- Talking about sex

The tips from parents were collated and analysed by Agnes Nairn, EM-Lyon Business School and RSM Erasmus University, Netherlands, and Jon Matthias, Care for the Family. This full-length report sums up the general themes of the tips which parents submitted, and includes several of those tips in parents own words.

Executive Summary

248 parents from across the UK shared 1,183 tips on 6 challenging aspects of bringing up children in an increasingly commercialised world. Tips cover mobile phones, pocket money, fashion, the internet, body image and talking about sex.

Parents' approaches proved to be quite consistent which meant that the tips for each of the 6 areas could be grouped around 5 or 6 key themes.

MOBILE PHONES

- Only give your children 'pay as you go' – if they have contracts they can run up huge bills, especially by signing up for ring-tones or other 'subscription services' (which they might not realise will take money week after week)
- Tell kids phones are functional not fashion items
- Set an age for getting a phone and stick to it
- Help prevent kids being victims of theft, e.g. by not showing off their phone
- Monitor who is calling your children and suggest they ask their friends to ring them on the house landline.
- Restrict use during family times e.g. when eating a meal together

POCKET MONEY

- It helps if pocket money is earned and children understand it's not a right – many parents suggest using pocket money to reward good behaviour
- Use pocket money to teach budgeting skills – so children realise buying one thing may mean they can't afford something else
- Explain why it's good to save some money
- Review the amount they get regularly
- Encourage children to give some money away
- Set up a bank account for your children

FASHION

- Don't fuss about fashion. We were all young once!
- Remember fashion is a way to express themselves
- Take a stand on premium brand pricing
- Discuss the fine line between "fashionable"/ "inappropriate"
- Be sensitive to the realities of peer group pressure
- Establish age limits for piercings and stick to them

THE INTERNET

- Keep the computer in a family room
- Install parental control software to block unsuitable sites
- Limit children's internet access time
- Share knowledge with your children
- Educate your children about strangers on the net
- Check your child's internet history files

BODY IMAGE

- Tell them you like the way they look
- Emphasise the importance of the "inner" person
- Don't worry about fashion, but do take self-esteem seriously
- Take practical action if they seem to be becoming obsessive about dieting etc.
- Don't obsess about your own appearance
- Sometimes, you might need to convince them of their self-worth so they take care of themselves, e.g. personal fitness – but do this sensitively

TALKING ABOUT SEX

- Have open and honest discussions
- Monitor or prohibit access to some TV and magazines
- Lead by example e.g. in your choice of 'going out' clothes
- Childhood is short – try and let your kids be kids for as long as possible
- Complain and campaign

Mobile Phone Tips

132 parents gave 200 tips about mobile phones.

Mobile phones are a reassuring way for parents and children to stay in touch with each other. However parents broadly agree that phones should be seen as functional, not fashionable. Parents recommend giving children 'Pay As You Go' phones to avoid being landed with huge bills and make them pay for at least some of their credit so that they learn about costs.

Parents recommend deciding the age you think your child will be responsible enough to have a phone and then sticking to your decision. Many parents were worried about crime and have warned their kids not to flash their phones around in public where they can become targets for thieves or muggers. Many parents said they checked their call histories because they were worried about who may be contacting them.

"Don't let them have one until they are old enough to pay for their own calls."

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	Only give your children 'pay as you go' – if they have contracts they can run up huge bills, especially by signing up for ring-tones or other 'subscription services' (which they might not realise will take money week after week)	56%
No 2 Tip	Tell kids phones are functional not fashion items	41%
No 3 Tip	Set an age for getting a phone and stick to it	22%
No 4 Tip	Help prevent kids being victims of theft, e.g. by not showing off their phone	11%
No 5 Tip	Monitor who is calling your children and suggest they ask their friends to ring them on the house landline.	8%
No 6 Tip	Restrict use during family times e.g. when eating a meal together	6%

PAY AS YOU GO ONLY

- The big message from parents to other parents is not to allow kids a contract phone. Over half of parents suggest this, mainly to avoid children running up large bills.

"Use pay as you go until THEY can sign (and fund) the contract!"

"They all have pay as you go phones which I top up as part of their spending money and they soon learn how expensive it is to download ringtones and games if their top

up has all gone and they have to wait a week for more. Friends have had children with phone bills of £200 - £300 on contract so this was an important lesson."

- Most agree that kids should pay for their top ups themselves, or that it should be a negotiated part of their pocket money or in return for work around the house.

"Our youngest (13) is on "pay as you go" and in return for doing her own ironing she has £10 put on the phone each month. This was the same for our other children before they had part-time jobs which allowed them to pay their own phone bills."

- Many see owning and managing a phone as a really valuable budgeting lesson for their children.

"Once you have paid out for the first phone the child should be totally responsible for the cost of running it from pocket money or earnings. Only buy pay as you go. Even if they mess up one month, do not bail them out. Yes it will be inconvenient for all...but it probably won't happen again!! This is the best introduction to budgeting a child can have."

FUNCTION NOT FASHION

- Nearly a third of parents see the mobile phone as a very useful device for keeping in touch with their children.

"Phones can be a useful source of protection for children when out and about i.e. keeping in touch."

"On the whole I find mobile phones a real help because it means I can get in touch if the children are late coming home or they can contact me in a crisis."

- To reinforce this view of mobile phones, parents suggest buying less expensive models. They recommend encouraging children not to regard phones as toys or status symbols. While many don't want their children to be laughed at for having a really outdated model, most agree that children should appreciate functionality first and fashion second.

"Buy a middle of the range phone with "some" extra features. Less to go wrong, less attractive to thieves BUT not bog standard phone which would be an embarrassment."

"Try and instil the need for appropriate use and avoidance of peer pressures to use it wrongly – i.e. for taking unnecessary and inappropriate photos, for cheating, for bad/destructive gossiping etc."

- A few parents also warn against letting children download ringtones and suggest discussing as a family the commercialism surrounding phones.

"Don't let them buy ringtones from companies such as Jamster, they are disguised subscriptions where you are actually agreeing to buy on a regular basis and they take the money without you knowing. If the child realises they may be reluctant to tell you

and just stop using their phone because they don't want you to know that there's no credit left."

"Explain to children the tricks of the advertising world. Explain that you are not going to help them to keep up with the latest trends in phones so they know where they stand with you."

AGE LIMIT

- Nearly a third of parents have been strict with deciding and sticking to an age at which their children can have a phone. Most agree that secondary school is a good time to allow a phone as children are travelling more on their own and need one for contact.

"Only promise a mobile phone to your children when you have had a look at all the issues surrounding them and if it is necessary for you to contact your child, or for your child to contact you. Discuss with your child what the pros and cons are and when they think is a reasonable age for them to take good care of a mobile. Obviously your child's view may differ from yours, so maybe make a compromise."

- Negotiations around age limit should focus on the phone as a practical tool rather than a must have fashion accessory.

"They really do not need the fanciest up-to-date phone. It should be a means of communication not a "statement".

THEFT

- Just over one in 10 parents suggest ways of helping kids avoid being victims of mobile phone theft. Never buying the latest model, keeping the phone hidden and not flaunting it in public were the most frequent suggestions. Other parents suggest putting limited credit on the phone to avoid financial consequences if the phone does get stolen.

"Avoid expensive models that look good but are more likely to be stolen."

"Make sure your child knows that if they are seen using their phone in public places it could make them a target for muggers."

MONITOR CALLS

- Some parents are clearly worried about who their children contact on mobiles, and what they discuss.

"I encourage monitored use of the home phone when possible and encourage the use of the phone as a tool rather than a leisure item or fashion accessory."

"Encourage openness about who your child is contacting. Suggest that they only give their numbers to a few friends."

- A small number suggest asking children to show them incoming texts or even view texts and call histories without their children's knowledge.

"This is probably immoral but I often check my child's texts, both received and sent. I also check call logs to see who they are phoning or receiving calls from. I also have most of their friends' phone numbers as well."

"I also get them to hand over their phone to us at bedtime (it can be put on charge.) This ensures their sleep is not disturbed. If they are getting a lot of calls or messages we ask them about them. (If a parent feels they have grounds for real concern I think it would be OK to actually read their messages.)"

NO PHONES DURING FAMILY TIME

- A small number of parents note that phones can cause anti-social behaviour and lead to less face-to-face talking time. Tips range from insisting that phones are switched off during meal times and other family times and not using the phone when in company, to encouraging parents not to talk on the phone in the street when they are with their children.

"Not allowed at meal times!"

"I believe it is helpful to have some ground rules about use and I get my children to turn their phone to silent and leave it in the kitchen when they are doing homework or we are doing something as a family."

"I hate seeing parents chatting away on their mobiles while they are walking along the street with their children, as if the children are too unimportant to talk to."

Pocket Money Tips

130 parents gave 199 tips

Pocket money is a fantastic way of teaching children valuable life skills such as budgeting, just reward, generosity and patience. So the actual amount of cash given is really not as important as instilling some principles. Don't set pocket money rules in stone but allow them to be flexible to reflect the age and temperament of individual children as well your own family structure, circumstances and style. There isn't an agreed "going rate" for pocket money, but a great wealth of ideas on using pocket money as a family learning opportunity.

"I think pocket money is an important learning process for children to understand the world of budgeting, saving and how to stay out of debt."

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	It helps if pocket money is earned and children understand it's not a right – many parents suggest using pocket money to reward good behaviour	44%
No 2 Tip	Use pocket money to teach budgeting skills – so children realise buying one thing may mean they can't afford something else	36%
No 3 Tip	Explain why it's good to save some money	22%
No 4 Tip	Review the amount they get regularly	22%
No 5 Tip	Encourage children to give some money away	12%
No 6 Tip	Set up a bank account for your children	9%

EARN IT

- The top tip from almost 60 parents is to make children earn their pocket money by doing jobs around the house, good behaviour or effort in school work.

"Junior (age 7) knows that I have to work to earn my income. He is rewarded for good behaviour and helping around the house with small but positive tasks. He is aware that pocket money is not a right."

- Many parents see the concept of earning pocket money as good training for the world of work.

“I hope by encouraging my 12 and 14 year old boys to earn their pocket money I am instilling into them the fact that you only get paid for the effort and commitment you make to an employer, i.e. no work-no pay. They also enjoy the feel good factor of helping, teamwork and achieving the amount of pocket money they have earned.”

- Others see it as a mechanism for reward and punishment with opportunities for extra top ups from time to time.

“I use pocket money as a reward/sanction scheme for my daughter – she will lose pocket money for bad behaviour and gain extra for good behaviour (it is behaviour not achievements).”

“Pocket money is to be earned and can be withdrawn for repeated bad behaviour. However, assistance in tasks outside of what is usually expected such as washing the car or helping in the garden, receive small extra rewards. We want our children to value things and to have earned money.”

“[Pocket money] Can be lost in varying proportions for bad behaviour. Certain basic tasks are expected to warrant payment to ensure smooth family running. More pocket money may be earned for exceptionally helpful behaviour.”

- A number of parents have carefully worked out schemes for earning pocket money and extras

“We give £10 when they have earned 10 home points. They earn one home point when they do something good but beyond normal. On average they end up earning 10 home points once a month.”

“I give Alice (age 4 yrs) £1 a week. Also we have behaviour chart where she gets beads for doing chores i.e. keeping her room tidy. If she gets enough beads she gets a present at the end of the week. This works well for her as she enjoys the responsibility for the jobs and loves the reward she gets in return.”

- A small number of parents in the survey disagree with linking pocket money to household duties as they expect help to be offered for love rather than financial return.

“Personally I don’t pay for jobs etc. I give the children pocket money and then don’t expect them to nag me for presents on holiday or when shopping as they are expected to buy those things for themselves. A certain level of help around the house is expected but I don’t tie this in with pocket money as I think that encourages thinking of what you are going to get out of helping people rather than a culture of helping because you are a member of a household and it’s your responsibility.”

BUDGET IT

- Over a third of parents see pocket money as a great way for children to learn about budgeting. Children need some guidance from parents but also some leeway to learn by themselves – usually the hard way!

“I like to give it to them to help them learn the value of money.”

“If you want your child to understand the importance of budgeting etc. then expect to give lots of help – it won’t come naturally, and if a youngster has to choose between new stationery for school and the latest magazine, you’ll get no prizes for guessing which one they would choose if they have no input from you.

“Give them little enough when young to let them spend it on what THEY want – they will learn that some things are a waste of money early on.”

- Most parents agree that once you have agreed on what children are to pay for from pocket money you should not bail them out.

“If you agree that certain amounts should be saved for certain things and your child doesn’t stick to that agreement, DON’T BAIL THEM OUT, for most youngsters it will only take one time for them to learn a hard lesson...”

“Make reasonable rules and stick to them. Don’t give in and give more money if they have spent it all. But allow freedom to use their own money how they want to – if they waste it, it will teach them to budget more carefully the next week/month.”

“Children will make mistakes when making decisions on what to spend their money on and it is important not to give in to them if they have spent it all.”

SAVE IT

- Just under a quarter of parents also see pocket money as a way of teaching children the value of saving.

“When our children were old enough to receive pocket money we encouraged them to save a little so they would have that money when they wanted to buy something special or to buy presents for others. We felt it important that children learn the importance of saving for things and not always having what they wanted immediately.”

- The theme of teaching children patience and delayed gratification was picked up by many parents

“Children appreciate things that they have saved for much more than things which are freely given to them.”

“We don’t give our children a very large amount as we don’t want them to be able to just go out and buy everything they want but rather learn to be patient and save. Pocket money is to learn about money handling for the future, rather than to be able to get lots of toys etc. We encourage them to keep a savings account. (Although our daughter completely cleared hers out to send to starving people in Africa!)

REVIEW IT

- As children grow older their needs change, as does their ability to manage their money. Most parents regularly review pocket money policies and most have different rules for different ages. Many also adjust rules to suit their children's individual temperaments.

"I give the kids £1 for their age i.e. 12 gets £12 per month."

"We give our children one pound for each year they are per month. When they become teenagers and want to buy different things e.g. CDs and casual clothing we will renegotiate with them and agree what is a reasonable monthly allowance for these things."

"Pay according to ability to cope with it. My 15 year old son gets £50 a month and has to buy clothes and everything else from it, except for items needed for school. While my 14 year old only gets £15 as he is a different personality and has a much shorter term view on purchases. I am still buying clothes for him."

GIVE IT AWAY

- Just over a tenth of the parents in the survey encourage their children to allocate a portion of their pocket money to donate to charitable causes.

"We have a policy of spend a third, save a third and give a third to charity and this works quite well."

"10% goes to a charity of their choice."

BANK IT

- A few parents (7%) put their children's pocket money into a bank account

"My children are now teenagers but since the age of 11 I have paid it by standing order into their own bank accounts. They have a debit card to collect cash out of the "hole in the wall" and have to budget!"

- A number of parents use a bank account because they kept forgetting to pay their children.

"Our initial rule was 10 times their age, so at 5 they got 50p. However, we are very forgetful at giving it, so now the older one gets his paid into a bank account monthly (£5.00 per month). He is now 10. The 6 year old has just started asking if he can have pocket money so he will get 60p until he is old enough to have his own account (when he is 7) and then he will have it paid into that."

Tips for Dealing with Fashion

99 parents gave 148 tips on fashion

Try to stay calm if they come home in something that looks like the contents of a skip. The fad will pass! Remember too that experimenting with clothes and hairstyles is an important part of developing as an individual and that belonging to the peer group is crucial to teenagers. However, do resist the family budget being blown on rip-off designer labels and explain clearly the difference between “trendy” and “tarty”. When children want to pierce parts of their bodies, agree an age limit and stick to it.

“Try and stay cool. Remember some of the disasters you wore as a youngster!”

“Love your children for who they are and not what they wear.”

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	Don't fuss about fashion. We were all young once!	34%
No 2 Tip	Remember fashion is a way to express themselves	30%
No 3 Tip	Take a stand on premium brand pricing	20%
No 4 Tip	Discuss the fine line between “fashionable”/ “inappropriate”	29%
No 5 Tip	Be sensitive to the realities of peer group pressure	18%
No 6 Tip	Establish age limits for piercings and stick to them	11%

DON'T FUSS

- Over a third of the tips suggest parents should “pick their battles” and that arguments about fashion really weren't worth it.

“Parents need to decide which battles are worth fighting and which are not worth breaking the relationship for – e.g. coloured hair will eventually wash out!”

“Choose your battles! Does it really matter if they're wearing jeans? If you think they look nice/smart/handsome/beautiful – tell them! If you think they look like they've been pulled through a hedge backwards, don't say anything or lie! By all means give them advice about their appearance, but don't take it personally if they don't take your advice. NEVER argue about it if you can help it.”

- Many urged others to think back to their own youth and to appreciate that time and tastes differ.

“Remember your own teenage years – I was like it too.”

“There were all of these things in our day too! Let's remember that eventually we outgrew them”

“Their taste and culture may be different but it is not better or worse than yours.”

FASHION IS SELF-EXPRESSION

- Almost a third of parents stress the positive role that clothes have in allowing young people to express themselves and forge their own identities; and some point out that fashion choices are really no more significant than an outward display of a normal developmental need.

“I encourage them to be who they are as individuals even if sometimes that means keeping quiet about what I think.”

“Provided the fashion item is not permanent i.e. a tattoo, then go with it and let them grow out of it. Our son grew his hair and bleached, then dyed it red. At the end of the day it wasn’t anything to argue about: he was finding his identity. His hair is now short and spiky but smart.”

“Clothes and style don’t reflect anything other than a need for a young person to stamp their identity on the world – it’s how they live and the choices they make that are more important.”

TAKE A STAND ON BRANDS

- Just under a third of parents are concerned when fashion revolves around expensive “must have” brands. Many parents use this issue positively as an opportunity to teach lessons in value for money. A number of concrete suggestions are made for financial negotiating with brand-obsessed children.

“Give them a budget Spring and Winter and if they want to blow the whole lot on a pair of branded trainers, so be it!”

“Find a middle ground. If they desperately want a £90 pair of football boots, make them work for it! Jobs around the house; let them earn a sticker for exceptional behaviour or work at school!”

“If my teenager wants new trainers I look around at what I think are reasonable trainers and find the average price, say £25. Then I give that as a budget and if they want a £50 pair that is fine but they have to make up the shortfall out of their pocket money – it tends to make the cheaper trainers much more attractive!”

- When children are applying pressure for branded clothes, some parents also take the opportunity to talk about wider issues surrounding the fashion industry. This parent finds that children are particularly sensitive to the concept of “fair trade”.

“Talking about the fashion industry and where and how clothes are made – the conditions people work in to give us cheap clothes seems to hit the mark.”

FASHIONABLE OR INAPPROPRIATE?

- Just under a third of parents are grappling with how to allow their children to express themselves but at the same time get them to appreciate how provocative or revealing clothes can give out unintended signals.

“Fashion can be an important part of self-expression. I would let a lot of it go unless sexually provocative which could be dangerous.”

“Explain that whilst there is nothing wrong with fashion in itself, there are practical considerations and suitability with respect to signals of certain clothes and styles that the child needs to be aware of.”

- Other parents gave tips about teaching children about what is appropriate in different social situations.

“I only make a fuss if I feel she is wearing something really inappropriate [to the occasion].”

“Bare midriff and low slung trousers in cold weather seems to come up fairly often. We do have to insist on a longer top being worn sometimes – especially when visiting older relatives!”

PEER PRESSURE

- A fifth urge other parents not to underestimate the reality of peer group pressure when it comes to clothes and hairstyles. Most tips stress allowing children to “fit in” – particularly in teenage years.

“Encourage them to look trendy but not tarty, at least that way they can feel as if they belong to their peer group. Keeping them looking different to their peer group may well lead to more problems for your relationship with them.”

“As they become teenagers, fashion, hair and make-up etc. become very important if they’re to fit in with their peers. Bullying from other kids can affect what your child’s style is and their confidence to dress well.”

“Do NOT force kids to wear clothing that is very out of style – they will be victimised and left out.”

- Other parents feel it is desirable to encourage children to have the confidence to be true to themselves rather than the crowd.

“Some of the most important things a parent can teach a child are self confidence, independent thought and respect for their own feelings and opinions. Teach them to respect others’ choices but not necessarily to copy them.”

“Encourage them to think more about what suits them and their lifestyle rather than what’s ‘in’.”

AGE LIMITS FOR PIERCINGS

- Piercing is an area where parents feel much more strongly about laying down the law. Around 11 seems to be the age most parents allow ear piercing and 16 for additional piercings.

“We are currently arguing about ear piercing. My daughter is 9 and I’ve always said she can when she’s 11. Don’t fall for the line that everyone else has it, make a note of friends who don’t, so you can counter that argument.”

“Ear piercing I set at 10 and any other piercing is a non-negotiable rule until 16.”

- Some parents also suggest discussing health and safety aspects of piercing

“We have set an age of 16 to have ears pierced as PE is compulsory up to the end of that school year. We have seen and passed on to our girls the horror stories of earring being ripped out during a netball match or hair being caught and again damage was caused.”

“Explain to them calmly the danger of going to an unqualified person for body piercing and earrings. Sometimes if your child seems to be heading towards the DIY then it may be better to let them have a piercing.”

Internet Tips

164 parents offered 300 tips about the internet.

This is the area where parents feel most insecure – perhaps because they have no models from their own upbringing to follow. Hence it may seem parents are particularly controlling about this area of their children’s lives. They suggest keeping the computer somewhere public, regulating site access, restricting computer time, checking internet histories and giving warnings about “stranger danger”. But parents also celebrate the advantages of the internet and the fact that children can teach their parents something for a change!

“Would be grateful for some tips - find this one difficult as my son spends every moment he can on it!”

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	Keep the computer in a family room	54%
No 2 Tip	Install parental control software to block unsuitable sites	35%
No 3 Tip	Limit children’s internet access time	31%
No 4 Tip	Share knowledge with your children	24%
No 5 Tip	Educate your children about strangers on the net	20%
No 6 Tip	Check your child’s internet history files	10%

KEEP IT VISIBLE

- Over half of parents recommend keeping the computer with internet access in a public area or family room such as the kitchen, living room, dining room or parents’ study so that an adult can keep an eye on what sites are being accessed – supervising their children without being too intrusive.

“Keep the computer in the kitchen or lounge, where you are frequently passing them by, that way you can glance at what they are doing without breathing down their neck...”

- Many are quite specific that they will never allow their children to have internet access in their bedroom.

“I absolutely am against TVs and games consoles and computers in children's rooms and will not do this under any circumstances.”

- Other parents, particularly those with younger children, recommend closer surveillance or even supervising children on the internet at all times.

“When our children are on MSN we always reserve the right to look over their shoulder.”

“Don't leave them on their own. Keep an eye on them at all times”

- Parents of teenagers may find constant supervision increasingly difficult. However parents recommended creating a family culture whereby it is clear that parents may drop in at any time to see what they are doing: some ask their children to keep the door open at all times or to position the computer with the screen facing the door.

“Always keep the door open and come in and out regularly. Check the tabs at the bottom of the screen to see what is open but probably minimised when they heard you coming!”

PARENTAL CONTROL SOFTWARE

- Over a third of parents recommend using some kind of parental control software to block out unsuitable sites particularly in order to protect their children from access to pornography but also to protect the family computer from viruses.

“Use an internet security program which does not allow them to see anything they shouldn't whether on purpose or accidentally.”

“Have a good anti-virus [software programme] installed as they often stray from safe sites and this can allow a virus in.”

- There are few recommendations for specific brands of software which have been found to be particularly effective. Parents tend to talk in more general terms about “Netnanny”, and “Parent Watch”, although one parent mentioned her intention to use the blocks which can be activated on Norton Security, and another gives some specific instructions which can be used with Microsoft Explore.

“Check your level of 'Parent watch' that's set on your computer - sets levels of nudity, language etc, that can be transmitted. “

“I only allow supervised access for short period as my child is very young (8). I will set parental controls on my Norton Security software when I allow less supervised access (from 12 upwards).”

“On computers where they can sign on unsupervised, set Explorer to only access websites that you have authorized individually with a password. Once you have set the password on that computer, explorer should block everything that has not been individually password enabled, either for one session or permanently. It does mean that your offspring has to talk to you about their internet activity. PS Don't allow access to other internet browsers because they would bypass your security system.”

- However, a greater number of parents speaking are rather sceptical

“We haven't found the parental control things particularly helpful because they seem to prevent so much genuine use - the kids programmes are much more complex than most of what I use and the parental controls mess up a lot of genuinely OK programmes, by not allowing certain cookies etc.”

- A number of parents feel that this is something of an expert area which they do not feel very qualified to address. They see setting up this sort of software control as something of an expert field and recommend either getting specialist help, spending money on the best packages available, or becoming more net-literate as parents.

“Ensure that parental controls are properly set. If you don't know how to set them find someone who does know.”

“Learn about and use proper internet security software and do not rely on the so-called parent controls built into some ISP's access software”

TIME LIMITS

- Just under a third of parents recommend limiting the time children spend on the internet. Time limits range from 30 minutes to 2 hours a day. Reasons for restriction include the need for family time; balancing screen time with need for imaginative play; the commercial pressures on the net; and the adverse effects of the addictive nature of the computer.

“Govern how often a child uses the internet for example we did not allow internet access on a Saturday evening as this is family time.”

“If you even suspect an imbalance of behaviour owing to 'desperation to go on the computer', rudeness, lack of active energy - cancel the computer for a month. It is addictive. From your own personal level of understanding, lay down the rules of what you think is a good idea or bad idea, never accept it's out of your control. Get the children to use a timer with a bell and agree how long each session should be, or at least some times so they get some practice at self policing in a very seductive environment.”

“For us a bigger issue is the amount of time spent - and the constant pressure to buy things.”

- Some parents see access to the internet as a treat to be allowed after chores are completed. Other parents have separate rules for homework and pure entertainment uses.

“The children have to of completed their chores before they are allowed on the computer. During school holidays extra computer time can be earned for good behaviour, equally it can be lost for bad behaviour.”

“Set a daily time-limit for recreational use (not appropriate for homework research!). OTHER RULES - Minutes are not transferable from one day to the next!! Time can be lost for bad behaviour (either in chunks of minutes or days, depending on the offence!). We are more lenient if they are playing with a friend, where more time is given.”

SHARE KNOWLEDGE

- Just under a quarter of parents recommend maintaining open and honest discussions with their children on both the opportunities and the dangers of the internet. Simply taking an interest in what children do on the internet is recommended by many as a way to keep a close relationship.

“Encourage chats about the more negative side of the internet, whilst acknowledging its strengths.”

“De -mystify it otherwise it becomes a naughty mysterious scary thing not the useful tool it can be when used properly.”

- A number of different approaches are suggested i.e. encouraging children to tell parents about their experiences; asking children to teach their parent about the internet; and exploring the internet together with children as an opportunity both to encourage openness and also to set rules:

“Be supportive of children who view sites out of curiosity: be understanding of the pressures, but work with them to help them to withstand the temptations. There was a time when my son and I agreed that he would tell me whenever he was on the net, as he had been being tempted to view pornography. Just the simple act of keeping him accountable and him promising to let me know what he viewed for a while (and giving me access to his history file) was enough to help him through a difficult period.”

“Talk to them about what they are doing/seeing. Ask them to teach you something - my 10 year old showed me how to do a PowerPoint presentation.”

“Surf with your children and lay down guidelines for them.”

STRANGER DANGER

- A fifth of parents suggest telling children about the dangers of encountering strangers on the internet and many prohibit the use of chat rooms

“Don’t allow kids to use chat rooms! I have heard so many bad experiences ...my daughter had a problem with this once and she was talking to people who say they are a kid but really are adults trying to lure kids into friendships and getting them to trust them and then leading them astray either over the net or worst still arranging to meet them somewhere...and if they use web cameras even worse things can happen”

- Many parents advise discouraging the giving out of personal details and suggest trying to prevent children giving false ages to access sites

“Encourage your child to have an email name that doesn’t give an indication of their name.”

“My younger child wanted to go onto Bebo. He is too young but his peers have used false dates of birth to get on. This would worry me. I did not allow my 11 year old son to do this.”

CHECK THE INTERNET HISTORY

- About 1 in 10 of the parents recommended checking up on children's internet usage by looking at the history files on their computer.

"Let them know you will check the 'History' file at random intervals."

"Check the internet history and discuss it with the child."

Body Image Tips

135 parents gave 196 tips

Tell your kids they look fantastic (even if you sometimes wish they were really a bit more concerned about how they look!) Always emphasise that a beautiful, kind and generous personality is much more important than an amazing physique. Don't worry about your children wearing fashions and styles you hate (it'll pass!). However, do keep an eye out for real worries affecting self-esteem. When you spot something, talking it over with your child may not always be the best thing to do. Take practical action instead: prepare healthy meals, organise sports and activities, consult experts, buy contact lenses and spot cream. And remember that it's not particularly helpful if you are constantly obsessing about your own appearance!

“Build up their self-esteem consistently – keep praising them – tell them they are a star – when they are going out tell them they look so cool.”

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	Tell them you like the way they look	42%
No 2 Tip	Emphasise the importance of the “inner” person	39%
No 3 Tip	Don't worry about fashion, but do take self-esteem seriously	24%
No 4 Tip	Take practical action if they seem to be becoming obsessive about dieting etc.	23%
No 5 Tip	Don't obsess about your own appearance	18%
No 6 Tip	Sometimes, you might need to convince them of their self-worth so they take care of themselves, e.g. personal fitness – but do this sensitively	6%

YOU LOOK WONDERFUL!

- Over forty percent of parents believe the best way to tackle concerns over body image is to tell children over and over again that they look lovely.

“Tell them they are beautiful as often as you can and always compliment them even on the smallest thing.”

“Tell them they look lovely more often than you tell them they look ridiculous!”

“Love them unconditionally. Always tell them you love them and they look pretty/handsome. There is enough negativity, keep it good at home.”

- Parents believe that by doing this from a young age it can help when they reach difficult teenage years

“Encourage them just to be themselves. I always tell them how lovely they look all the time. I think if they have a good self esteem from an early age they don't need to

try and fit in as much as they are secure in who they are. Just encourage them as much as possible.”

“Most important – tell them they look great – and tell them that well before they get to the age where they are worrying about their appearance.”

- Many emphasise not making personal negative comments – even in fun, and especially not in front of friends.

“Give them reassurance and never, ever make personal comment about their height, weight, skin etc.”

“Please try to say positive things and refute any negative ones by themselves or others. Never criticise their appearance in public and especially not in front of other children!”

- And parents generally agree that children should know they are always beautiful to their family – outside and in

“Let them know you accept and love them as they are.”

“If I tell my daughter she is beautiful I always say “inside and out” as I am trying to teach her that looks aren’t everything.”

IT’S WHAT’S INSIDE THAT COUNTS

- Almost forty percent of parents advise stressing inner rather than outer beauty to deflect children’s body image concerns.

“Teach them to “be” first and “look” second.”

“Emphasise the good points in their personality – helpfulness, kindness, cheerfulness etc.”

- Many suggest talking about glamorous celebrities to show that beauty does not always equate to happiness and that true friendship does not revolve around appearance

“Point out that the media hypes up looks and that models are not so perfect in real life - in fact no one is. People like you for who you are and if not they aren’t worth having as friends.”

“Look at magazines with them and when they are talking about how people look or fashion discuss what type of person they are instead. Be careful yourself to not be judgemental of people’s looks but look for positive expressions of people’s attributes.”

“Discuss the dreadful images of [a celebrity] – she may be thin but is she happy/healthy etc.?”

- And a number advise parents and children not to make appearance-based negative comparisons and judgements

“Keep your comments about the weight and body image of others positive. If they hear you constantly being negative about how others look they will be more likely to develop unrealistic expectations on their own bodies.”

“Avoid judgemental comments about others based on appearance.”

BAD STYLE IS OK – BAD SELF ESTEEM ISN'T

- About a quarter of parents see concern about appearance as a normal part of growing up which should be tolerated (sometimes through gritted teeth!)

“Of course they want modern fashions; every generation does, so help them make wise choices with a budget. Be flexible; if they make the wrong choice, it won't last for ever; breathe a little – take a chill pill!”

“It's normal! Parents need to have real relationships with their children which allow dialogue and discussion across the whole spectrum of life. Of course children are concerned about the way they look but things need to be dealt with in a realistic and meaningful manner.”

- However, these parents also advise watching out for when an interest in fashion starts to turn into a damaging self-confidence issue.

“I think looking good in clothes is a developmental process, not something I'm concerned about. Wanting to look thin is worrying. I encourage her to have healthy role models, not stick insects”!

“Some concern over appearance is normal for all teenagers. However, look out for danger signs such as changes in eating patterns.”

IF WORRIED – ACT

- Just under a quarter of parents suggest doing something practical if children seem to be unhealthily concerned with how they look. This may be more helpful than lengthy discussions.

“I certainly would not recommend talking to an overweight child about dieting – rather to lead the whole family into a healthier diet.”

- Action might include using expert resources

“One daughter was upset about her “puppy fat” aged about 11-12. I went with her to see the dietician at our surgery and we talked about a healthy eating plan. It was very successful because I did it with her and we kept it very light hearted. I was worried that she might become anorexic if I was too heavy handed.”

“My eldest son (12 1/2) is convinced he is too fat. He eats healthily with the occasional treat and we play down his concerns. I did make a point of measuring and weighing him and plotting the results on a child growth chart to show him he was the perfect size and weight for his age! It helped a lot.”

- Or it might be finding ways to stop constant thinking about body image

“Encourage a hobby they are GOOD at and take their mind away from the things they want to change but can’t.”

“We encourage our children to enjoy using their bodies in active outdoor pursuits (canoeing, rock climbing, biking, swimming) and encourage their interest in those by being involved ourselves, so there is less time for them to worry about clothes, make-up etc.”

- Or making purchases which can make a difference in their everyday lives

“If they are really concerned then help them as much as reasonable (e.g. my son hates wearing glasses, feels a “nerd” so I let him choose a pair and make a big thing of paying for them (ouch!)”

“Being part of a group is important and it may be necessary to encourage a child to try contact lenses, make-up etc. if they are concerned about a part of their appearance.”

“Try to think if there is anything you can do to make them feel better – if they are suffering from terrible spots take it seriously and look into getting some really good spot stuff, or buy the stuff that they are trying to tell you about.”

TRY NOT TO BE OBSESSED YOURSELF

- More than one in ten parents find this a difficult issue often because they themselves are concerned about the way they look

“This is a difficult subject for me as I have low self-esteem. I am forever calling myself fat and ugly. It is of concern to me that my daughter will pick up on me putting myself down and start putting herself down. I would find it hard to change my opinion of myself though.”

“As I hate the way I look I struggle to do this well. However, I even talk about that to the girl - about how I have a wrong self of my own appearance.”

- A tip from many is to try to lead by example

“Firstly I think that kids learn from your example - if you constantly talk of diets and losing weight rather than eating healthily and taking exercise to stay fit then what else can you expect your child to think is normal.”

“Lead by example. Take pride in your appearance but don’t allow it to be obsessive i.e. visits to beauty salons or panicking your make-up has run out.”

PRIDE IN APPEARANCE IS SOMETIMES NO BAD THING

- 6% of parents note that concern with body image is important and that in some circumstances they will be judged on how they look

“Although my boys are not yet concerned with the way they look, I encourage them to be for their own good.”

“Main rules are be clean and modest and don’t judge others on appearance - although different when going for a job interview. That is what they will be judged on.”

Tips for Talking about Sex

125 parents gave 140 tips

Hipster jeans and sex-quizzes in teen girls magazines, or reading 'lads mags' in the playground leaves many parents uncomfortable about the 'sexualisation' of childhood. It may be a tricky and embarrassing topic but most parents recognise they have to keep talking to your children.

You can try to slow down the growing up process by helping them choose appropriate reading material and clothes which don't reveal too much. You may want to try to guide them away from TV programmes or magazines which imply that all young people are constantly having sex. And, as in so many areas, parents set an example if they wear provocative clothes.

"This is difficult as we change when we become parents – almost into our own parents even though we vowed not to!"

"Communication, communication, communication and when you've exhausted that, try communication!"

		% of parents giving this tip
No 1 Tip	Have open and honest discussions	54%
No 2 Tip	Monitor or prohibit access to some TV and magazines	26%
No 3 Tip	Lead by example e.g. in your choice of 'going out' clothes	11%
No 4 Tip	Childhood is short – try and let your kids be kids for as long as possible	9%
No 5 Tip	If you're unhappy about material your children are in contact with, you can complain and campaign	9%

OPEN AND HONEST DISCUSSION

- Over half of parents cope with highly-sexualised culture which surrounds them in the media by talking openly and honestly with their children.

"Communication, communication, communication and when you've exhausted that, try communication."

- Many parents suggest discussing sexuality as something valuable and special in the context of loving relationships.

"Be as open as possible about sexuality; being secretive distorts their viewpoint. Treat sexuality as something that is personal, special, valuable and prized. It is not cheap, nasty, dirty or ugly!"

"Try to talk openly about sex; not in a way that preaches, but in a way that shows there are alternatives to what they see in the media. Be positive."

“We talk to our children and discuss things with them a lot. We give them our views and ask for theirs. We have tried to encourage them to have a healthy attitude towards sexuality. We do this by being appropriately open about our own sexual relationship.”

- Others stress the importance of not being too judgemental and asking children for their views too.

“Don’t censor too much, rather try and ask them what they think about these issues. We were both brought up by parents who either turned off the TV when something “a bit steamy” was on or made a very judgemental comment, neither of which helped us feel less embarrassed! Censoring too much leaves your kids unable to cope when they are faced with the pressure without you there to avert their gaze!”

“Talk to children honestly about sex from an early age. Don’t allow young children to watch certain TV programmes – but relax the rules as they grow older so that they learn self-discipline. If you don’t agree with their choices, discuss them honestly with your children and listen as much as you speak.”

“Talk to your kids about everything so there are no mysteries. Invite their opinions and discuss rather than laying down the law.”

- Many suggest taking the opportunity whilst watching TV or reading magazines together to discuss the difference between the values often exhibited by media characters and celebrities and values they would rather their children adopt.

“I think talking about the fact that people portrayed on TV are not representative of the average young person, and to explain that most young people are actually not drinking and swearing and sleeping around.”

“Discuss celebrity lifestyles – particularly those that have multiple partners and discuss why this might be – are they lonely or too busy or are they owned a bit like a slave to their record label, football club, modelling agency and cannot really have a proper life?”

MONITORING AND BANNING

- Just over a quarter of parents favour restrictions over children’s access to certain types of media. Whilst a small minority have simply got rid of their TV set, others do not allow children to have the TV in their bedroom, ban certain programmes, or only allow TV-watching before the 9pm watershed. Many parents restrict access to magazines with celebrity gossip.

“My two girls are not allowed to buy teen magazines because of their content. We try and monitor the programmes they watch on the TV and take notice of the film classifications.”

“We watch relatively little TV and only news and documentaries after 9pm. We have never watched soaps.”

- A number of parents research the media their children are likely to use.

“The best thing is to go to the newsagent and read through yourself so that you are prepared to state quite reasonably why a particular edition of a magazine is not right.”

“Try to watch a film that may contain inappropriate sexuality before letting your children view it. Be prepared!”

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

- Just over one in 10 of the parents feel the best way to counteract inappropriate sexuality is for parents to act as role models in the way they dress, the way they behave and the values they espouse.

“The way we act ourselves is important, I think children watch that.”

“Your own attitudes to sexuality will have the biggest impact on your kids before they begin to take notice of these external things. Kids who are confident in themselves and secure in their family are less likely to look for fulfilment in sexuality.”

“Model wholesome and appropriate language and behaviour yourself, i.e. don’t watch rubbish programmes!”

GROWING UP TOO SOON

- Almost a tenth of the parents feel they could help by encouraging their children to enjoy the age they are rather than rushing to grow up.

“Let children be children for as long as possible. Encourage them to dress decently and to understand what behaviour is appropriate. Each child is an individual. Let them develop their own style. Discourage talk about boyfriend/girlfriends. Welcome their friends to your house and encourage them to play together/spend time together as a group.”

“Don’t pressure children to grow up too quickly, to become mini-adults. Don’t even joke about boyfriend/girlfriends as this puts pressure on them.”

“Dressing sexily as a later teenager and early twenties to attract the opposite sex is one thing and continuing to dress in a sexy manner for our partner is different than letting our children wear things because ‘oh they look so cute in these little numbers’.”

COMPLAIN AND CAMPAIGN

- One in ten feel strongly that there is simply too much sexuality and that parents should complain and campaign.

“Not so much a tip as a comment! There is far too much focus on sexuality ...it’s everywhere!”

“[Sexuality is] invasive and making children sexually aware at a very early age; in many cases, sexually predatory! (And I teach them from 11 upwards!)”

- Some believe that parents can register a protest through purchasing power

“I think we need to band together on this and change things by changing our buying – we need to do much more to let our opinions be heard in this.”

- Others believe that making complaints is the best form of action

“I am continually surprised at the words of pop songs, advertisements on billboard and the radio for items which use sex to sell the product and that as adult we do nothing. I do from time to time phone the consumer association to complain but I feel that as a society we have become extremely complacent and turn a blind eye.”

“COMPLAIN!!”

- Whilst others feel that celebrities with young fans should shoulder some responsibility for dressing and behaving in an appropriate manner

“Celebrities have a duty towards young fans they attract and they must realise that they set the trends in clothes, hair, make-up and even weight.”

You can survive the consumer society!

We hope you've found the tips in this booklet interesting and helpful. Perhaps you feel there are some things you'd like to add, or other areas you need support with.

For more information on:

- **Care for the Family**, visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk
- **National Consumer Council**, visit www.ncc.org.uk
- Academic research into the commercialisation of childhood, contact **Agnes Nairn**: Nairn@em-lyon.com

Care for the Family exists to support family life. We believe parents can survive the consumer society, but we also know that bringing up children can be one of the most demanding and challenging things you'll ever have to do.

Through a variety of ways, including newsletters, events, and conferences, Care for the Family stands with parents in many different circumstances. At Care for the Family we run specific initiatives for single parents, step-parents, parents of teenagers, parents of children with additional needs, bereaved parents, and people who are raising children alone after losing a partner at a young age.

If you'd like some help with a specific aspect of parenting, or would like to know more about Care for the Family, then please do get in touch.

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Or phone (029) 2081 0800.
(Office open 9-5, Monday-Friday, answerphone at other times)

Pester Power Families Surviving the Consumer Society

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