

Coping Skills for Managing Emotions

Helping children manage their emotions is important for the development of children's self-regulation skills, resilience, and sense of self, nurturing their mental health and wellbeing.

Children need adults to help them manage their emotions

Children need repeated experiences of having their needs met by a responsive and caring adult to help them develop a positive sense of self, manage their emotions and to get along with others. When children have these experiences they are more likely to be mentally healthy and have good relationships with others. This contributes to their feelings of satisfaction, happiness and overall success in life.

Parents and carers can extend children's development of emotional skills by helping to manage children's emotions and behaviours. This involves gently guiding children's learning through steps to help them achieve something that they possibly may not be able to do on their own. Children learn self-control and appropriate emotional expression and behaviour by watching and experiencing how other people manage their emotions and from their own experiences of how others behave with them.

Parents and carers can help contain children's stressful experiences (e.g., when they feel overwhelmed, unsure or frightened) by showing them how to become calm and get their needs met. Children who have consistently experienced warm and responsive care develop a sense of security and trust that their primary caregiver will be available to return to for emotional support after they have explored and ventured into their environment. This reduces their stress and provides feelings of safety, trust and predictability that are important for children's developing sense of self.

Warm, trusting and responsive care towards children enables them to respond with appropriate emotions and internalise a positive view of themselves and others, learning appropriate behaviour and developing an understanding concern for others. Children who have been helped to manage their difficult feelings gradually learn how to do this for themselves.

Over time children become more independent in managing their emotions across more situations; however, it is important to acknowledge that turning to others for guidance and support, especially in times of stress, remains an important coping skill throughout life.

When children learn to trust there are others to support them to feel safe and calm, they are able to grow and develop and create positive experiences essential for their mental health and wellbeing. Warm, responsive and trusting care builds resilience in children and helps them to cope with distress. This provides children with a sense of control and optimism about what they are capable of which is important for their developing sense of self.

From feeling bad to feeling good

Helping children manage their emotions involves creating and maintaining feelings of safety, calm and optimism in children. This can often mean helping a child to move from a negative state where they may feel stressed, anxious or frightened into a positive state where they feel safe and calm and ready to move on. This involves lowering the child's

'stress' hormones (such as cortisol and adrenaline), and increasing their 'feel good' hormones (such as dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin).

Our 'feel good' hormones help to keep us balanced, maintain regularity, manage memory and attention, increase feelings of trust, reduce fear, develop social skills and empathy for others and feel pleasure. Hormones (including oxytocin) are also released during responsive caregiving, helping the carer feel good which means they are more likely to continue to care for the child and meet the child's needs.

Children's 'feel good' hormones (serotonin levels) are higher when they are able to engage in experiences in their own way in their own time. When too many activities are scheduled and children feel they have to rush from one thing to another, they can feel stressed and tired. This can lead to behaviours such as tantrums, lack of cooperation or difficulty sleeping.

High levels of stress hormones lessen the child's ability to concentrate, manage conflict, problem solve, and try new things. Children who have experienced higher levels of stress in their preschool years show more aggression and anxiety and are less socially competent than those who have experienced less stress. However, it is never too late for children to learn about developing their coping skills and building resilience, through further opportunities in life.

Children with high levels of stress hormones and low levels of 'feel good' hormones may:

- engage in conflict or be hard to please
- lack motivation or feel sad or low
- have difficulty focusing
- be unresponsive or have difficulty expressing themselves
- run away when upset or act defensively
- be worried, wary or watchful
- act silly or be hyperactive
- appear tired or have trouble sleeping.

When a caregiver recognises the child's emotional experience behind their behaviour, they can respond in ways that will contain the child's experiences and help them to move forward. Providing nurturing care, including touching and physically holding children, actually decreases the child's levels of stress hormones and increases their levels of feel good hormones. Holding children minimises the possible damaging effects of high stress on the developing brain, and also helps children to develop less extreme reactions to stress and return to a calm state more quickly. Emotional regulation is the term used to describe when children respond to experiences with an appropriate range of immediate or delayed emotions, thoughts, behaviours and physiological responses (e.g. heart rate, stress hormones).

Considering children's needs and scheduling less in their day is not the same as buffering children from all sources of stress and frustration. Children need to have manageable challenges in order to learn how to deal with minor setbacks and frustration and practise their developing emotional regulation skills.

Helping children manage their emotions lowers 'stress' hormones and releases 'feel good' hormones in children and carers.

Children feel less stressed and can manage better if they can do things at their own pace, in their own way.

Being warm, caring and providing security

Parents and carers can help children manage their emotions by being calm, warm and providing children with safety and security. Children may need help particularly when they are feeling tired, hungry, sad, scared, nervous, excited or frustrated.

The Circle of Security is an early intervention program that emphasises children's need for parents and carers to help organise children's internal experiences and feelings, particularly when they are too overwhelming for children to cope with on their own. The Circle of Security represents children's continual journey of moving away from their carers to explore and coming back to their carers to check in and receive the support and reassurance they need to continue exploring and learning. The program emphasises the crucial role of parents and carers in providing support for children's exploration, as well as being a safe haven for children when they are tired, upset or overwhelmed.

Ways parents and carers can convey warmth, caring, and security

- Using words to reflect the child's experience.
- Using open-ended questions where appropriate enables the child to express their feelings (e.g., "What did you enjoy the most about going to the park?"; or "What else can you make with playdough?").
- Reflecting in their own words what they understand the child has said being close to the child, with no things or other people between you.
- Being at the same level so the child feels more comfortable.
- Demonstrating interest in the child through eye contact.
- Having an open, relaxed body posture.
- Having a positive facial expression.
- Listening to children and responding in a timely manner.
- Speaking in a soft to normal volume, using a normal to low pitch and a slow, even tempo.

Positive touch helps children manage their emotions

To become socially and emotionally skilled and mentally healthy, children need to experience warmth, affection and positive touch. Positive touch includes physical gestures such as hugging, cuddling or gently patting children in a respectful and appropriate way. Positive touch conveys positive emotions to the child, such as: "I understand that you are feeling sad right now"; or "I know you are feeling angry and out of control, I am calm and can help you to feel more in control."

Positive touch is beneficial across the lifespan. Children have their own preferences and it is important that adults know and respect these. Some children may not enjoy being touched and it is important for parents and carers to find other ways to connect in this situation. Positive touch is important for children's development of a separate sense of self. It also contributes to children's developing capacity to receive and give nurturing touch experiences, an important factor in developing close and satisfying relationships with others.

Most babies and some older children benefit from cuddles and hugs.

Older children may prefer gentle touches to their arms, shoulder, head or back or a simple 'high five'.

Did you know that not only does positive touch reduce stress hormones and release feel good hormones, it also releases growth hormones essential for children to grow and thrive?

Emotion reflections

Adults can help children to understand and manage their emotions by responding appropriately to children's cues.

Emotion reflections are when an adult recognises the emotions a child may be experiencing in a given situation and reflects this back to the child using words to name the emotion, matching voice tone and body language. This helps the child to:

- feel understood when their perspective is acknowledged
- understand their inner world using labels to make sense of their feelings
- learn that emotions are a normal part of life
- make links between past emotional learning and new situations
- distinguish between different feelings
- use words to express their own emotions to others.

Emotional reflections

The table below shows how emotion reflections might be used:

(Source: Kostelnik, M.J., Whiren, A.B., Soderman, A.K., & Gregory, K.(2006). Guiding children's social development. Theory to practice (5th ed.). Thomson Delmar Learning: NY)

When care givers...	This helps ...
<p>1. Observe Don't say anything. Watch first. Pay attention to the situation. What was the build up? (e.g., what happened before the child displayed their emotion?). Watch for facial expressions, tone of voice and posture, as well as listening to what the child is saying to get a complete picture.</p>	<p>Adults to have a better understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the child may be experiencing and why • how the child expresses their emotions.
<p>2. Notice all emotions Both positive and less positive emotions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children to understand that all emotions, positive and less positive, are valid and worth expressing.
<p>3. Assess What do you think the child may be feeling? Try not to judge what you think the cause of their emotion may be (although you may have some thoughts about it).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults to think about what the child is experiencing and be open minded until you have more information.

When care givers...	This helps ...
<p>4. Reflect the child's emotions back to them Make a brief statement to the child describing how they appear to you and the emotion you think you observed (e.g., "you look sad"; or "you seem excited").</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children to feel acknowledged and understood. • Children to not feel overwhelmed by adults using too many words or complicated language or asking difficult questions such as "How are you feeling?"
<p>5. Use a variety of feeling words Over time children experience more differentiated emotions (e.g., excited, angry, frustrated, lonely) from the primary emotions (happy, mad, sad, afraid).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children to build their dictionary of feeling words. • Children increase their capacity to distinguish between different emotions.
<p>6. Acknowledge Acknowledge children's emotions even when you are not comfortable with them or think they are unreasonable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children feel understood and increases the likelihood they will share their feelings with others in the future so adults can help them develop constructive ways of dealing with their emotions. • Adults to recognise the child's viewpoint which may be different from their own.
<p>7. Revise Revise inaccurate reflections</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults become better at reflecting children's emotions. • Children to practise using words to express their emotions. • Children feel understood and capable which is important for their developing sense of self.

Parents and carers can also use non-verbal communication to reflect children's emotions. Non-verbal communication includes body positioning, hand and arm gestures, and body language. It is important for children's emotional development that parents' and carers' use of words, visual and sound cues convey a single message. For example, talking in a calm voice with open body language (e.g., holding arms open) and a kind expression conveys gentleness, safety and trust. This helps ensure adults' non-verbal messages reflect and are consistent with their verbal messages to children.

How you are is as important as what you say or do. Mixed messages can be confusing for children.

Practise, practise, practise

It takes time and effort to build a new skill. Practise using emotion reflections in your everyday interactions to help children manage their emotions.

Parents and carers can build their reflecting and responding skills by closely observing children and other caregivers. This assists with learning the different ways children communicate and a variety of ways to soothe children when they are upset.

Children are different

Children vary in the way they perceive, react to and interact with their world around them. Some children have lots of energy while others are calmer and quieter. Some children prefer variability and new experiences whereas others prefer to have regular routines. For some children, their mood is mostly positive whereas for others it is less so. Children also vary in how they switch between moods, with some taking longer and requiring more help than others to recover from being upset. In new situations, some children dive straight in whereas others may tend to withdraw and observe from a distance while they decide whether or not to join in. Children's concentration spans also vary with some children sticking at tasks for longer than others. These variations are part of what makes each child unique.

When adults understand and respect children for who they are and how they experience the world, children feel understood and valued. Children are more likely to have more positive experiences and feel less overwhelmed or out of control when they have the time and space they need to be themselves. Adults can help children to remain calm and manage their emotions by following the child's lead and respecting their needs.

What does helping children manage their emotions look like?

Here are some examples of emotional experiences children may have, how parents and carers might respond and what skills children can learn from these experiences.

When a child is upset		
They might ...	A parent or carer might respond by ...	The child learns ...
... sit on the floor not playing and frowning	... bending down placing a gentle hand on the child's shoulder and saying 'I can see that you look upset. Do you want to tell me what happened? What can we do to help you feel better?' using a kind and gentle voice.	... that someone is interested and cares. It also provides the child with some choice, as well as hope and skills for managing negative experiences.
... shout at another child with whom they are fighting over a toy	... helping the two children to calm down by using words to describe their feelings and working together to solve the problem (for example, "You seem to be upset. Why don't we stop and have a big stretch and relax? Then maybe you can each say why you are upset and what ideas you have for	... to calm down and how to solve problems with others.

When a child is upset		
They might ...	A parent or carer might respond by ...	The child learns ...
	solving the problem and feeling better.").	
... cry	... giving them a cuddle and be still with them until they have calmed down.	... to experience and know what it is to be calm and trust that there is someone there for them.
... be quiet and not draw any attention to themselves	... watching from a distance for a while and think about what the child may be experiencing. A parent or carer could slowly move closer to the child and provide some contact and comfort or reassurance, followed by engaging the child in an experience when they seemed ready to do so.	... that they are important and their feelings are valued. They may also learn that they can feel better by sharing their feelings with others.

Information from: <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters/social-and-emotional-learning/emotional-development/coping-skills-managing>