

# CONNECTING WITH KIDS & THEIR EMOTIONS

When we ask parents what they want for their kids, the answer is always the same – we just want our kids to be happy. Although we can't shield them from the hard parts of life we can help build their emotional intelligence and resilience as they grow up. That's the best way of ensuring they lead a satisfying healthy life – and happiness usually goes hand in hand with that.

Communicating with children is an art form and the good news is that certain types of communication can actually help them understand their feelings and even behave better. As adults, we can get used to speaking and listening in certain ways, but it can be helpful to remember that kids **LOVE** it when we listen to them. That's just as important as all the things we say to them, so open your ears.

**Here are some basic principles to help you teach your kids to manage their emotions and stay well:**

**Catch them being awesome:** Notice when your children are behaving in positive ways and point it out to them. Explain how helpful that behaviour is and give them a pat on the back or a high five. If you acknowledge good behaviour it's much more likely to be repeated. If you see them manage their emotions well, praise them. E.g. "I saw you nearly lost your temper at the park but a few deep breaths and you dealt with that little boy really well."

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**Tune in first:** Make sure your children have turned their attention to you, before you tell them something important. If you pass by the doorway and call out 'Screens off – we're going', it's no surprise when 10 minutes later they still haven't moved. Go into the room, get down to their level, make eye contact, and be clear with them. When you communicate, give them your attention.

**"I spent a lot of time yelling at my kids. I think they would just shut their ears when they heard me start. I learnt to say less but make sure we were both connecting before I started – it works well."**  
– Ned, 30

**Ask about feelings:** When your child is sad, anxious or just acting out, ask them how they are feeling. Kids who get used to talking about emotions know how to identify many different feelings (rather than just being sad or mad). That's the first step to dealing with them in a healthy way.

**Role model emotional intelligence:** Don't hide all your negative feelings from your children. It's healthy to tell them you are a bit sad because your friend is unwell, or you are hurt by something someone said at work. Show them how you work through these feelings, how you deal with anxiety and manage your stress. They are like little sponges soaking up everything they see.

**Acknowledge their feelings:** Avoid saying things like 'you shouldn't feel like that'. It is better to say "I hear you feel jealous of your sister, that's OK, let's talk about it." It's not a crime to feel humiliated, sad, unmotivated or angry as long as we express it in healthy ways and don't stay stuck in the feeling.

**Play with feelings:** There are some fun games to play to teach little ones about emotions. You can draw pictures of faces and help them recognise what the emotion is called and when someone may feel like that. You can also flick around the channels on the TV and name the emotions you see. You might tell little stories in the car and ask them to guess how the person in the story may be feeling – mix up the good the bad and the neutral types of feelings.

**Explain that negative feelings are normal:** It's a great life skill to be able to sit with painful feelings. When children are left out of a team or a group at school they will inevitably feel bad for a while. We can help by talking about rejection and disappointment. It's not the end of the world – it's a feeling.

**Encourage problem solving:** Eventually they will be ready to talk about what they might do about it. Help them formulate a plan of action for feeling better or dealing with the issue, without taking over.

**Enjoy the positive feelings:** When things are feeling good embrace that! Notice it and talk to children about what a great day you've all had. There will always be ups and downs in life – recognising the ups is a smart move!

**"When my 5 year old got upset I would try to jolly her out of it. That didn't prepare her very well for what came along in adolescence. With my second child I talked about all whole spectrum of feelings that we experience in life – I think it was a better approach. There's nothing wrong with feeling down for a while, eventually we pick ourselves up and go on."**  
– Narelle 37

**Help them move forward:** If kids are catastrophising or complaining, try to help them reframe their thinking. Start by acknowledging where they are now (a helpful saying is 'Connect before you Correct') and then guide them in a more positive direction. For example, if young Matt says "I hate school, everyone there's stupid", you could reply "Hmm sounds like you've had some challenges lately". Talk about them if he wants to share, show empathy and then when you have really listened at the end of the conversation say something positive like "Luckily you have your mate Lachie to support you – we should have him over, he's a good friend".





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## WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH

Be careful about communication with your children when there is conflict. It's tempting as the adult just to take over and conclude the discussion. However when there is a problem with your kids you can aim to manage it in an age appropriate way that models good emotional management skills for them. If your 4 year old breaks a vase because she threw a ball inside, then blames her older brother, see this as a learning experience. Try not to overreact. She is probably checking out how it will feel to tell a lie and blame someone else. They will argue and you can offer support and intervene if necessary. She may become overwhelmed by the conflict that ensues and retreat, or she may fight it out. It's the discussions afterwards that matter. If you can talk it through and listen to her that will be very helpful. If she can clean up the mess and apologise, all the better. Positive sensible (rather than overly emotional) communication is the key to ensuring your home is a place of learning – this is where they'll pick up the life skills they need.

If your child is very distressed, sometimes it's appropriate to put verbal communication aside for a while. Just sit with them and comfort them. Be there to listen or just wait until they are ready to talk. Try not to blame or put guilt trips on your children, talk about conflicts and life challenges as chances to learn. Debriefing when a conflict has blown over, talking about feelings of anger, grief or fear is a great way of bonding with your child. Don't be afraid to share a little about what you feel and assure them that all families have their ups and downs. Keep in mind that kids look to adults to reassure them that what they are feeling is normal, and that things will be OK.

## WHEN KIDS WON'T COMMUNICATE

Being a child can at times, feel disempowering. There are lots of decisions they don't get to make, and lots of things they are made to do. Kids soon work out that they do have a few secret weapons for wrestling back some control. They can refuse to eat, hold off on sleeping or clam up and stop communicating. This causes parents all sorts of worries, so it's very effective. Try to look at the WHY, when kids won't talk. Rather than trying to force them, show some empathy. You might say "It looks like something has happened to make you upset – that must feel bad. When you have had some quiet time maybe we can talk about it, don't forget how much we care about you". Then leave them alone for a while. It may take a few days but kids will usually start to communicate if they feel confident they will be listened to and not judged too harshly.

Sometimes kids do want to talk ... but not to you! Accept that and encourage them to confide in trustworthy adults. They may be teachers, neighbours, aunts or grandparents. Help-seeking is a great life skill, so try not to feel overlooked. Parent's perspectives are important – but kids need to hear about the world from others too.

As our kids grow we need to learn new techniques along the way but tuning into how they are feeling is a long term strategy. Remember, even if you try these new communication strategies and only some work – at least you have broadened your repertoire.

Good luck!

