

Supporting children's emotional development

Understanding and managing feelings

Children's abilities for recognising, understanding and managing their emotions

are influenced by the ways the adults who care for them acknowledge and respond to their feelings. When children learn to manage their emotions they are also better able to manage their behaviour. Parents, carers and school staff can provide important support and guidance for children's emotional development.

Helpful ways of supporting children's emotional development:

- **Listen and validate the child's emotional experience**
Listen to what children say and acknowledge their feelings. This helps children to identify emotions and understand how they work. Being supported in this way helps children work out how to manage their emotions. Some things you might say: *"You look worried. Is something on your mind?"; "It sounds like you're really angry. Let's talk about it."*
- **View emotions as an opportunity for connecting and teaching**
Children's emotional reactions provide 'teachable moments' for helping them understand emotions and learn effective ways to manage them. Something you might say: *"I can see you're really frustrated about having to wait for what you want. Why don't we read a story while we're waiting?"*
- **Encourage problem solving to manage emotions**
Help children develop their skills for managing emotions by helping them think of different ways they could respond. Some things you might say: *"What would help you feel brave?"; "How else could you look at this?"*
- **Set limits in a supportive way**
Set limits on inappropriate behaviour so that children understand that having feelings is okay, but acting inappropriately is not. Something you might say: *"I know you're upset that your friend couldn't make it over, but that does not make it okay to yell at me."*

Some unhelpful things to avoid:

- **Dismissing children's emotions**
Telling children not to feel the way they do (e.g., by saying *"Don't be scared/sad/angry"*), can lead children to believe that their emotions are wrong and they are bad for having them. For children to learn how to manage their emotions they first need to be acknowledged and understood.
- **Lying to children about situations to avoid emotional reactions**
Telling children things like *"It won't hurt a bit"* (when you know it will) can actually increase the emotional reaction. It teaches them not trust the person who has lied. It is important to communicate with children about difficult situations that affect them in ways they can understand. Providing information to children at their level, with reassurance, helps them work out ways to manage their emotional responses.
- **Shaming children for their emotions**
Sometimes adults tease children about their emotional responses or try to shame them out of feeling a certain way. Saying things like, *"Why are you crying like a baby?"* or *"You're such a scaredy-cat!"* undermines children's confidence. Instead of helping them to feel brave it leads them to feel guilty for experiencing that emotion.
- **Ignoring children's emotional responses**
Sometimes adults ignore children's emotional reactions and think that the child will just grow out of it. This communicates to children that their emotions are unimportant and limits their opportunities to learn effective ways of managing their emotions.

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. We welcome your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

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How thinking affects feelings

Understanding that what we think affects how we feel and how we behave

helps children and adults learn effective ways of managing emotions. As shown in the following examples, unhelpful thoughts lead us to feel bad and can stop us from doing what we want to do. Helpful thoughts lead to more positive feelings and effective behaviours.



Ben thinks "I'm so dumb – everyone is better at school than me". Ben feels frustrated and hopeless, and he gives up on doing his homework (behaviour).

Sharni thinks "I'm never going to make any friends at this new school". Sharni feels worried and sad, and she refuses to go to school (behaviour).

Rachael thinks "I wrote a good story in class yesterday". Rachael feels proud and confident, which helps her to write the next story (behaviour).

Some examples of unhelpful thinking and helpful alternatives are listed in this table:

Kinds of unhelpful thinking to look out for	What a child might think or say	A helpful alternative
Overgeneralising	I failed this maths test – I am hopeless at EVERYTHING.	I may have failed this maths test but I'm good at other things.
Black or white thinking	I forgot to say my line. Now the whole play is ruined.	I made one mistake. It doesn't mean the whole thing is ruined.
Shoulds and musts	They should have known not to start the game without me.	I would have liked them to wait for me, but I can still join in.
Personalising	It's my fault she got hurt. I should have warned her.	It was an accident. It's nobody's fault.
Magnification	This project is so huge I don't know where to start. I might as well give up.	I can manage this if I take it step by step.
Minimisation	Who cares if I won an award for 'most improved'? It doesn't mean anything.	I may not have got the best marks, but I've still done well.
Catastrophising	The other team looks so good. There's no way we can win.	It will be a tough match, but we can still try our hardest. We might do better than we think.

Challenging unhelpful thinking

Unhelpful thinking is very common in both children and adults. Often we don't notice it because the thoughts happen automatically. By listening to the things children say about themselves and their experiences, parents and carers can learn to notice and gently challenge children's unhelpful thinking. The best way to do this is to help children think through the reasons why they think a particular way. Saying things like "I can see how

you might think that, but maybe there's another way of looking at it" or "Let's see how we can check that out" are very useful for helping children change their unhelpful thinking. Children need to know they are not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts (everybody has them), but that learning to identify and change unhelpful thinking is a way of managing their feelings better.

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