

Mental health information sheets

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Everyone needs a friend

“Those girls at school are mean. I told them about this great game but they wouldn’t play it. They said I couldn’t play with them.”

Rebecca, who is seven, plays happily at home with her four year-old sister Samantha. Samantha adores her big sister and will do anything she says. But with school friends it’s not so easy.

Rebecca’s mother wonders whether the other children really are mean or whether Rebecca may be too pushy.

When children come over to visit it seems to go well as long as they are doing what Rebecca wants. But if the other child wants to do something different, Rebecca often sulks or goes off in a huff.

Children’s friendships often have their ups and downs. When friendships are going well they support children’s emotional wellbeing and confidence, as well as providing someone to play with.

Positive friendships help children have fun, and also help them cope during periods of stress and change. This is why having friends at school is so important for children.



Helping children with the ups and downs of friendships

It is not always easy for children to know how to manage friendships. Problems with friends can affect how children feel about themselves and their enthusiasm for activities that involve others. Parents and carers can help children learn the kinds of friendship skills they will need as they grow and develop.

Learning how to make and keep friends involves a number of skills. Children learn more and more complex social skills from those around them as they develop.

Home life has an effect on the development of social skills. A child who has an adoring little sister is likely to have more leadership skills. A child who is the little sister may be more used to fitting in with what others want to do. These children are likely to react differently when they go to school and meet other children with different life experiences and social skills.

Core friendship skills for children

Cooperation

- How to share, how to take turns, how to work together towards a common goal.

Communication

- Using words to explain what you want and listening to others respectfully.
- Paying attention to body language (eg making eye contact, smiling, being able to read others’ nonverbal reactions).

Understanding and managing feelings

- Being able to express feelings in ways that help others understand you.
- Recognising and responding to others’ feelings.

Accepting and including others

- Recognising others’ needs for respect and friendship.

Solving friendship problems

Children develop friendship skills through playing with other children. Because they are learning, they are sure to have times when things do not go as they would like. Sometimes they blame themselves for what has happened.

They may say, "Nobody likes me 'coz I can't run as fast as they can." Sometimes they blame everyone else for the problem and, like Rebecca, say, "The girls are all mean to me." Even though they blame the other children they may still think of it as a problem they cannot change.

How parents and carers can help

First and foremost you can help children by listening to them talk about the everyday joys and troubles that arise out of their friendships. Asking what might have led to others' reactions can help the child, with your assistance, to think of possible solutions.

Try a problem-solving approach

When problems arise in friendships it is important not to blame children but to show them how to find a solution. A problem-solving approach is often helpful.

- 1 Encourage the child to describe what has happened.
- 2 Ask about how they felt.
- 3 Ask them how they think the other person might see it and how they might be feeling.
- 4 Get them to think of ways they could do things differently next time.
- 5 Encourage them to try the new approach – get them to practise with you so they feel more confident.
- 6 Check back with your child to see how things turned out.



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Helping children learn positive friendship skills

Importance of children's friendships

At any age, having friends provides support and promotes mental health and wellbeing. Children's friendships are also very important for their social and emotional development. Through friendships children learn how to relate with others. They develop social skills as they teach each other how to be good friends.

Most children want to have friends. Children who have friends are more likely to be self-confident and perform better academically at school than those without friends. When children have difficulty in making friends or in keeping them, it often leads to feeling lonely and unhappy with themselves. Feeling rejected by others may lead to significant distress. Learning positive friendship skills can help children socially so they feel happier and more confident.

How friendships develop and change

Friendships require give and take. By sharing toys, time, games, experiences and feelings, children learn that they can have their social needs met and can meet the needs of others. Since friendships develop through this kind of mutual exchange, close friendships are usually based on well-matched needs.

Children's friendship needs and skills change as they grow. Similarly, children's ideas about friendship change as they develop. This is reflected in the different kinds of activities that children like to spend time doing with their friends at different ages. The table below indicates the ways children tend to describe close friends and the kinds of skills that support positive friendships as they develop.

Approximate age	A friend is someone who...	Friendship skills include...
Up to 1 yr		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> looking, smiling, touching, imitating
1–2 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> plays with you has good toys can do fun things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying friend by name
3–5 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> does something that pleases you you know better than other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> playing well in a twosome approaching others to join in
5–7 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> helps and looks after you you help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taking others' feelings into account seeing others' viewpoint
8–10 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> plays fair – follows the rules talks and shares interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talking and listening to each other forming groups with similar interests
10–12 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> trusts you and is trustworthy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sharing confidences negotiating respecting one another
12–18 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understands you and who you understand you can talk to about feelings or problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> talking about personal and social issues supporting one another



Friendship patterns in the primary school years

Children choose friends who have similar interests and enjoy similar activities. During primary school close friendships are most often with a child of the same sex. This is related to children's preferences in play.

Boys tend to prefer active kinds of play in groups, whereas girls typically prefer gentler games in pairs or threes and use talk more than action. Such preferences may be especially strong around the ages of eight and nine when many children become more aware of social expectations regarding girls' and boys' behaviour.

These expectations can create difficulties for boys who are interested in gentler kinds of play and for girls who prefer the kind of active play that is usually associated with boys.

Friends cooperate and communicate more with each other than with other children. They also have conflicts more often, but usually manage to settle them without upsetting the friendship. Friends influence each other's behaviour. Over time they may take on similar mannerisms, language and preferences. Although friendships usually have positive effects, friends who have behavioural problems may encourage problem behaviour in one another.

As children's interests and developmental needs change, their friendship patterns may also change. By the middle of primary school it is common for children to form small friendship groups based around similar interests. These groups often establish their own rules about who can join them. Setting rules and learning to negotiate them is important for helping children to develop their understanding of social relationships. However, when children lack cooperative relationship skills it can lead to friendship groups being dominated by some children and excluding others.

Friends influence each other's behaviour. Over time they may take on similar mannerisms, language and preferences.

Social skills that promote friendship

Children who are good at making and keeping friends use positive social skills. Parents, carers and school staff help children learn positive social skills by guiding them as young children, being positive examples for children to follow, and providing opportunities for play where children can practise their skills. Key social skills that help with friendships include cooperation, communication, empathy, emotional control and responsibility.

All children go through friendship conflicts. Even usually popular children experience rejection sometimes. When this happens children's confidence may be affected. They may blame themselves or others. Beliefs about the reasons for the friendship conflicts they experience affect the ways that children react.

Some kinds of thinking are more helpful than others for managing the conflicts children have with friends. The following example shows different possible reactions to being refused when a child has asked to join in a game with others.



Positive social skills are shown in these behaviours

Starting conversations	Sharing
Taking turns	Asking for what one wants/needs
Expressing feelings	Apologising to others
Asking questions	Following rules of play
Complimenting others	Playing fair
Accepting others	Listening to others
Refusing to join others' negative behaviours	Being a good loser
	Helping others
	Cooperating

Poor social skills are shown in these behaviours

Physical aggression (kicking, hitting, etc)	Being a poor loser
Arguing	Getting into others' space
Interrupting	Talking too much
Name-calling	Breaking rules of play
Bossing others	Being too rough in play
Whining, complaining	Taking others' possessions
Showing off	



All children go through friendship conflicts. Even usually popular children experience rejection sometimes.

Thoughts	Beliefs	Feelings	Behaviour
<i>I'm just not much fun. Other kids don't like me.</i>	<i>It's my fault and it won't change.</i>	Anxious Sad Low confidence	Withdraws from social contact with other children
<i>They're out to get me. They're being mean on purpose.</i>	<i>It's their fault and they shouldn't have done it.</i>	Angry Hostile	May become aggressive or try to get back at them in other ways
<i>It's because they already started the game. Next time I'll ask first. I can look for someone else to play with today.</i>	<i>The situation wasn't right. I can change it.</i>	Resilient (disappointed at first but quickly recovers) Confident	Accepts what has happened and looks for other ways to solve the problem

It is very beneficial for children when a parent, carer or school staff member helps them solve friendship conflicts by encouraging resilient, cooperative attitudes. Rather than simply blaming the other children the adult may say something like, "What else can you do? Are there other children who might be interested in playing a game?"

Key points for supporting children's friendship skills

Parents, carers and school staff have important roles to play in helping children develop friendships. They set examples for children to follow through the ways they manage relationships. They can also act as coaches for children, teaching them helpful social skills and talking through friendship issues to help with solving problems. As they learn how to manage social situations, having opportunities to talk about friendships with parents, carers and school staff helps children feel supported and develops their communication skills.

Provide children with opportunities to play with peers

Children gain experience and learn important social skills from playing with friends. For children who are still learning how to get along, it can be helpful to plan what to do before having a friend over for a play date. This could involve deciding whether to share all of their toys or only some, or encouraging them to think about what games the other child would like to play when they arrive.

Teach positive social skills

Observe your child to work out the negative social behaviours your child uses too often and the positive social behaviours they could use more.

- Little things like smiles, looking at the person, knowing names and using a confident, friendly voice can make a big difference when making friends. Being able to better control negative emotions and paying attention to the needs and wants of others are also very important.

- Teach one behaviour or social skill at a time and make sure the child is able to do it before introducing another skill. Show your child what to do. You may act out the situation and even demonstrate what to say. Take turns 'acting' until your child can demonstrate what to do. Don't be too serious. Make it a fun experience.

Be a coach

- Coaching is critical for helping children use new skills in real-life situations. Coaching involves prompting, reminding and encouraging (but not nagging!) children to use the skills they have learned. Coach your child to practise positive social skills in everyday situations with family members and friends. Support children's learning by giving positive feedback and praise.

Help children solve friendship conflicts

- Talking problems through with a supportive adult helps children to think about what happens, how they feel about it and what to do next. Thinking things through like this helps to build more mature social skills.

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Friendship skills: Suggestions for families

Parents and carers are children's first and most important teachers when it comes to relationships

The ways you relate to your children and the guidance you provide helps develop children's social skills. You can help children develop and maintain friendships by modelling effective social skills, providing opportunities for children to practise interacting with others, and offering support when they go through difficulties. Taking the role of a coach helps children learn the skills they need for themselves.



Children who have a wide range of interests are more likely to have something in common with others and so find it easier to make friends and get along.



The following suggestions may be helpful

Make time to play too

Parents and carers can improve their children's social skills by playing with them regularly. Letting children choose and lead the play allows you to be playful with them and encourages them to practise skills for cooperation and negotiation. Making time for play helps strengthen your relationship with them as well as their skills. Avoid criticising and make it fun!

Allow your child to try all sorts of different activities

Children who have a wide range of interests are more likely to have something in common with others and so find it easier to make friends and get along.

Invite children for play dates

Having friends over to visit helps children to establish friendships and practise their social skills. It also provides an opportunity for you to provide on-the-spot coaching for children as they develop their friendship skills. Providing positive guidance and helping to structure activities (without taking over!) can be very important when establishing new friendships.

Child says...

"There's this girl in my class who is really mean to everyone in class, and so we are all mean right back to her."

"Maybe she thinks we don't like her, and so she's being mean to us?"

"Well, I like her when she's not being mean."

"Maybe I could invite her over to play after school?"

Talk with children about what is happening for them with their friends

Find a relaxed time, like the drive home from school or after dinner, to talk about what is happening in your children's friendship group. By doing this, you let them know that you are interested in their wellbeing, and this can also be an opportunity to share some of your experiences and to help them solve any problems they might have.

Encourage positive, relevant strategies

Parents and carers can talk about, and encourage, friendly and cooperative strategies that can help their child to develop friendships. For example, encouraging children to negotiate or compromise when trying to solve conflicts with peers is a strategy that is more positively received than aggression or verbal threats.

Take a problem-solving approach

Parents and carers don't need to have the answers to all of their children's problems. You can support your children to think through a problem for themselves by talking with them and asking some useful questions. For example:

Parent/carer asks...

"Why do you think she is being so mean?"

"That could be one reason. Do you like her?"

"So how could you show her that you do like her, and that there's no need for her to be mean?"

Affirms: "That sounds like a great idea to me."

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Friendship skills: Suggestions for school staff

Having friends at school provides critical support for children's social and emotional wellbeing

Children who have friends show more cooperative behaviour and feel more connected at school. Conversely, children who lack friends are more likely to be bullied and to show behavioural and mental health problems. School staff can play a key role in teaching and promoting positive friendship skills.

How school staff can help

Be a role model

Lead by example. Be sure to have a caring, empathic and respectful attitude to all students. Connecting with students in a personal way provides an important model for friendly behaviour. On the other hand, singling students out for criticism in front of others can indicate that it is okay for them to do likewise.

Create learning opportunities

Introduce classroom routines to teach friendly behaviour. For example, you might model giving compliments and then set up situations where students can practise giving and receiving them.

Integrate friendship skills across all key learning areas

Provide children with varied opportunities to practise what they are learning and reinforce core social skills. Literacy, drama and social studies lessons all lend themselves well to this. For example, you can select story books and writing topics that endorse key social messages (eg what makes a good friend).

You can also teach social skills through role play or dramatic rehearsal. Dramatic play is enjoyable for most children and gives them practice in using skills in real social situations.

Connecting with students in a personal way provides an important model for friendly behaviour.



Use small group work

Small group work is an effective way of providing children with opportunities to practise the skills of cooperation, including giving and receiving help, sharing ideas, and listening to one another's point of view. For small group work to be successful children need to first be taught the relevant social and emotional skills, such as listening and sharing. Group tasks should be well-structured and monitored to ensure that children continue to develop skills for cooperative learning.

Take advantage of 'real life' situations to teach social skills

For example, help children express their feelings during emotionally-charged social situations (eg "I guess you might feel pretty angry that Sean spilled your drink").

- Teach empathy and encourage children to be more understanding of the feelings of others (eg ask the child to tell you about how Sean is feeling in the situation).
- Promote problem-solving. Use questions and strategies to guide and encourage children to find mutually-satisfying solutions (eg understanding the other's position, saying sorry, looking for solutions that meet each child's needs).



School staff may also need to plan ways to support particular children with strategies to manage friendship conflicts outside the classroom.



Reinforce skills outside of the classroom

The playground often puts more demands on children's social skills as there is less structure than inside the classroom. A whole-school approach will work best to establish clear behaviour guidelines for the playground. School staff may also need to plan ways to support particular children with strategies to manage friendship conflicts outside the classroom.

Involve parents and carers

Communicate with families about your strategies for supporting children's developing social skills. Sharing information and ideas is important in every area of the child's learning and encourages parents and carers to continue to teach and reinforce skills at home.

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Everyone gets scared

Six year old Jessica doesn't want to go to sleep in her own bed. "You stay with me Mum", she says. Jessica's Mum reads another story. Her Mum gives her one more kiss and leaves.

A few minutes later, Jessica appears in the doorway. "I'm scared something might happen to the house. The roof might blow away. "Nothing's going to happen to the house," her mum says. "But I saw it on TV!" Jessica wails.

Jessica had not seemed to be bothered about the TV before. Now her parents realise she must have become worried after seeing TV news items about recent storms.

Understanding children's fears

Children get scared for all sorts of reasons. Often their fears seem unreasonable to adults. But even what may seem illogical, can be very real to children.

Some fears are very common amongst children, with different sorts of fears appearing at different ages. Preschool children are often afraid of imaginary things like monsters hiding under the bed. In early primary school, children are usually more fearful of real things that might happen, like being hurt. Later, fears are more typically about possible failure at school or in sport.

Noticing when children are afraid

It's not always easy to tell when a child is frightened or worried. Obvious things that the child responds to immediately, like thunder, are easy enough to recognise. But some things are not as obvious. Children may not tell you they are scared. Often they show it through their behaviour instead.

When children are scared or worried they may:

- become clingy or demand that a parent or carer stay close to them
- have sleeping difficulties or want to sleep in their parent or carers' bed
- lack confidence to do things they did happily before
- avoid situations that make them feel scared or anxious
- ask a parent or carer to do things for them or with them
- complain of tummy aches or headaches.



Helping children to cope with fears

Children need adult support in order to learn to cope with fears. They need reassurance to reduce their anxious feelings, and skills for coping so that they can gradually learn to manage fears themselves.

Learning to cope with fears and worries helps children develop confidence

How parents and carers can help

- Acknowledge how your child is feeling. Naming it (eg 'feeling scared') helps the child begin to see fear as a normal emotion that can be overcome.
- Stay cool yourself so you can model positive coping.
- Tell them how you learned to get over fears when you were their age.
- Positive self-talk can help children put fears into perspective (eg "The storms on TV are far away from here. My house will be okay").
- Asking what a favourite hero might do in this situation can sometimes be helpful for encouraging children to be brave.
- Learning relaxation skills is often very helpful for dealing with fears.
- Help the child put realistic limits around the scary situation. For example, Jessica's parents could explain that the TV pictures she saw were about something that happens rarely and only when the weather is extreme.
- Since television is a frequent trigger for children's fears it is important to monitor television viewing to minimise exposure to things that may be frightening. It can also help to discuss scary things at the time they are seen on TV.



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About fears and worries

Everyone experiences fear

It is one of the most basic human emotions, helping to keep us safe by alerting us to danger. The fear response prepares us to flee or withdraw from threatening situations.

An important part of children's growth involves learning how to cope with the common fears of childhood. As children learn to manage their emotions and overcome everyday fears, their confidence grows for taking on new challenges. Parents and carers and school staff can play a critical role in helping children develop skills for managing feelings and coping with fear.

How children experience fear

Fear reactions are made up of physical changes, feelings and behaviours. The body responds to fear by speeding up the heart rate and breathing so that we can act quickly to respond to danger. Along with this we may experience physical symptoms such as feeling tightness in the chest, getting shaky or sweaty, or having 'butterflies in the stomach'. Sometimes people turn pale with fear – usually when the fear is very strong. Children often simply describe the unpleasant feelings in the stomach as 'feeling sick'. These sorts of physical responses to fear are associated with psychological responses such as feeling scared, tense, nervous or worried.

Children who experience fear are more likely to show us than tell us that they are afraid. They may do this by seeking reassurance, by trying to avoid the situation that makes them fearful, by becoming agitated or by becoming upset. If the situation that makes them fearful is one they cannot avoid they may try to get a parent, carer or other trusted adult to deal with it for them. Some behaviours that adults frequently find annoying, like nagging and whingeing, result from children's attempts to avoid situations they are afraid of.

Children who experience fear are more likely to show us than tell us that they are afraid.



How children experience fear – continued

Age	Common fears	How thinking is involved
Early infancy	Loud noises Loss of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Senses stimulate infant learning• Aware of dependence on caregiver
Late infancy 8–15 months	Strangers Separations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Associates unknown person with risk• Realises that parent or carer is missing
Preschool 2–4 years	Imaginary creatures such as monsters Potential burglars The dark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Imagination is a major thinking tool• May not distinguish fantasy from reality
Early primary age 5–7 years	Natural disasters (eg fire, thunder) Injury Animals Fears related to TV viewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to think in concrete logical terms• Fears relate to dangers that have a basis in reality
Upper primary age 8–11 years	Sports and school performance Fear of failure Illness and death	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluates own performance by comparison with others• Sense of self tied to achievement
Adolescence 12–18 years	Peer rejection Fear of ridicule Meeting new people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Able to think in more abstract ways• Able to anticipate the future in more detail• Self-esteem related to peer relationships

As noted above, pre-school children's fears of imaginary things, such as fearing that monsters are under the bed, shows their use of imagination in thinking and play. Once children develop logical thinking it allows them to think through the things that make them afraid and to filter out those things that are purely imaginary. The focus of school-age children's fears is therefore more likely to be realistic and to involve things that do or could actually happen to them. The fears of children in upper primary school are commonly about getting hurt or being embarrassed in social situations.

The development of thinking also means that fearful situations can be anticipated and worried about. By later primary school, children's thinking ability has developed enough that they can worry about things that haven't happened yet. They may begin to worry about school tests or about not being liked by peers. The physical symptoms associated with fear are also present when children worry. They are not as strong but they last longer. Even though imaginary fears decrease with age, some childhood fears, such as fear of the dark and fear of death, continue into adulthood. Research has shown that females generally experience or report higher levels of fear than males do.

Why some children are more fearful than others

All the fears described in the previous table are normal. Most children will experience them to some degree. But some children seem to experience fears more strongly or more frequently than other children.

Children with an anxious temperament may cry more easily than others, be more 'clingy' with parents and carers, or try to avoid doing new things so they won't have to feel scared. They are also often more shy than average and find it hard to join in groups or talk to people they don't know well. Children with an anxious temperament seem to experience the physical symptoms of fear more easily and more quickly than others. It is especially important for these children to learn skills to cope with fear and anxiety.





Skills for coping with fears and worries

Learning to manage fear involves social and emotional skills for self-awareness and self-management. Children need to learn to recognise and manage physical symptoms, anxious thinking and fearful behaviours. Depending on the ways an individual child responds to fear, they may experience the kinds of symptoms included in the left column of the table below. Skills that can help children to manage these symptoms are listed on the right.

Physical symptoms

Butterflies in stomach
Shortness of breath
Feeling sick
Heart racing

Fearful thinking

Something bad is going to happen; I can't do this; I'm going to get hurt; People will laugh at me; This is too much for me to handle.

Pessimistic thinking, such as expecting the worst

Fearful behaviours

Seeks reassurance
Cries
Tries to avoid scary situations
Acts shy
Gets agitated

Relaxation skills

Notice physical symptoms and recognise they are signs of nervousness
Deep breathing techniques for calming nervousness
Relaxation techniques

Helpful thinking

I can manage this; I can be brave; It doesn't have to be perfect; I've got through this sort of thing before, so I can do it again.

Optimistic thinking, such as: *Things will work out okay – they usually do.*

Coping behaviours

Plan and rehearse how child will handle the scary situation (eg establish a bedtime ritual, keep a torch by the bed)
Build confidence for social situations by learning and practising assertive behaviours

Key points for supporting children's coping skills

For children to learn to manage fear effectively they need adult support and guidance. Acknowledging children's fears is an important first step. Helping children to understand how fear affects their bodies and thinking is the next step in teaching them how to manage it. Parents and carers also have an important role in showing children how to apply helpful coping skills to reduce fearful feelings.

Provide times to talk

Your support and encouragement will help your child to attempt what at first seems scary. Show you understand by acknowledging how your child feels. You can help children recognise when they are feeling scared by naming the feelings, for example: "It sounds like you're a bit worried about..." or "You're feeling a bit scared, are you?" Labelling fears in this way helps children to see that feeling scared is a normal feeling that can be managed.

Model appropriate behaviour

Children learn a lot about how to get through difficult situations in life from the examples set by parents and carers. If a child comes to share a worry with you and they see you are also worried, they can lose confidence and become more fearful. If instead you can stay calm and deal with stressful situations, you are actually helping them to learn coping skills. Better still, you can talk out loud with them about how you deal with fear and worry. This helps children see that even grownups get scared or worried at times, and that feeling scared is something you understand and can help them with.



Build confidence and independence in small steps

Having successes helps build confidence. When children are set small challenges that they can succeed at, it can support their confidence for doing more things independently. For example, you may get your child to buy an everyday item from a shop on his own. If that is too difficult then you can make the task more manageable by breaking it into smaller steps. You might stand near at first while he talks to the sales assistant. When he can do this, you may prompt him to go into the shop alone.

Spend time preparing for a scary situation before it happens

Prepare children for situations they may find scary by planning ahead and practising ideas about what to do. Children don't learn when they are already fearful, because fear makes it hard for them to remember what you are saying. Preparation and practice help them use their coping skills and see that they can manage.

If ongoing fear and worry make it hard for children to enjoy life or interfere with their ability to manage everyday activities at home, at school or socially, they may need help for an anxiety difficulty.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on children with anxiety.

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Coping with fears and worries

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for early primary aged children, but can be modified for use with older ages. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

Parents and carers are usually the first people children look to for support and reassurance when they are scared or worried. Providing reassurance such as hugs and encouragement helps to restore children's sense of safety and confidence. Giving children a sense of safety includes limiting their exposure to frightening situations, such as violence – whether real or on TV. Parents and carers can also play a leading role in helping children learn skills for managing their fears.

Things to take into account

- It takes time and effort for children to learn new coping skills.
- Younger children usually learn best when you do it with them.
- Though older children may be able to use coping skills independently, they still need your support when scared.
- All children feel more secure and confident when they have regular quality time with parents and carers.
- Bedtime is often when children's fears surface. Try to ensure that children have calming time before bed to unwind. A regular bedtime routine or ritual helps children feel a sense of safety and security.





Encourage helpful thinking:
 “Tell those scary thoughts
 ‘I know I am safe and I won’t let
 you scare me!’”

The following example shows some possible ways a parent or carer might help Jessica, a six-year-old child who has difficulty going to sleep because of fears that something might happen to the house.

Child’s difficulty	Some suggestions on how to support
Feels scared and worried	Acknowledge feelings: “You’re having trouble going to sleep because you’re worried something might happen.”
Unsafe	Reassure: “That storm was only on TV. It’s not going to happen here.”
Can’t think through logically	Reality check: “The wind would have to be really, really strong to blow the roof off. We don’t get those kinds of winds here.”
Feels overwhelmed by scary thoughts	Label: “That’s just a scary thought. You don’t have to keep it.”
Lacks skills for coping	Demonstrate coping skill: “Let’s blow the scary thoughts away. Take a deep breath and together we will blow them all away.” This example uses a simple idea and makes a game of blowing away all the scary thoughts. Using skills and images the child relates to, as well as making it fun, helps best.
Has trouble relaxing	Teach relaxation: Younger children often respond well to relaxation techniques that help them to visualise calming images (eg a waterfall or clouds floating gently across the sky).
Doesn’t feel confident about managing fears	Encourage helpful thinking: “Tell those scary thoughts ‘I know I am safe and I won’t let you scare me!’”
May not believe in own ability	Praise and encouragement: “You did it. You’re getting braver and braver!” or “You’re trying really hard to be brave. Good on you!”

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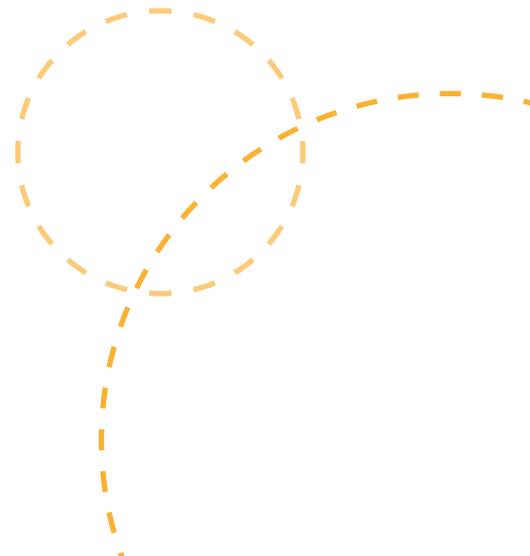
Fears and helpful self-talk

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for older primary aged children. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

What we say to ourselves affects how we feel. Thinking that a situation is too scary can make it so. Unhelpful self-talk increases children's anxious feelings and can make it more difficult for them to manage fears and worries. Self-talk includes all the things children say to themselves silently, as well as the things they sometimes say out loud. By contrast, when the things children say to themselves are helpful and encouraging, they support good coping skills and self confidence.

The following example shows how unhelpful self-talk has increased 12 year old Adam's fears about going to high school the following year.

Situation	What Adam says to himself	How he feels
School orientation visit	• I don't know anyone here	• Alone
	• There are too many new faces	• Overwhelmed by strangers
	• They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me	• Panicky
	• What if I don't make any friends?	• Lacks confidence
	• What if the teachers are mean?	
	• They expect you to do a lot of work	
At home	• What if I can't keep up?	
	• It's too hard	
	What Adam says to his mother	How he tries to cope
Tells mother	• "I don't want to go."	• Wants to avoid the feared situation





Adam's unhelpful self-talk has made his original problem much bigger. It has convinced him that he won't be able to cope at high school. For Adam to learn to manage his fears, he needs to learn to replace his unhelpful self-talk with helpful thinking. Parents and carers can help him to practice thinking in ways that are more helpful. Asking Adam why he doesn't want to go to high school and helping him look more realistically at his fears, might be a good place to start.

Adam's unhelpful thinking	How to support helpful thinking	Better ways to look at it
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know anyone here 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empathise: "I can see you are worried about going to high school. There are lots of new things for you and everybody else." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know anyone because I am new. I'm not the only one. There will be lots of new kids.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are too many new faces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge: "What makes you so sure they're not looking for a new friend?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am good at making friends. I will soon get to know people.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggest: "You can use your friendship skills to get to know them." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher I met didn't seem too bad. There's no point worrying about something that may not be a problem.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What if I don't make any friends? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind: "What have you done before when you've had a problem to deal with? Why not see this as a new adventure?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lots of other kids will be in the same boat. I just have to remember to ask for help if I need it.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What if the teachers are mean? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasise the positives: "There are a lot more freedoms for high-schoolers." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It sounds like they have some good programs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They expect you to do a lot of work 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What if I can't keep up? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's too hard 		

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Helping children to choose wisely

Nine year-old Zak was in a bit of a panic. "Grandma, Grandma, you have to write a note!" "Why, Zak?" his Grandma wanted to know. "Because I didn't do my homework and I don't want my teacher to get mad at me."

Zak's Grandma remembered asking him that afternoon if he had any homework. At the time he was watching his favourite TV show. He told her, "Not much. I'll do it in a minute."

After that Amos had called and invited Zak over. Amos had a new video game and Zak couldn't wait to play it. He had forgotten all about his homework.

Now it was bedtime and Zak suddenly remembered that his homework wasn't done. If only Zak would learn to think through his decisions more carefully!

It's frustrating for parents and carers when children don't think ahead and they are left to sort out problems at the last minute. Adults might be able to come up with a solution for the immediate crisis, but what about getting children to think things through in the first place?

Effective decision-making is a skill that children can learn

To be able to make good decisions children must learn to:

- recognise when there is a choice for them to make
- understand that they are responsible for making the decision
- take others' needs into account
- think of different possible choices or solutions and decide which is best.

Children learn skills for effective decision-making when they are taught the steps and given opportunities to practise using them to solve problems. Teaching Zak these steps and reminding him to use them could have helped him make a better decision.

Being able to plan ahead and choose wisely are very important skills that help children succeed at home, at school and in life. Parents and carers can help by teaching children how to think through decisions and giving them opportunities to practise their skills.



Learning the steps

Steps for decision-making

1 What do you have to decide about?

2 What choices do you have?

3 Weigh up the pros and cons of each option and choose the best one

4 Put your choice into action and then check how it works out

Example

- Deciding what to do after school
- Go and play with friends
- Stay and do homework
- Watch my favourite TV show
- Going to friend's house is more fun than homework
- Watching TV is fun and relaxing
- I'll get into trouble if homework doesn't get done
- Do homework as soon as I get home from school so that I can watch TV, or if a friend calls, I am free to go and play

Helping children take responsibility

Children often focus on immediate wants and don't consider long-term consequences. They need adult guidance to develop their decision-making skills. Parents and carers can prompt good decision-making by identifying appropriate choices for children to make and using questions to help them think through the steps.

To learn to use decision-making skills children need to be shown how to use the steps and be given opportunities to practise them. Practice and experience are necessary for building skills.

It is important to remember that children's thinking skills develop gradually and so does their capacity for planning ahead and weighing up options in order to make decisions. Children do not learn to make good decisions overnight. They need to start with simple things.

How parents and carers can help

- Give children a choice between two options. This helps to make decisions manageable.
- Limit the number of choices to ones that are realistic for children to make (depending on their age and ability).
- Encourage children to give reasons for their choices. This teaches them to think through their decisions.
- Ask, "Is that a good idea?" or "Do you think that will work?" Instead of saying, "This is what you should do," ask "What about this?" Asking encourages children to develop their own judgment.
- Listen with interest to children's explanations. Learning to explain their thinking helps children think better.
- Give children a role in family decisions, for example, when planning activities or deciding on household jobs. This helps children learn how to make decisions that take others into account.

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About good decision-making

Children as well as adults make decisions every day

Even young children regularly choose how they will behave, which toys or games they would like to play with, which books they would like to have read to them, or which television shows they would like to watch. As they get older children make bigger decisions that often involve their family, their friends and their schoolwork. The kinds of decisions children make affect their wellbeing, their relationships and their success.

Children learn skills for making good decisions gradually. Parents, carers and school staff can help children learn how to make good decisions by providing effective guidance and supporting them as they practise.

How decision-making skills develop

Children's decision making is strongly influenced by the expectations and values they learn from those around them. This occurs through observing others (particularly those close to them), hearing about and discussing values, and having opportunities to make decisions and experience their consequences. Though young children have some skills for making decisions, they do not yet have the experience to understand and decide about the complex situations that adults must deal with. Developing skills for logical thinking and problem-solving supports children's growing abilities for effective decision-making. As children develop skills for managing their thinking as well as their feelings, they become better at putting decisions into practice and at keeping them on track. For example, children who have learned to use thinking to manage their behaviour are able to say to themselves, "Stop, I'd better think about this first." The ability to think before acting helps children control impulsive behaviour and make better decisions. Being able to think about time and plan ahead provides a basis for children to evaluate options by considering long-term goals, not just immediate circumstances. The table below shows some ways that children's developing thinking skills help them learn to make decisions and solve problems.

Younger children are more likely to...	As they develop, children are more able to...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on one aspect of a situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see things from different angles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on their own position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see other people's points of view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • look for immediate benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think ahead and plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • want things now 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on longer range goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • act without thinking first 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make simple distinctions between good/bad, right/wrong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply more complex values to their own thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make decisions based on a whim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use reasoned strategies for making decisions



What's involved in making decisions

The key skills for decision-making are: identifying when a decision needs to be made, thinking of possible options, evaluating the options, and choosing strategies for making the decision and reviewing how it works. A simple situation, such as deciding what to have for breakfast, can demonstrate these skills in action.

1 Identify decision

What to have for breakfast

Choice may be based on:

- What do I feel like?
- What looks good?
- What's healthy?

2 Think of options

- Cereal – sweetened, processed or natural, unsweetened
- Toast – with jam or vegemite
- Fruit – fresh or cooked in syrup
- Milk – plain or flavoured

Options may be limited by:

- What's available
- What child is used to
- What child is willing to try
- Choices parent/carer allows

3 Evaluate options

- Sweetened cereal tastes better but is not so healthy
- Plain milk is healthier but child doesn't like the taste

Consider the relevance of things like:

- Pleasure (taste)
- What's quick and easy?
- What's healthiest?

4 Choose a strategy, try it and check how it works

For example:

- Try and compare taste
- Choose what's quickest ...or
- Compare listed ingredients for nutritional value
- How good was your decision?
- Did you enjoy breakfast?
- Did you achieve goals (eg for being quick, for healthy eating)?
- How will you decide next time?

Guiding their decisions

Younger children are unlikely to think through a decision about something like breakfast options very carefully. They are more likely to respond at a simple level to preferences such as taste or the way the food looks. Parents and carers can guide children's decision-making by limiting the choices they make available. They can also explain the values that guide their decisions. For example, a parent or carer could say, "Let's buy this cereal because it has lots of healthy things in it."

Making the reasons for your decisions clear and providing a choice between two acceptable options can be helpful for guiding children's choices, for example: "It's not a good idea to start that game right now because your friend will be going home soon. You could play a quick card game or go outside and play ball." By explaining the reasons for your decisions you also help children learn the kinds of values you want them to use as they become more able to make decisions for themselves, for example: "I know you would like to go out with your friend. But we agreed that we would see your cousins today and they are looking forward to it. They would be very disappointed if you didn't arrive."

What can get in the way of making good decisions?

Having the skills for thinking through decisions makes a good decision more likely, but it doesn't guarantee one. Other things can get in the way. For example, strong feelings can cloud clear thinking. So when a child is frightened, angry or overwhelmed by strong feelings the chances of making a good decision are reduced. Having skills for managing feelings can help children to calm down and make better decisions.

Some children have impulsive temperaments and find learning to think through their behaviour a particular challenge. These children especially benefit from learning skills that help them to think before they act. Certain kinds of thinking can also interfere with good judgment. It is not uncommon for younger children in particular to be over-confident about their abilities and this can contribute to poor decisions at times. Being competitive can mean children want to prove themselves in front of others and so lead them to make rash decisions. Prejudice or hostility towards particular individuals and poor social skills also contribute to poor social decision-making.

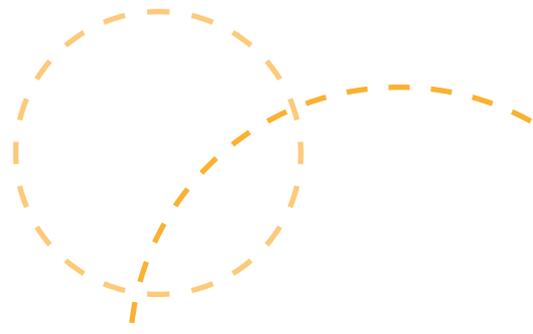


Helping children to make good decisions

A good decision is one that, on balance, is most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone concerned. Children learn to make good decisions with adult guidance and when given opportunities to practise making decisions for themselves. By talking through the steps for decision-making, adults can help children learn how to think decisions through. They also help them understand the important things they need to consider when making decisions. Take nine year old Zak, for instance, who gets into a panic because of a poor decision. He had completely forgotten about his homework and had gone off to play at a friend's house instead. Now he wants his Grandma to write a note to the teacher because he is worried he will get into trouble at school for not finishing his homework in time. In the example below, Zak's Grandma uses the decision-making steps to help Zak think through his suggestion and come up with a better solution.

Zak:	"I didn't get to do my homework. Will you write a note so I don't have to stay in at lunch time and do it?"	
Grandma:	"Let's think about this problem so we can work out the best solution. What ways can you think of?"	Identifies it as a problem to be solved
Zak:	"You could say I was sick."	
Grandma:	"Can you think of any other ways to try to solve this problem?"	Prompts for options
Zak:	"I could stay home to do it and bring it to school the next day."	
Grandma:	"Really? Do you have any other ideas?"	Prompts for more options
Zak:	"I could try to get up early and get it done before school."	
Grandma:	"That sounds like a possibility. Any more ideas?"	
Zak:	"No."	
Grandma:	"Okay, let's think through what's good and not-so-good about the solutions you've suggested. Which one shall we think about first?"	Asks Zak to evaluate options
Zak:	"I could stay home, but then I will miss sport and I'm supposed to be on the team. Won't you write me a note, Grandma?"	
Grandma:	"So staying home may not be such a good idea, I agree. Do you think it would be fair for me to write a note? Do you think it would be honest to say you were sick?"	Reinforces positive thinking Proposes values to consider
Zak:	"Not really. I guess I can try getting up early to do it. What if I don't have enough time?"	
Grandma:	"Getting up early to get your homework done sounds like a very responsible decision to me. I could wake you up in the morning to make sure you have time."	Encourages and supports responsibility
Zak:	"Okay. Will you wake me up at 6:30 then?"	
Grandma:	"It's a deal. I'll even get your breakfast for you!"	Reinforces good decision-making

To be sure Zak's decision is successful, his Grandma can support him to carry out his plan. After the immediate problem has been solved, Grandma could use similar steps to help Zak think through ways he can avoid having this problem again. Zak will still need adult guidance to come to a decision and keep to it, but he will feel more responsible for his actions and accept guidance more readily when he has been involved in deciding how to manage his homework.



Keys to supporting children's decision-making skills

Provide chances to practise

Teach children the steps for decision-making and practise with them. Remember that children's abilities for making decisions develop with experience and maturity. Start with simple choices and gradually build up to bigger, more complex decisions as their abilities and skills improve.

Support for autonomy

Provide children with structure and input but let them make decisions that are appropriate for their age and level of responsibility. If adults make all the decisions for children or continually override their decisions, children cannot develop the sense of autonomy that is necessary for them to make wise decisions for themselves.

Require responsibility

Provide tasks and expectations that require children to make a meaningful contribution to the family. Getting them to be responsible for feeding pets, looking after their sports gear, managing their pocket money, or regularly doing a particular household chore gives children opportunities to make decisions and demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Teach values

Good decisions are guided by values. Children learn about what to value by example and through discussion. Talking about the positive values you use to make decisions (eg caring, honesty, respect, keeping healthy) provides children with positive models for their own decision-making.

Remember that children's abilities for making decisions develops with experience and maturity.

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Decision-making: Suggestions for families

Learning to make good decisions helps children become more independent and responsible

A good decision is one that, on balance, is most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone concerned. Learning to consider the situation carefully and weigh up the options before coming to a decision helps children make better decisions. It also helps them to understand and take into account others' views when making decisions that affect them.



How you can help

Allow children to practise making choices

Giving children opportunities to make choices helps to build their sense of responsibility as well as their decision-making skills. It is important that the choice really is theirs, so provide options that you will be happy with no matter which they choose. Showing interest in their choice helps to reinforce that you see their decisions as important.

Talk about everyday decisions

Involve children in your own decision-making. For example, you might say, "I'm trying to decide whether to take up a sport to get fit or go to a dance class. Which do you think I should do?" Talk through the advantages and disadvantages of each suggestion so your child can learn how to thoughtfully evaluate different options.

Support children to use decision-making steps

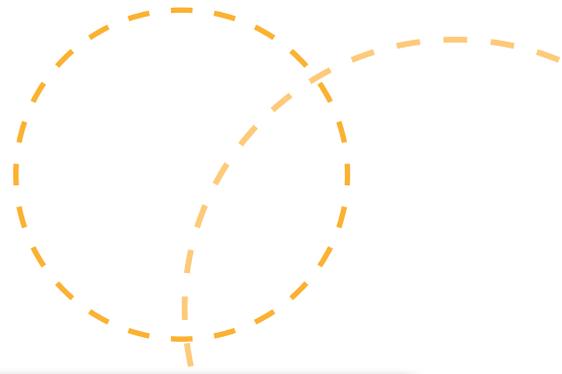
As children develop their skills for thinking through decisions, teach them the steps of decision-making and show them how to use them effectively. Decision-making steps: 1) Identify the decision to be made, 2) Think of options, 3) Evaluate the options and choose the best one, and 4) Put your choice into action and check how it works.

Ask questions that promote thoughtful decisions

"What do you like about that?" "What makes this the best option?" "How would this work?" "Can you think of any reasons why...?" Asking questions that prompt children to think through their reasons for choosing a particular option helps them learn how to evaluate options and think through consequences.

Setting their own goals to work towards encourages children to plan and think ahead.

It helps them understand the link between making decisions and taking action.



Encourage children to set achievable goals

Setting their own goals to work towards encourages children to plan and think ahead. It helps them understand the link between making decisions and taking action. Appropriate goals for children to choose include developing a new skill (eg learning to play chess, learning to swim), improving performance in school work or in an area of particular interest (eg learning to play a particular piece of music, masters a difficult skill in sport), or earning pocket money to save for something special. It is important that the goals set are achievable and motivating for the child. In addition, the steps needed to reach goals need to be definite, clear and small enough for the child to manage. Providing praise and acknowledgment for small steps of progress supports children to meet their goals.

When children make poor decisions...

- Check your expectations. Are the decisions you want them to make appropriate for their age and ability? Do children understand what they need to think about to make an effective decision? Are the options clear? If not, then you may be expecting too much and need to make the task simpler or take charge of the decision yourself.
- Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. Allowing children to experience the consequences of their decisions can provide useful lessons in responsibility. It is easier for children to accept difficult or disappointing consequences when they feel supported and cared for as they learn to correct their mistakes.
- Talk through good and poor decisions. Children learn best when they are calmly helped to think through the outcomes of their decisions and supported in making a better choice next time. Helping them to accept responsibility for mistakes and plan how to improve the situation teaches skills for more effective decision making.

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Decision-making: Suggestions for school staff

Effective decision-making skills are important for children's learning in many areas

When children are supported to make responsible decisions at school, it helps them manage their own behaviour and relate more effectively to others. Many situations provide opportunities to teach and reinforce children's developing decision-making skills at school. These arise in formal learning, social activities, play, and in choosing appropriate behaviour in the school grounds. School staff can assist children to manage their behaviour at school by teaching skills for decision-making and encouraging children to use them in a range of situations.



Teach skills for decision-making and goal-setting

For younger students

Provide opportunities to make simple decisions. Asking students to explain the reasons for their choices helps them develop skills of evaluation.

Comment on decisions made by characters in stories (eg “Do you think Charlie made a good decision? Do you think he should have done something different?”)

Model the steps for decision-making by talking through decisions you need to make.

For older students

Explicitly teach the steps of decision-making and provide practice in using them.

Build goal-setting and decision-making steps into assigned learning tasks by making them an explicit component of task instructions. This builds their capacity for self-regulated learning, which has been shown to enhance academic performance.

Step 1 What’s my goal?

Step 2 What strategies/options can help?

Step 3 What are the pros and cons of each option?

Step 4 Choose the best one to try.

Step 5 Evaluate how my choice worked.
What do I need to change?

Involve students in decision-making

Even younger students can be involved (with guidance) in deciding on classroom and school rules. Children accept that adults will make the final decision, but appreciate being consulted and having the opportunity to contribute to the rules. In addition to building children’s decision-making skills, this helps them to own and accept rules as necessary and fair.

Providing students with some choice over what and how they learn can enhance motivation as well as responsibility.

Encourage children’s decision-making to promote responsible behaviour

Asking, “Was that a good decision?” helps children to evaluate their actions. Asking, “What’s a better way to handle it?” prompts them to choose a better option. Asking, “What can we do about this?” invites them to discuss a problem and to get your help in thinking of a strategy for managing it better.

Support growing independence by fostering decision-making

Primary school children often expect school staff to make decisions for them. This sometimes occurs even for relatively minor decisions that children could make for themselves. Teaching and reinforcing the steps of decision-making helps to support children to develop independence and confidence in their own judgment. For example, a child who is given a specific suggestion in response to the question, “What should we play?” learns that adults are good at determining what he or she should do. When the response is, “Let’s see, what ideas do you have?” he or she is encouraged to take responsibility for generating options. Further ‘scaffolding’ can help the child to evaluate the options and make a choice, at the same time increasing confidence for deciding independently in the future.

Primary school children often expect school staff to make decisions for them.

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Everyone gets mad

"Hi Dylan. How was school today?" "All right," says Dylan, but the way he throws his bag into the car says something different. Dylan gets into the car, roughly pulls off his jacket and manages to elbow his younger brother. "Can't you be more careful Dylan?" his mother says.

No answer.

Later at home Dylan gets really angry when he finds a favourite toy missing from his shelf. Then when he is asked to turn off the television and help get things ready for dinner, he ignores his mother's request. When she asks again, he storms off angrily into his bedroom and slams the door.

Over dinner Dylan's mum asks him, "What's up?" Dylan just shrugs, "Nothing."

It's easy to see that Dylan is pretty angry about something, but it's hard to tell what it's about. Did something happen at school? Is he worried about the soccer game coming up on the weekend?



Helping children learn to manage anger

Children's angry behaviour is often difficult to deal with because it stirs up feelings of anger and annoyance in others. It can also frustrate parents and carers when anger is used to push them away. If you were Dylan's mum how would you feel? Annoyed? Frustrated? Tense? Angry?

Everyone feels angry at times. Parents and carers can help children learn how to cope with anger in positive ways by teaching them to be aware of feelings, to find appropriate, safe ways to express them, and to identify and solve the problems or frustrations that lead to angry feelings.

Learning skills for understanding and dealing with anger will make it easier for children to solve problems, get help when needed and be more relaxed around others.

How parents and carers can help

Be aware of feelings

Children need to learn that having angry feelings is normal and okay, but that reacting aggressively towards others when they're angry is not. Adults can help children become aware of feeling annoyed, frustrated, angry or furious by naming feelings. Learning to say, "I'm feeling angry," or "I'm really frustrated," gives children a way to separate feeling angry from how they react.

Time to talk

Talking to Dylan about what has put him in an angry mood will help him see that feelings have causes and that solutions can be found. Once you find out what he was angry about you can help him think up better ways to handle the problem.

This kind of conversation doesn't work while he is really angry. Sometimes it must wait until later. Children often find it easier to talk in informal situations where they feel less pressure. Find a relaxed time to talk to children about feelings. Asking, "What makes you angry?" can be a good way of starting a conversation about anger.

Find alternatives

Getting children to think through a difficult situation helps them develop problem-solving skills. Asking, "Is that what you wanted to happen?" or "What else could you have tried?" encourages children's helpful thinking. Thinking of alternative solutions helps children plan different ways of reacting next time. Be sure to praise their efforts.



Have ways to calm down

When emotions are strong, it is easy to act without thinking. Encourage your child to take control and allow time for the emotions to subside. Walking away, using a quiet spot to think, or doing something else like riding a bike or listening to music are all activities that can assist in reducing strong emotions.

'Cool-down' steps to teach children

- 1 Recognise that you are angry
 - Notice the body signals that mean you're angry (eg getting hot, racing heart, tense muscles)
 - Give a number from one to 10 to show how angry you are
- 2 Cool down your body
 - Breathe slowly
 - Take time-out in a quiet place
 - Go for a walk, do something physical
 - Draw how you feel
- 3 Use coping self-talk
 - "It's okay. I can handle this."
- 4 Try to solve the problem
 - Talk to someone who is a good listener
 - Plan what to do next time

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About anger

What causes anger?

Everyone experiences anger. It is a normal reaction to frustration, stress or disappointment. It can occur in children as young as three or four months old. Anger can be quite noticeable in toddlers who often express it through tantrums and other aggressive actions. However, as they grow and develop, most children learn how to deal with some of the frustrations of everyday life. They also learn how to express their anger in acceptable ways.

Some anger can be helpful. For example, when expressed effectively, anger can help tell someone else, "Stop. I don't like that." Anger can also motivate us to overcome problems and achieve goals. Whether children's anger is positive or negative depends on how effectively it is managed and whether it can be directed towards positive goals.

When children lack skills for managing anger it can lead to aggressive behaviour. Usually, it is the aggressive action that follows anger that most concerns parents, carers and school staff. Learning to manage anger involves developing social and emotional skills for calming down and having ways to express angry feelings assertively. This means learning to use words rather than aggressive actions to communicate feelings. Parents, carers and school staff have an important role in helping children learn to manage anger effectively.



The experience of anger

Feeling angry involves changes within the body and also in thinking. Muscles tense and there is a burst of energy as the heart speeds up, blood pressure rises and breathing becomes faster. These changes can lead to having a flushed or red face and to feeling hot. Symptoms of anger like these are part of the 'fight or flight response' that helps to prepare the body for danger.

Thoughts also play a big part in anger. Angry thinking can trigger angry feelings and make them last longer, so learning to understand and change thinking patterns is very important for managing anger. With help from adults children can develop skills for recognising and changing angry thinking.

What do children get angry about?

Angry feelings are usually the result of being frustrated while trying to reach a goal. Researchers have found that children feel angry (rather than sad) when they believe that the negative situation they are concerned about can or should be changed.

Different kinds of situations can lead to angry feelings in children. Some of the most common situations are listed in the table below.



Kind of situation

Possessions

Physical aggression

Verbal aggression

Control

Rejection

Unmet emotional needs

What leads to anger

- Not being allowed/able to have something they want
- Having someone take their things
- Being hit, kicked, punched, etc
- Having others (children or adults) speak to them aggressively
- Being required or forced to do something they don't want to
- Being excluded from social games
- Being rejected by other children
- Feeling unsafe
- Feeling uncared for

Differences in children's use of anger

Before they start school, most young children have learned that getting aggressive when angry is not considered appropriate behaviour. They may have also learned some strategies for managing anger, for example, counting to 10, explaining what they are annoyed about, or asking an adult for help to resolve a problem. These are positive coping strategies that help children manage their angry feelings and build skills for effective relationships.

Some children try to manage angry feelings by avoiding the situation or person that has led them to be angry. Children who use this kind of strategy very often do not build effective skills for relating to others, which can cause them problems in later years.

Some other children seem to have few strategies for managing anger and so may continue to act aggressively and impulsively. Children with anger problems are often rejected by other children because of their difficult behaviour. Feeling rejected, they may think others are being mean to them and become more angry. This may start a pattern of thinking that leads them to respond with aggressive behaviour even where no intention to hurt is present. For example, they may get angry when somebody bumps into them and react aggressively without stopping to think that it may have been an accident.

The different ways that children manage anger are influenced by a combination of personal characteristics, how much stress the child and family are under, and opportunities available at home and school for learning how to cope with feelings.

From early childhood, some children seem to react more to frustration and take longer to return to a calm state. These children may need extra assistance to learn skills for controlling anger. Some children don't learn how to manage anger because being angry is not okay in their families. They don't get the chance to practise positive ways of managing anger or telling others when they are angry. Children can also learn aggression through the examples of others. When the adults responsible for children's care get angry quickly and often, or when they use reactive, harsh and inconsistent discipline, children are more likely to behave aggressively themselves.

Research indicates that physical aggression in children is most common at the age of two. As skills for language and thinking develop, aggressive behaviour is reduced. However, for some primary school children aggression remains at a high level. These children may benefit from professional help to learn to control aggression and stop behaviour problems becoming worse. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on serious behaviour difficulties.

Skills for coping with anger

Usually feelings of anger are directed towards someone or something that the child would like to change. Even though there may sometimes be good reasons for wanting to change things, it is often not helpful to act in anger. Intense angry feelings very often cloud judgment and lead to impulsive or aggressive behaviour rather than thoughtful actions. For children to be able to manage anger effectively they need to learn to recognise when they are angry, have strategies to manage angry feelings, and work out effective ways to solve the problem that has caused their anger.

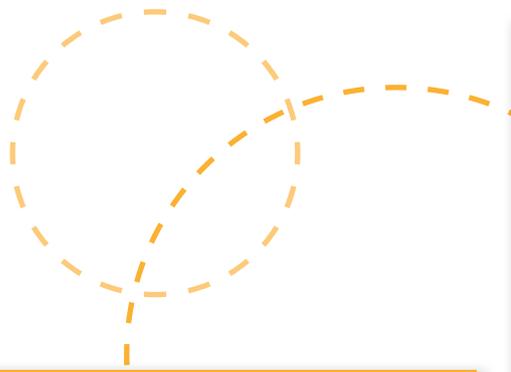
Recognise anger signals

Learning to recognise when they are getting angry helps children understand how angry feelings work. This is the first step to managing them. Children can be taught to be aware of what triggers their anger. Then they can learn strategies to help them cool down and stay calm instead of getting carried away by angry feelings. Young children need assistance with learning, remembering and using the steps. The following table shows common body, thought and action signals for anger.

Examples of common body, thought and action signals for anger

Body signals	Thought signals	Action signals
Fast breathing	<i>I hate her.</i>	Threaten
Heart rate increased	<i>It's not fair!</i>	Run away
Sweating increased	<i>You IDIOT!</i>	Swear
Flushed, hot face	<i>I want to hit him.</i>	Punch or hit
Body feels hot	<i>I WON'T do it.</i>	Fidget
Tense muscles	<i>You think I never do anything right!</i>	Yell

Parents, carers and school staff can help children to recognise the signs of anger when it is beginning. Adults can tell when children are getting angry by the way they look, the way they speak, or the tension in their bodies. Saying, "You look upset. Are you angry about ...?" helps to build awareness of feelings and also invites children to talk about the problem situation.



Manage angry feelings

Children need skills to help them cool down their anger. Simple relaxation techniques involving deep breathing, calming strategies (eg counting to 10) and coping self-talk are very useful for helping children 'lower the temperature' of their anger. For some children it may be especially beneficial to have a special place for 'quiet time' where they can get away from anger triggers while they cool down. It is important to note that the physical symptoms of anger can take a long time to return to normal. Having a cool down strategy helps children learn the steps to manage their angry feelings.

Solve problems

Once they have calmed down, thinking through the situation that made them angry can help children to come up with other ways of approaching it. Parents, carers and school staff can support children's skills for solving problems by asking questions that help children think things through. Questions to ask include:

- What happened?
- How did you feel and react?
- How did the other person feel and react?
- What happened then?
- What could you have done differently?
- What could you do differently next time?

Adults may need to help children work through the steps by giving examples and suggestions for them to think through. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on decision-making.

Key points for helping children learn to manage anger

For children to learn to manage anger effectively they need adult support and guidance.

They need to know that anger is a normal human emotion and that there are acceptable and safe ways of expressing it. They need to feel understood and supported rather than judged or blamed for feeling angry.

Be a model for children

Children learn effective ways of managing anger from seeing adults manage their anger effectively. Show them how you use appropriate ways to tell others you are angry and sort out problems.

Discuss feelings

Using words to discuss anger, frustration, annoyance, irritation, etcetera helps children learn that having angry feelings is normal and is something that can be talked about. This helps children understand feelings and feel understood. It also makes it easier for them to recognise that some ways of reacting to anger are okay and others are not.

Anticipate and prepare

Parents, carers and school staff can help children manage their anger by identifying situations that often trigger angry responses and being prepared to offer support as early as possible. This may include getting children engaged in activities that will take them away from a situation they find stressful. It may involve planning with an individual child in advance how he or she can handle a challenging situation.

Use positive discipline

Providing specific praise when children manage their anger well supports their learning. Setting clear rules and predictable consequences for children's behaviour helps them know what you expect. When limits are made clear and praise is provided for appropriate behaviour children find it easier to develop the self-discipline they need to manage anger effectively. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on effective discipline.

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Talking through angry feelings

The following examples are for families to use at home. They are most suitable for older primary aged children. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children cope with managing angry feelings at school.

Children who have trouble managing anger

Children lack strategies for thinking through the situations that are troubling them. They may find it difficult to know what is making them angry or to talk about their feelings. Talking with children in supportive ways about angry feelings helps to teach them effective ways of managing anger and builds positive relationships.

It is best to wait until the child is calm and relaxed to talk about angry feelings. When angry feelings are running high it is very hard for children to listen and think coolly. Parents, carers and school staff can help by encouraging children to explain their points of view and listening sympathetically. Being able to talk about angry feelings allows children to feel understood and supported. It helps them to think more calmly and find better solutions.



How to talk through children's angry feelings

The following example shows some possible ways a parent or carer might talk with Dylan, who has come home from school grouchy. He is rough with his younger brother and gets angry when he discovers that a toy is missing. Then he gets angry when his mother asks him to help. Here his mother persists, gently but firmly, with getting Dylan to say what he is really angry about. She talks to him about ways he could manage his feelings and deal with the problem.

- Acknowledge anger and encourage the child to explain what it's about:
"Are you sure you're not angry about something?
You seemed really angry when you got into the car."
- Empathise with the feeling – but don't excuse aggressive behaviour:
"So, you were upset because your friend blamed you for losing his football."
"You must have been really mad to treat your brother like that."
- Ask about the effects of angry behaviour – on others and on himself:
"How do you think your brother felt when you yelled at him?"
"How did you feel after you behaved like that?"
- Teach or reinforce ways of managing angry feelings:
"What could you do to cool down your angry feelings so you can think it all through?"
- Discuss ways of solving the problem that has led to angry feelings:
"How can you sort it out with your friend?"
"What could you say that would help him understand how you feel?"
- Support your child's efforts to solve the problem:
"How did it go?"
"Would you like me to help with...?"
- Notice and praise efforts to manage anger:
"I like the way you kept your cool with your little brother when he took your stuff."

It is best to wait until the child is calm and relaxed to talk about angry feelings.

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Helping children cool down and stay calm

The following examples are for families to use at home. The methods described can also be adapted by school staff to help children manage anger at school.

When children get caught up with angry feelings it can be quite difficult for them to calm down. This is because the body gets ready to fight when we are angry and can take some time to return to normal. Teaching children steps to cool down their anger can help.

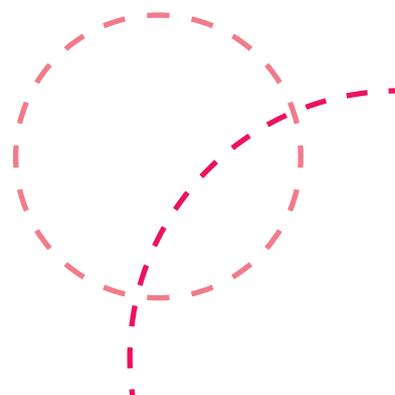
Rate your anger

1

Using a rating scale to notice how angry they are helps children become more aware of their angry feelings so that they know when to use calming strategies.

Draw a thermometer to show the scale points of between zero and 10. Add some words that describe low levels (eg 0 = calm; 2 = a bit irritated), medium levels (eg 5 = quite cross), and high levels (eg 9 = extremely angry, 'losing it'). Talk about the body signals that accompany each level.

Ask children to rate their anger and watch it to see if it changes. This encourages them to look for the signs of angry feelings and to see if they can lower their anger levels. It is much harder to change anger when it is high, so when the rating goes above 6 it is usually best to teach children to move away from the situation. They can move to a special quiet space or ask an adult for help.



Relax

2

There are lots of ways to relax. Some useful ways to teach children to use relaxation strategies to calm their angry feelings are:

Deep breathing

Slow deep breathing has a very helpful calming effect. Getting children to practise breathing in deeply and breathing out very slowly, can help to calm down angry feelings.

Visualisation

Have children visualise a very relaxing scene in their minds. For example, they might imagine themselves floating on an air bed in a swimming pool. You can combine deep breathing with visualisation. For example, ask children to imagine a candle in front of them. As they exhale, ask them to imagine making the candle flicker but not go out.

Robot/rag doll technique

The robot/rag doll technique is useful for helping young children release muscle tension. Ask children to tense up all muscles in the body and visualise themselves as robots. Have them hold this tense state for approximately 15 seconds. Then ask them to release all the tension and visualise themselves as rag dolls, with all muscles very loose, and stay relaxed like this for 15 seconds.

Slow deep breathing has a very helpful calming effect. Getting children to practise breathing in deeply and breathing out very slowly, can help to calm down angry feelings.

Use coping self-talk

3

Using coping self-talk involves saying things to yourself to calm down. Children can be encouraged to say things to themselves like:

Take it easy.

Take some deep breaths.

Stay cool.

It's okay if I'm not good at this.

Chill out.

Don't let him bug me.

Time to relax!

Try not to give up.

To teach children to use coping self-talk, it is helpful to model it yourself. For example, you could make a point of saying out loud, "I need to relax," "I'm going to cool down," or "I won't let this get to me." You can also use coping statements to coach children through stressful moments. Asking older children what they could say to themselves when they need to cool down their anger helps them learn to use coping self-talk for themselves. This is best practised before children get angry.

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Sorting out conflict together

Van's friend Eli had come over to play. They played outside for a while and then decided to play a new game on the computer. From the other room Van's father could hear the sounds of the computer and the boys. They were obviously enjoying the game.

But after a while something changed. Eli was starting to get frustrated. "It's my turn, Van," said Eli. "Come on! It's my turn," he said again. "Stop being such a pain. You've already had a turn," Van replied. "But you've had more. You're hogging it!" said Eli. "No I'm not," said Van. "Anyway you always hog the games at your house." "I do not!" yelled Eli.

It was getting serious, and Van's father decided it was time to help them sort it out. "What's going on, boys?" he asked them. "Nothing," said Van. "Van won't let me have a turn," said Eli. "I'm sure if we talk about this we can work it out," said Van's father.

Whether they get into an argument over a game, what to watch on TV, or whose turn it is to clean up, conflicts are common in children of primary school age. Conflict is a normal part of human relationships. Sometimes conflicts blow over, but sometimes they don't.

Adults may believe it's best to let children sort things out by themselves. The problem with this is that often children get into conflict because they don't have the skills to solve it themselves. If left alone the conflict gets bigger. Usually then the person who is louder, stronger or more aggressive wins.

Children do need adult help to solve conflicts. The best way to help them is not to simply tell them what they should do. It works better to act as a 'coach' and help children find a solution that suits everybody. When children work out solutions this way, they learn valuable skills that can help them resolve conflicts more effectively. With good coaching they can learn to use the skills of conflict resolution even when you're not around.

The things that children get into conflict over may seem minor to adults but they are real issues for children.



Skills for conflict resolution

The skills needed for effective conflict resolution include skills for managing emotions, as well as thinking skills for problem-solving and communicating with others.

The key conflict resolution skills are:

- being able to control angry or anxious feelings
- learning to listen even when you disagree
- understanding the other person's opinions and feelings
- being able to think of different solutions
- exchanging ideas with the other person
- finding 'win-win' solutions.

How parents and carers can help

Using the steps of conflict resolution to coach children to come to their own solutions helps them learn the skills they need. Learning to resolve conflict successfully takes good coaching and lots of practice.



Unresolved conflicts can spoil friendships and affect children's confidence. When conflicts are left simmering they can negatively affect children's mental health and wellbeing.

Coaching children to resolve conflict

Step 1

Help children see conflict as a problem they can sort out fairly, with help, for example: "It looks like there's a problem here. I'm sure if we talk about it we can sort it out."

Step 2

Get each child to explain how they see the conflict. Get them to focus on what they want or need, and what their concerns or worries are, rather than blaming the other person.

Step 3

It is often helpful for the coach to then re-state the concerns of both parties, for instance: "So, Eli, you're worried that you won't get a turn; and Van, you're trying to make it to the next level of the game and you're worried that if you stop now you won't get to it."

Step 4

Get children to suggest at least three different solutions, such as: "What are some ways to solve this so you can all feel okay about it?" If they can't think of any, offer some ideas for them to think about.

Step 5

Help children agree on a solution that will work and put it into action.

Step 6

Praise them for sorting it out.

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Learning to value others

Some girls in Grace's year four class were taking turns at skipping. Grace watched them closely and decided she would like to have a turn too. She asked to join in but Sally said, "It's too hard for you."

Grace had an intellectual disability. This meant she sometimes took longer to learn things. She was also not as well coordinated in sports as the other girls.

"Come on. Let me have a turn," said Grace. "Anyone can have a turn," said Deepa. "Have your turn after me."

So Grace tried to skip over the rope, but it got caught at her feet. "Try again", a few of the girls said. "You have to jump just as it hits the ground." Grace tried again. They gave her extra tries because she was learning. On the last try she managed two skips in a row. "You did it," said Deepa. Grace was really proud. "I did it!" she said. "And you helped me."

Learning to see another person's point of view

Learning to see another person's point of view is important for getting along with others and building positive friendships. Understanding others helps children know what to do in social situations and is the basis for developing caring and responsibility.

It's not always easy for children to see the point of view of someone who is different from them. Being different could mean having a disability, coming from a different country, being a different age or gender, or having different values and interests. Children who are seen as different may be left out of activities.

They may face discrimination because others think they are not as good, as talented, or as important as they are. Discrimination can have very negative effects on children's self-esteem and mental health and wellbeing.

Skills for empathy

Taking others' needs into account involves values of caring, compassion and acceptance of others. It also involves emotional skills for empathy. Learning to empathise with another person means learning to 'walk in their shoes.' It means being able to recognise and value their feelings and needs, even though they may be different from your own.

Skills for empathy develop over time and include:

- recognising your own feelings
- recognising others' feelings
- listening to others' opinions
- thinking what it would feel like if you saw the situation their way
- thinking how you can respond in a caring way
- doing something to help.

Some children find it easy to tune into feelings. Others need more guidance to learn empathic skills. Adults have an important role in supporting children to learn kindness and empathy.

A little kindness can sometimes go a long way. Learning to skip has made Grace's day. Watching and supporting her has helped everyone else feel good too.

How parents and carers can help

Research has found that the examples shown by caring adults have a big influence on children's empathy. Parents and carers (as well as school staff) can also foster empathy by promoting values of caring and compassion and coaching children to be kind and thoughtful towards others.

- Model empathy by tuning into children's feelings (eg "Ouch! That must have hurt," or "You must be feeling disappointed that your friend can't come over").
- Help children think about how feelings affect other people (eg "How do you think your friend might be feeling?").
- Help children develop skills for understanding other people's points of view by discussing the effects of discrimination and the importance of respectful and caring attitudes towards everybody.
- Talk about situations that involve empathy (eg "What I liked about the story was how kind the hero was," or "That was a mean thing to do. Don't you think she should have helped her friend?").
- Notice when children are kind and let them know you value their behaviour (eg "That was a very thoughtful thing to do. I really appreciate it!").



How to support children to accept and include others

- Teach children that there is nothing wrong with being different and that each of us is different to somebody else.
- Teach children that everyone has a right to be respected.
- Help children develop skills for positive friendships and cooperative play.
- Parents and carers of children with special needs can talk to the staff at their children's school about how to support their strengths and about encouraging other children to include them.

Valuing others means seeing difference as something positive. It means trying to understand how others think and feel, and knowing that this helps you as well as them.

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About conflict resolution

Conflict is normal

Conflict is a normal part of children's lives. Having different needs or wants, or wanting the same thing when only one is available, can easily lead children into conflict with one another. "She won't let me play," "He took my ...", "Tom's being mean!" are complaints that parents, carers and school staff often hear when children get into conflict and are unable to resolve it. Common ways that children respond to conflict include arguing and physical aggression, as well as more passive responses such as backing off and avoiding one another.

When conflict is poorly managed it can have a negative impact on children's relationships, on their self-esteem and on their learning. However, teaching children the skills for resolving conflict can help significantly. By learning to manage conflict effectively, children's skills for getting along with others can be improved. Children are much happier, have better friendships and are better learners at school when they know how to manage conflict well.

Different ways of responding to conflict

Since children have different needs and preferences, experiencing conflict with others is unavoidable. Many children (and adults) think of conflict as a competition that can only be decided by having a winner and a loser. The problem with thinking about conflict in this way is that it promotes win-lose behaviour: children who want to win try to dominate the other person; children who think they can't win try to avoid the conflict. This does not result in effective conflict resolution.

Win-lose approaches to conflict

Children may try to get their way in a conflict by using force. Some children give in to try to stop the conflict, while others try to avoid the situation altogether. These different styles are shown below. When introducing younger children to the different ways that conflicts can be handled, talking about the ways the animals included as examples below might deal with conflict can help their understanding. It introduces an element of fun and enjoyment.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Force	Shark, bull, lion	Argues, yells, debates, threatens, uses logic to impose own view
Give in	Jelly fish, teddy bear	Prevents fights, tries to make others happy
Avoid	Ostrich, turtle	Thinks or says, "I don't want conflict." Distracts, talks about something else, leaves the room or the relationship

Sometimes these approaches appear to work in the short-term, but they create other sets of problems. When children use force to win in a conflict it creates resentment and fear in others. Children who 'win' using this approach may develop a pattern of dominating and bullying others to get what they want. Children who tend to give in or avoid conflict may lack both confidence and skills for appropriate assertive behaviour. They are more likely to be dominated or bullied by others and may feel anxious and negative about themselves.

It is possible instead to respond to conflict in positive ways that seek a fair outcome. Instead of being seen as a win-lose competition, conflict can be seen as an opportunity to build healthier and more respectful relationships through understanding the perspectives of others.

Win-some, lose-some: Using compromise to resolve conflict

Adults have a significant impact on how children deal with conflict. Often adults encourage children to deal with conflict by compromising. Compromising means that no-one wins or loses outright. Each person gets some of what they want and also gives up some of what they want. Many children learn how to compromise as they grow and find ways to negotiate friendships. It is common around the middle of primary school for children to become very concerned with fairness and with rules as a way of ensuring fairness. This may correspond with an approach to resolving conflict that is based on compromise.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Compromise	Fox	I give a bit and expect you to give a bit too

Win-win: Using cooperation to resolve conflict

Using a win-win approach means finding out more about the problem and looking together for creative solutions so that everyone can get what they want.

Conflict style	Animal example	Child's behaviour
Sort out the problem (Win wisely)	Owl	Discover ways of helping everyone in the conflict to get what they want

Skills required for effective conflict resolution

Effective conflict resolution requires children to apply a combination of well-developed social and emotional skills. These include skills for managing feelings, understanding others, communicating effectively and making decisions. Children need guidance and 'coaching' to learn these skills.

Learning to use all the skills effectively in combination takes practice and maturity. However, with guidance children can begin to use a win-win model and gradually develop their abilities to resolve conflicts independently.

Skill	What to encourage children to learn
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manage strong emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use strategies to control strong feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Verbally express own thoughts and feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and communicate thoughts and feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify the problem and express own needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk about their own wants/needs/fears/concerns without demanding an immediate solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand the other person's perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen to what the other person wants/needs• Understand the other person's fears/concerns• Understand without having to agree• Respond sensitively and appropriately
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generate a number of solutions to the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Think of a variety of options• Try to include the needs and concerns of everyone involved
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negotiate a win-win solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be flexible• Be open-minded• Look after own needs as well as the other person's needs (be assertive)

Listening to the other person helps to reduce the conflict and allows children to think of the problem as something they can solve together.



Guiding children through the steps of conflict resolution

Steps and suggestions for conflict resolution

1 Set the stage for win-win outcomes

Conflict arises when people have different needs or views of a situation. Make it clear that you are going to help the children listen to each other's point of view and look for ways to solve the problem that everyone can agree to.

- Ask, "What's the problem here?" Be sure to get both sides of the story (eg "He won't let me have a turn" from one child, and "I only just started and it's my game," from another).
- Say, "I'm sure if we talk this through we'll be able to sort it out so that everyone is happy."

3 Help children listen to the other person and understand their needs and concerns

In the heat of conflict it can be difficult to understand that the other person has feelings and needs too. Listening to the other person helps to reduce the conflict and allows children to think of the problem as something they can solve together.

- Ask, "So you want to have a turn at this game now because it's nearly time to go home? And you want to keep playing to see if you can get to the next level?"
- Show children that you understand both points of view: "I can understand why you want to get your turn. I can see why you don't want to stop now."

5 Build win-win solutions

Help children sort through the list of options you have come up with together and choose those that appear to meet everybody's needs. Sometimes a combination of the options they have thought of will work best. Together, you can help them build a solution that everyone agrees to.

- Ask, "Which solution do you think can work? Which option can we make work together?"

2 Have children state their own needs and concerns

The aim is to find out how each child sees the problem. Help children identify and communicate their needs and concerns without judging or blaming.

- Ask, "What do you want or need? What are you most concerned about?"

4 Help children think of different ways to solve the problem

Often children who get into conflict can only think of one solution. Getting them to think of creative ways for solving the conflict encourages them to come up with new solutions that no-one thought of before. Ask them to let the ideas flow and think of as many options as they can, without judging any of them.

- Encourage them: "Let's think of at least three things we could do to solve this problem."

6 Put the solution into action and see how it works

Make sure that children understand what they have agreed to and what this means in practice.

- Say, "Okay, so this is what we've agreed. Tom, you're going to show Wendy how to play the game, then Wendy, you're going to have a try, and I'm going to let you know when 15 minutes is up."

Key points for helping children resolve conflict

The ways that adults respond to children's conflicts have powerful effects on their behaviour and skill development. Until they have developed their own skills for managing conflict effectively most children will need very specific adult guidance to help them reach a good resolution. Parents, carers and teaching staff can help children to see conflict as a shared problem that can be solved by understanding both points of view and finding a solution that everyone is happy with.

Guide and coach

When adults impose a solution on children it may solve the conflict in the short term, but it can leave children feeling that their wishes have not been taken into account. Coaching children through the conflict resolution steps helps them feel involved. It shows them how effective conflict resolution can work so that they can start to build their own skills.

Listen to all sides without judging

To learn the skills for effective conflict resolution children need to be able to acknowledge their own point of view and listen to others' views without fearing that they will be blamed or judged. Being heard encourages children to hear and understand what others have to say and how they feel.

Support children to work through strong feelings

Conflict often generates strong feelings such as anger or anxiety. These feelings can get in the way of being able to think through conflicts fairly and reasonably. Acknowledge children's feelings and help them to manage them. It may be necessary to help children calm down before trying to resolve the conflict.

Remember

- Praise children for finding a solution and carrying it out.
- If an agreed solution doesn't work out the first time, go through the steps again to understand the needs and concerns and find a different solution.



The information in this resource is based on Wertheim, E., Love, A., Peck, C. & Littlefield, L. (2006). Skills for resolving conflict (2nd Edition). Melbourne: Eruditions Publishing.

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Helping resolve conflict: Suggestions for families

The skills needed for resolving conflict effectively are complex

They involve managing feelings, understanding others, communicating effectively, developing options and making decisions. Parents and carers play an important role in helping children resolve conflicts. You can also play a critical role in establishing positive guidance that teaches children the skills needed to resolve conflicts effectively.



How you can guide children's conflict resolution

Set the scene for cooperation

Show how to cooperate and respect others through your own approach. Ask children to help solve the conflict and express confidence that they can work it out cooperatively. It is very important that children approach the conflict in a positive way, and believe that they can work together to solve it.

Help children handle emotions

Children may need encouragement and help to stay cool in a conflict – especially if they feel they are being accused or blamed. They may feel anxious and need support to stay calm if they feel intimidated. In conflicts that are particularly heated, children may need to have time away from each other to cool down before going on to work out ways of resolving the conflict. Taking time to calm down can help children overcome the tendency to react aggressively or withdraw from the situation.

Encourage empathy and respect for others

Teach children to listen to and understand the needs and concerns of the other person. Help them to ask why the other person wants something and consider what it might be like to be 'in their shoes'. Learning to understand the other person's perspective is a critical foundation for conflict resolution and for building positive relationships.

Practise communication skills

Effective conflict resolution relies on clear communication of feelings and wants. This can be especially difficult when under pressure in a conflict. Learning to speak clearly and respectfully takes practice. You can help children practise what to say to initiate conflict resolution, for example: "If we talk about this, I'm sure we can sort it out." Practising assertive ways for children to express their wants and concerns is also particularly helpful, for example: "I want you to ask before using my things."

Encourage creative solutions

In conflicts people often get stuck in their own positions and can't see other options. This is why it is so important to get creativity going when thinking of possible solutions. The brainstorming rule, that no-one is allowed to say that something won't work, is intended to help with getting creative. Steer children back to the point if necessary, but leave evaluation of the ideas they come up with for later. It's okay for adults to help children think of alternative solutions if it helps them to get creative.

When enough is enough

Some conflicts are too big for children to work out. Sometimes children are not ready to sort them out and the conflict continues to escalate. If children's conflicts become very intense or lead to physical aggression, then it is important for an adult to step in. When a mutual solution is not possible you can still help your child to think through the alternatives that are available to him or her and choose the best one.

If children's conflicts become very intense or lead to physical aggression, then it is important for an adult to step in.

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Helping resolve conflict: Suggestions for school staff

Children may get into conflicts at school for a range of reasons

Providing support and guidance in conflict resolution helps children learn the social and emotional skills they need to get on effectively with others. Conflict resolution also provides teaching staff with a very effective tool to deal with social problems that can interfere with children's learning in class and to help identify when there are underlying concerns, such as problems with learning, that need to be addressed.



Guiding children in the steps of conflict resolution

The following example shows how guiding children in the steps of conflict resolution can help to reinforce effective social skills for the classroom.

Mira:	"He took my crayon."	
Teacher:	"I'm sure we can work this out. Tell me what the problem is – Mira? Ben?"	Sets the stage for win-win outcomes
Mira:	"I was using that one."	
Ben:	"I needed that colour and she put it down."	
Teacher:	"So you both wanted to use the same colour. How is that a problem for you?"	Asks children to describe their concerns
Mira:	"I want to finish my picture and I can't because Ben took the crayon."	
Ben:	"I'm worried that she'll use it all up before I get a turn. And I really need the orange one."	
Teacher:	"I see. You both want to use orange in your pictures. Mira, you want to finish your picture, and Ben, you're worried that the crayon will get used up before you get a turn with it." "Can you think of any ways that we could sort this out?"	Shows understanding Asks for solutions
Ben:	"Mira could use yellow so I can have the orange one."	
Mira:	"I could show Ben what I want to use the orange for so he can see I won't use it all up."	
Ben:	"We can take it in turns. She can use the orange one for a bit while I use the purple. Then we can swap."	
Teacher:	"Which idea do you think would work best in our sharing classroom?"	Helps children choose an option
Ben and Mira:	"Taking turns."	
Teacher:	"Sounds good. Let's give it a go."	Praises and supports

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What is social and emotional learning?

School is not only about reading, writing and arithmetic. It's also about making friends, learning how to work with others, and knowing how to be responsible for yourself.

Knowing how to manage feelings and get on with others are important skills for everyone. This kind of learning starts in early childhood with parents and carers as children's most important first teachers.

Research has found that teaching children social and emotional skills at school as well as at home makes a positive difference to their wellbeing. Social and emotional skills help school children settle in the classroom and get on with learning.

Useful skills to learn include:

- coping with frustrations or worries
- getting along with others
- solving problems.

The kinds of social and emotional skills that are important for children to develop have been identified by researchers as:

Self-awareness

Understanding feelings, self-confidence.

Social awareness

Respecting and understanding others, and appreciating differences between people.

Self-management

Managing emotions, being able to set goals and stick to them.

Responsible decision-making

Choosing wisely and thoughtfully.

Relationship skills

Cooperating, communicating, making friends and resolving conflict.

Research shows that children benefit most from social and emotional learning when it is taught in regular school lessons and matched to children's learning stages. All national, state and territory curricula include personal and social development as a major learning area for primary school children.





Children learn best when they are encouraged to practise the skills they learn at school, at home and in the real world.

How parents and carers can help

You continue to have a critical role to play in supporting children's social and emotional learning throughout the school years. Your child's school will let you know what approach they have chosen for their social and emotional learning curriculum so that you can use some of the ideas at home.

Other ideas

- 1 Look in the parent and carer resources area at your child's school for information on the social and emotional learning program it has chosen to teach.
- 2 Ask your child's teacher about the skills the children are learning in social and emotional learning classes and how to build on them at home.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on a range of topics that help develop children's social and emotional skills, including coping with fears and worries, managing anger, managing friendships, making decisions, and resolving conflict.

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Helping children to manage feelings

“Let’s go, let’s go. Come on Dad!”
This is the family outing that everyone in the family has been waiting for.

Seven-year-old Voula has been up since dawn jumping around excitedly.

When Voula gets wound up it can be difficult to keep things under control. She doesn’t seem to understand that her baby brother doesn’t like her jumping around and poking at him, or that her Dad is a bit slower in the mornings and needs his space. You don’t want to dampen her enthusiasm, but you’d like her to be able to express it in ways that are less annoying to others!

Learning to manage feelings

Children’s feelings are often intense. They can be quickly taken over by feelings of excitement, frustration, fear or joy.

When feelings take over children’s behaviour, they can find it difficult to manage without adult support. This is why learning how to recognise and manage feelings is a very important part of children’s social and emotional development.

Understanding that all sorts of feelings are normal, that they can be named, and that there are ways of handling them are the first things children need to learn about feelings. Understanding that feelings affect behaviour, and being able to recognise how this happens are important steps for learning to manage feelings.



Children’s feelings are often intense. They can be quickly taken over by feelings of excitement, frustration, fear or joy.

How parents and carers can help children manage feelings

1 Notice feelings

Before we can learn how to control feelings, we first have to notice them. You can help your children notice feelings by noticing them yourself and giving them labels: happy, sad, excited, frustrated, angry, embarrassed, surprised, etcetera. Giving feelings names helps to make them more manageable for children.

Learning to pay attention to how they are feeling helps children understand that all feelings are okay and that they can have emotions without being controlled by them.

2 Talk about everyday feelings

Talking with children about what it's like when you're angry, sad, nervous or excited helps them find ways to express feelings without having to act them out through negative behaviours. Children learn these skills best when they hear adults and peers using words to express feelings and when they are encouraged to use words like this too.

Learning to name feelings helps children find ways to express them without having to act them out.

3 Create space for talking about difficult feelings

Although all feelings are okay, some feelings can be more difficult to cope with than others. Help children to separate a feeling from a difficult reaction by helping them name it. Being able to say or think, "I am feeling angry," means that children don't have to act really angry before anyone takes notice. It allows them to choose how they will respond. The same idea works with other difficult feelings like nervousness or fear.

Learning to cope with feelings helps children manage their behaviour at school and at home. It helps them learn better, relate to others better and feel better about themselves.

Things to remember:

- Learning skills for managing feelings takes practice.
- Noticing and naming feelings comes first.
- Talking about everyday feelings in normal conversations makes it easier when the difficult feelings come up.
- Talking about difficult feelings is usually best tried after the feelings have calmed down a bit, and when children, parents and carers are feeling relaxed.

Things to try at home:

- Use feeling words when you talk with children about everyday situations (eg "You scored a goal! How **exciting** was that!" or "It's pretty **disappointing** that Kati can't play with you today").
- Invite children to describe their own feelings (eg "I'm feeling pretty **nervous** about going to the dentist. **How about you?**" or "How did **you feel** when?").

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Supporting children's confidence

Mateo really likes football but he's not sure about playing with the local team. He thinks: "I'm not as good as the other children are. What if they don't pass the ball to me? What if I drop it?" Mateo often stops himself from having a go at new things. He doesn't want to look silly.

He would rather let others go first so he can watch what they do. At school when the teacher asks him a question he often says, "I don't know," even if he does know the answer. Mateo doesn't want to get things wrong. When he makes a mistake on his homework he gives up and says, "I can't do it."

His parents want him to try. "You've got to have a go," his dad says, "otherwise, how will you learn?"

Children who lack confidence in their abilities sometimes try to avoid even having a go at some things. This can get frustrating for parents and carers. It can also stop children from developing the skills they need to tackle tasks confidently.

How confidence develops

For most children, starting school means spending more time on learning and less on play. It also means more expectations of them – from parents, carers, school staff and also from themselves.

Primary school children typically start out with high expectations. When they see how well they do things compared to others, their view of their own abilities often changes. They learn that they are good at some things and not so good at others. They also see how other children and school staff respond to what they do. These things influence children's confidence in their abilities. They also influence how willing they are to have a go in situations where they feel unsure.





How parents and carers can help

Confidence improves through building on small successes. Parents and carers (and school staff) can help by:

- explaining to children that skills develop with practice
- encouraging children to persist when they don't succeed straight away
- praising effort, persistence and improvement
- making sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- being ready to help when necessary, without taking over.

Encouraging children to have a go and valuing individual improvement support children's confidence.

Confident thinking

Self-esteem is an important part of confidence. Having good self-esteem means accepting and feeling positive about yourself. Confidence is not just *feeling* good but also knowing you are good *at something*.

Particular ways of thinking are very important for building confidence. Helpful ways of thinking include:

- believing that, if you try, you can succeed
- finding positive ways to cope with failure that encourage having another go
- enjoying learning for its own sake by competing with your own performance rather than that of others
- making sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- being ready to help when necessary, without taking over.

Dealing with disappointment

Everybody fails to achieve their goals sometimes. Parents and carers (and school staff) can help by:

- responding sympathetically and with encouragement (eg "That was disappointing, but at least you had a go.")
- helping children focus on what they can change to make things better, rather than thinking that the situation is unchangeable or that there is something wrong with them (eg "What can you try that might make that work better next time?")
- challenging 'I can't' thinking by showing and saying you believe in them and reminding them of what they have achieved.

Optimistic thinking recognises what has been achieved more than what is lacking. It looks at the glass as half-full rather than half-empty.

Parents and carers can help children focus on their own effort and on achieving personal goals as the best way to measure success.

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About social and emotional learning

Why is social and emotional learning part of KidsMatter Primary?

Social and emotional learning is about learning how to manage feelings, manage friendships and solve problems. These are essential life skills that support wellbeing and positive mental health. Social and emotional skills promote children's ability to cope with difficulties and help to prevent mental health problems. Children who have developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, resolve conflict, and feel positive about themselves and the world around them.

KidsMatter emphasises teaching social and emotional learning as a way of promoting children's mental health. Social and emotional learning provides practical skills that all children can learn and apply to everyday situations. Learning skills such as self-awareness, effective communication and conflict resolution can also help to prevent the development of mental health difficulties in children who might otherwise be vulnerable. In this way teaching children social and emotional skills helps to promote resilience – the capacity to cope and stay healthy in spite of the negative things that happen through life.

Why social and emotional learning is important to schools

Australia's national educational goals for the 21st century, as well as curriculum frameworks for each state and territory, recognise the importance of children achieving positive outcomes that relate directly to the skills of social and emotional learning. In addition, there is broad agreement and research evidence that shows that social and emotional skills can improve academic learning and enhance students' motivation to cooperate and achieve.

Because it emphasises teaching children the skills for positive relationships, social and emotional learning is a key strategy for schools in their efforts to reduce bullying and improve caring, respect and responsibility at school. When children are taught specific strategies for recognising and responding to emotions, thinking through challenging situations and communicating effectively, they are less likely to act out frustrations at school and elsewhere.

What does social and emotional learning have to do with learning?

Research has shown that children's learning is influenced by a range of social and emotional factors. How well children do at school is affected by things such as:

- how confident children feel about their abilities
- how effectively they are able to manage their own behaviour
- how well they can concentrate and organise themselves
- how effectively they can solve problems
- how positively they are able to get on with school staff and with peers
- how effectively they take into account others' needs
- how well they can understand and accept responsibilities.

How social and emotional learning is taught

A number of programs for school-based teaching of social and emotional skills have been developed in Australia and internationally. For the implementation of KidsMatter Primary, schools select the program (or programs) that best suit their particular needs. Social and emotional learning programs that have been shown through research to improve children's social and emotional competence are more likely to achieve goals related to improving students' mental health. KidsMatter Primary provides schools with detailed information about programs and the research evidence for their effectiveness.

School-wide classroom teaching of social and emotional learning allows staff and students to share a common understanding of what it is all about. Importantly, the emphasis of its teaching needs to be not just on learning about emotions and relationships, but on practical skills that children can apply across a range of situations at school, at home and in the broader community. Classroom teaching which is offered regularly will maximise the benefits. Opportunities for learning can be coordinated across the school so that children can continue to develop their skills with age and experience.

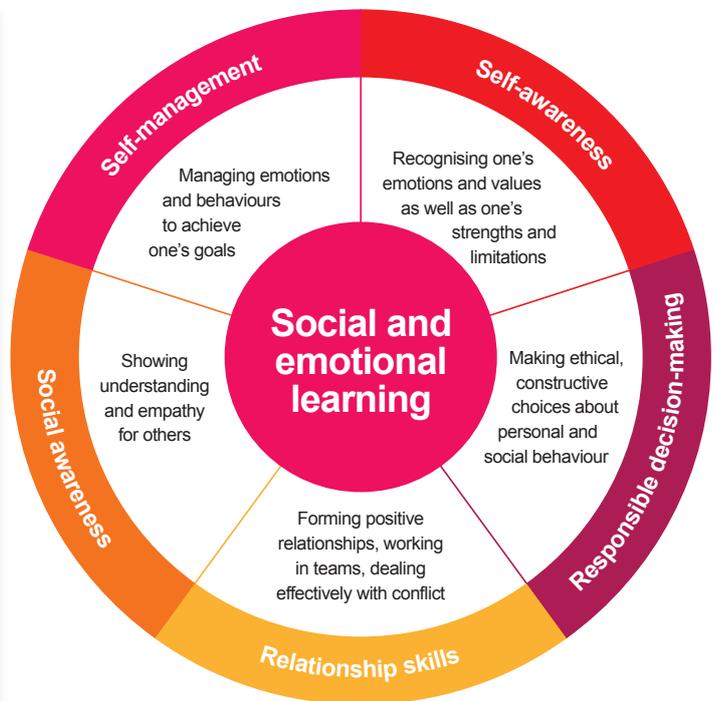
Children learn social and emotional skills most effectively when they are also reinforced at home. Many social and emotional learning programs include components for involving the family and community in promoting the teaching. This gives parents and carers the chance to learn about the particular approach schools take and what they can do to support children's social and emotional learning. In this way, school-based social and emotional learning offers gains all round – for students, for schools and for families.

The social and emotional learning framework

Many teaching staff and schools already incorporate some aspects of social and emotional learning. The KidsMatter Primary approach looks at what schools are already doing and asks them to evaluate how systematically and effectively they are teaching social and emotional skills. It provides them with a framework for planning, teaching and evaluating to help ensure that from year to year children can build social and emotional skills that are relevant and appropriate for their age and skill level.

The KidsMatter approach to social and emotional learning is based on the model developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an internationally-recognised lead organisation for this area of research. The diagram outlines the five core competencies that CASEL has identified as central to social and emotional learning.¹

These five social and emotional skill areas are viewed as essential for the development of good mental health. Structured teaching of these competencies, and opportunities for students to practise and generalise them in the classroom, school and wider community, are also crucial to implementing effective social and emotional learning. KidsMatter Primary encourages schools to communicate with families about their work in teaching and promoting children's social and emotional learning. Informing and working with families on the development of children's competencies has been found to increase the benefits for children.



Adapted from the Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2006).

These five social and emotional skill areas are viewed as essential for the development of good mental health.



Supporting social and emotional skills at home

For children to develop social and emotional skills they need guidance that is matched to their level of development, as well as practice. In addition to teaching social and emotional learning at school, parents and carers can encourage children to use these skills in everyday interactions at home. Prompting and encouraging children to apply their learning in this way helps them develop their skills. Here we provide two examples that show how everyday situations can be used as opportunities for supporting children's social and emotional skills development.

In the first example, Voula is very excited about a family outing, but her behaviour is very annoying to the rest of her family, especially to her baby brother. The following table considers the problem, the skills Voula needs to learn, and how a parent or carer might support her learning.

Skill	The problem	Needs to learn	How to support
Self-awareness	Doesn't recognise she is wound up	To recognise she is feeling excited and how it affects her	Name it: "You seem pretty excited. You might tire yourself out using up all that energy before we even get there!"
Social awareness	Doesn't take account of others' needs	To understand how others have different feelings and needs from hers	Ask/explain: "See how the baby is getting upset? He wants you to stop poking him."
Self-management	Doesn't know how to contain her excitement	To be able to be excited without annoying others	Redirect: "Let's see if you can use that energy to help us get ready."

In the next example, Wendy, who is 10 years old, is angry because her young preschooler sister, Meg, has scribbled all over the homework she had left on the kitchen table. Wendy is angry with Meg and angry with her mother for allowing this to happen.

By looking at the ways that Wendy could use social and emotional skills, we can see how she could be supported to solve this problem and further her skills for effectively managing other similar problems in the future.

Skill	Needs to learn	How to support
Self-awareness	To recognise that she is angry and remember that she can work this out calmly	Show you understand: "I can understand why you would feel angry." Prompt: "Let's think this through."
Social awareness	To understand her sister's point of view: as a preschooler she thinks the homework is just paper to draw on	Encourage perspective-taking: "Meg didn't realise it was important. I don't think she did it on purpose – do you?"
Self-management	To use strategies that help her to calm down	Show and encourage: "We can sort this out better when we do it calmly."
Responsible decision-making	To not leave homework lying around	Ask: "What do you need to do to fix it this time? What can you do next time so it won't happen again?"
Relationship skills	To be able to discuss the issue with a parent or carer and to explain her feelings to Meg in a calm way	Show and praise: "How about telling Meg that you're unhappy and that you don't want her to draw on your things again?" "Thanks for working it out calmly. I'm impressed with the way you've handled it."

It's important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children.



Talk about feelings –
help children
explore theirs.

Keys to supporting social and emotional skills development

It's important to recognise that social and emotional skills develop over time, and that they may develop differently for different children. Parents and carers and schools working together to help children develop social and emotional skills can really make a positive difference for children's mental health.

Key points

- Get involved – find out about the social and emotional learning program your child's school is using. Learn the language and basics and look for opportunities to apply them at home.
- Talk about feelings – help children explore theirs.
- Be a model – use the skills yourself and show children how they work. Parents and carers don't have to be perfect; showing them you can make a mistake and learn from it can be really helpful too.
- Be a guide – turn difficulties into learning opportunities.
- Acknowledge and appreciate – provide explicit feedback and praise.

1. The Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2006). Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide. Chicago, IL: Author

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Social and emotional learning: Suggestions for families

Parents and carers have a critical role to play in guiding and supporting children's social and emotional learning. Social and emotional skills develop with practice.

Everyday situations present lots of opportunities for children to learn and practise skills for coping with emotions, managing relationships and solving problems. You can help children build the skills they need by providing effective coaching.



How parents and carers can help

Encourage discussion of feelings

Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling. Listen with empathy so they feel understood. Help them see that feelings are normal and that all feelings are okay, it is important to understand them, and that understanding and talking about feelings helps you to manage them.

Support children's confidence

Help children identify and develop their strengths by encouraging them to have a go at things and find activities they enjoy. Praise their efforts, celebrate their successes and encourage them to keep trying and learning.

Provide opportunities to play with others

Playing with other children provides practice in important social skills such as sharing, taking turns and cooperation. Help children develop their skills by praising their appropriate play behaviour, for example: "I noticed how nicely you shared your toys. That made it fun for both of you."

Lead by example

Parents and carers are important role models. Children learn how to behave by observing and imitating the behaviour of those around them, particularly adults. When you model positive ways of coping with strong feelings like anger, it helps children feel safe and shows them ways that they can manage strong feelings too.

Give children choices

To develop responsibility, children need practice in making choices that are appropriate for their age and experience level. You can help children build decision-making skills by encouraging them to explore options and helping them think through the reasons for their choices. Involving children in family decision-making (that you are in charge of) helps them develop skills for responsible decision-making and encourages cooperative family relationships.

Encourage creative problem-solving

Asking questions that help children think of alternative solutions supports their thinking and problem-solving skills. When problems arise you can explore them together by asking questions, such as: "What could you do about that?" or "What do you think might happen if you try that?"

Teach children to use assertive communication skills

Show children how to confidently and respectfully communicate their thoughts, feelings and needs to others in an assertive way, for example: "I really don't want to play that game. It's too dangerous. Let's play a different game instead."

Some possibilities for parents and carers

Parent or carer says, "I'm getting too angry. I need some time out to think about this."

Parent or carer says, "I'm feeling really tense. I need to take some deep breaths to calm down."

Admitting to having difficult feelings is not a sign of weakness or failure. It sets a good example for children by showing them that everyone has difficult feelings at times and that they are manageable.

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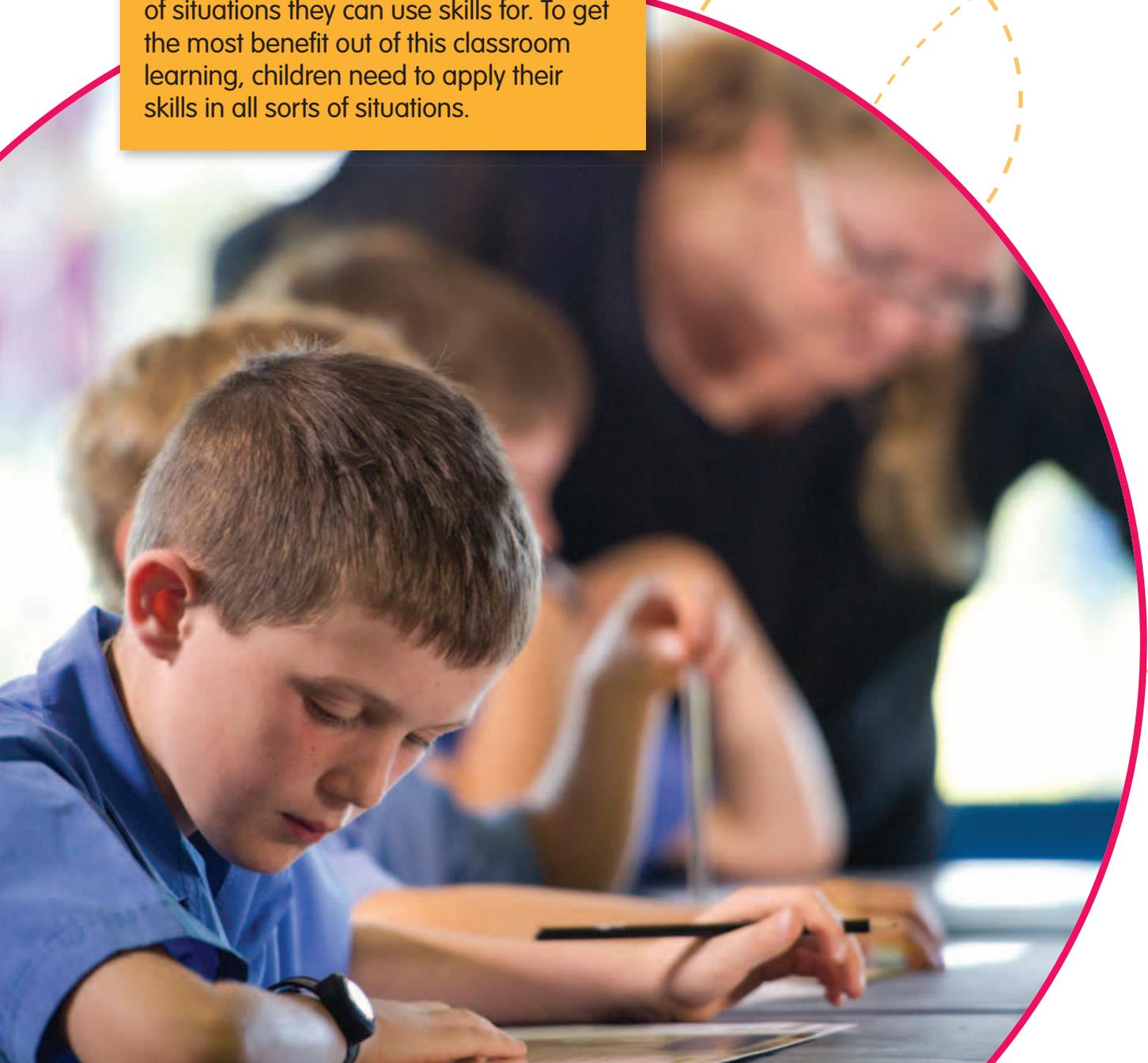


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Social and emotional learning: Suggestions for school staff

Effective support for social and emotional skills development builds children's understanding and abilities by starting from what they can do and encouraging them to take the next step.

Formal classroom teaching shows children what the skills are all about and encourages them to think about the kinds of situations they can use skills for. To get the most benefit out of this classroom learning, children need to apply their skills in all sorts of situations.



How school staff can help

Set the tone for positive, supportive relationships

Establish a trusting relationship with students and make the classroom an accepting environment by demonstrating respect, listening to students, and conveying positive expectations about respectful and caring behaviour. Show your students that everyone needs help occasionally by modelling this behaviour yourself and asking them for help.

Normalise social and emotional learning

Make talking about feelings, managing friendships, handling conflicts and thinking through problems part of the everyday conversation in your classroom and around the school. This sets an expectation that social and emotional learning is a normal and valued part of school life and that everyone benefits from applying the skills learned.

Support self-confidence

Children build self-confidence through seeing that they are capable and that their contributions are valued. Provide opportunities for all students to undertake responsibilities through special roles and tasks, ensuring that everyone gets a turn. Build their sense of capability as well as their motivation by appreciating effort and persistence, not just outcomes.

Appreciate individual and group differences

Promote inclusiveness by recognising and responding to the individual needs and cultural differences of students and families. Help children to appreciate diversity by talking openly and positively about differences and encouraging mutual respect and positive valuing of one another. Ensure that cooperative learning activities are well structured to enhance inclusive values and behaviour.

Foster emotional awareness

Learning to manage emotions first requires being aware of them. School staff can encourage children to notice body signals and to name or describe the associated feelings. Provide safe, supportive opportunities for children to notice how their bodies tell them about different kinds of feelings. Ask children to reflect on the feelings as well as the thoughts they have in response to different learning activities and events. Prompt them, when necessary, to think of coping strategies they might try.

Teach empathy

Model caring and compassion through your own behaviour and encourage students to consider the thoughts and feelings of others. Promote discussion of others' feelings and emotions when reading books to the class. For example, ask the class, "How do you think character X is feeling? How can you tell?"

Communicate effectively

Encourage students to use effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills while interacting inside the classroom by modelling this yourself. Demonstrate the use of appropriate body language and posture, eye contact, and tone of voice, and provide students with practice opportunities to try out the skills for themselves.

Require cooperation

Tasks that require students to work in pairs or small groups are a good way of building and reinforcing important relationship skills. To maximise the effectiveness of cooperative group work, the required communication skills and strategies should be taught in advance, and the group task needs to be made very clear. When allocating group membership, it is important to be alert to pre-existing student conflicts that can interfere with classroom cooperation and that may require extra support and intervention. Rotating group composition, so that students work with different group members, helps to build a range of social skills and fosters inclusiveness.

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