

Mental health information sheets

Component 3: Parenting support and information

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Scaffolding children's learning

"This is just too hard. I can't do it!" nine-year old Emmet says as he tears the page from his notebook and scrunches it up in frustration. "Mum, can you help?"

As parents and carers, it is hard to see children struggle with their learning, especially when they are frustrated or upset. Sometimes, and often before you know it, you become caught up in trying to help them and you wind up doing their schoolwork for them. How do you find the right balance between telling them, "You just have to do it!" and giving them all the answers? And what if you don't even have the answers?

Helping children with schoolwork (eg homework assignments or projects) is sometimes a challenge for families as well as for children. However, it can also be an opportunity for parents and carers to get to know what children are learning at school and to support their learning. Children learn better when they have opportunities to share and practise at home what they are learning at school.

It is not necessary for parents or carers to have all the answers when children have difficulties with their schoolwork. If adults simply provide children with the answers, children miss out on the chance to learn and think for themselves. Parents and carers can help children by guiding their learning and thinking and supporting them to try for themselves.

Helping to build children's learning

In just the same way that scaffolding provides temporary support to a building, parents and carers can also 'scaffold' children's learning. For some things, children may need lots of support. This is especially the case when they are learning new things.

As children's abilities develop, they gradually become more independent in their learning and parents and carers can start to reduce their 'scaffolding'.



Helping children think through tasks supports their learning. Teaching them skills for thinking helps children learn to think for themselves.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers scaffold children's learning by leading and coaching them towards coming up with their own answers. This shows children how to learn, and makes it more likely that they will succeed. The next time your child asks for help, you might try some of the following ways to scaffold thinking and learning.

Prompt children to extend their thinking

- Ask them to think about something relevant: "Why do you think...?"
- Ask them to think through alternatives: "That would be one way, what's another way we could try?"
- Provide support for thinking through difficult tasks: "Let's have a think about this together."

Ask them to explain the steps

- Help children to plan their approach: "What is it that we need to do?"
- Ask them to review their steps so far: "Tell me more about what you have already tried?"

Demonstrate

- Show an example and talk it through: "First, I will..., and then I will..., and then I can..."

Break it into steps

- Help children who are stuck by breaking the task into smaller steps.
- It's a good idea to ensure the first step involves something that children can already do. This way they will experience success early which helps their confidence.
- Be sure to provide praise for completing each step as they work through a task.
- Guide children step-by-step to build their skills so they can eventually complete the whole task on their own.

Tips for scaffolding children's learning

- Provide a challenge that is *just* beyond what your child can already do easily by him or herself.
- Give prompts.
- Ask questions.
- Model the steps involved.
- Praise your child for attempting the task, not just for succeeding.
- Watch to see if your child is struggling or becoming frustrated, as these may be signs that the task is too hard.



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About thinking and learning

Cognitive development

Cognitive development refers to growth in a range of thinking and learning skills, including language, attention, planning, problem-solving and memory. This overview outlines some of the key developments in children's skills for thinking and learning and suggests ways that parents and carers can support children's growth in these areas. One of the best ways for parents and carers to support primary school children's thinking and learning is through taking an active interest in their learning at school so that they can support and build on it at home. International research has found that the involvement of parents and carers with their children's schooling contributes to children's achievement at school and has positive effects on their mental health and wellbeing.

How children learn

Although children are born with some inherited tendencies, an environment that stimulates learning and development is necessary to ensure children reach their learning potential. Adults play a vital role in providing stimulation and support for children's learning. Parents and carers can nurture children's development through understanding the importance of what children experience in the world around them, and providing experiences that arouse their curiosity and interest. Opportunities for children to be actively involved in learning from their experiences are especially important for their development.

Children's knowledge grows over time as they build on earlier understandings. When they encounter new experiences, children look for information that they can use to confirm, add to, or change their ideas. For example, when a child experiences a new event, he or she first tries to understand the new experience by matching it to pre-existing ideas. If, however, the new experience doesn't fit with what the child already knows, it stimulates the child to come up with new ideas or ways of understanding. By adding or adapting old ideas and putting ideas together children build knowledge.



Developmental patterns in children's thinking and learning

Most children tend to develop skills for thinking and learning in a predictable sequence (eg children start to tell stories by looking at pictures in a book before they learn to recognise words). However, it is important to remember that each child develops at a different rate and that individual differences are common. Differences may be due to children's inherited tendencies, the experiences and opportunities they are exposed to, or a combination of both. As children learn to use language in increasingly complex ways it supports further learning and development. Language helps to organise children's thinking. It allows them to use basic logic and gradually develops their capacities for thinking through situations, solving problems and developing their own ideas.

The following table shows some common examples of how children's thinking and language develop over time.

From 5 years of age, most children...	From 8 years of age, most children...	From 12 years of age, most children...	Skills developed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> can picture and think about objects and events in their minds, such as using realistic objects and/or reasonable substitutes during pretend play (eg they might use a banana as a telephone) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> can think logically about real objects and events that can be seen (eg can easily learn how to use the washing machine when you show them, but may not get it right if you just try telling them) think in 'black and white' terms about what is fair, right or wrong learn best through hands-on experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> are beginning to think in more hypothetical, creative and abstract ways can understand ideas without having hands-on experience 	Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have a vocabulary of 2,000 words or more, learning as many as 5–10 new words each day use several words in a sentence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand and carry out instructions with multiple steps like to describe personal experiences in great detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use longer and more complex sentences understand different ways of using language to communicate with others 	Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have a short attention span of approximately 15 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have an increased ability to focus on one thing at a time are better at ignoring distractions are proud to complete tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have a longer attention span can stay focused on completing a task (eg school assignments) 	Attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> can make simple decisions on their own, (eg deciding what shoes to wear) can memorise basic information (eg address and phone number). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have increased problem-solving ability, (eg they may be systematic in looking for a misplaced toy). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> like to solve complex problems have an expanded memory ability which improves their long-term recall. 	Problem-solving and memory

What if you have concerns about your child's development?

The examples provided are a general guide only. It is important to remember that children develop at different rates and in different ways. Often children's learning and development occur in bursts, with new skills appearing almost overnight. If you are concerned about your child's development talk with your child's classroom teacher, a psychologist or counsellor at your child's school, and/or contact your family doctor to be referred for an assessment by a paediatrician.

The development of thinking skills

Although children already have certain knowledge and skills by the time they start school, school encourages the development of more complex skills. At school, children have new responsibilities, such as completing their work in class and bringing the things they need each day. This requires them to learn to organise themselves and to prioritise important tasks.

During the primary school years, children continue to have many opportunities to build on and improve their cognitive skills in the following areas.

Language

Though learning to read at school is important for developing literacy skills, conversation is also an important way for children to develop language skills. Conversation directs children's attention to important details of an event or experience and so helps them learn. Parents and carers play a key role in their child's language and cognitive development during the primary school years. Language involves more than just speaking. It also includes using body language and gestures, listening, and understanding what others say.

You can help children develop these important skills by making time for regular talks with your children where you listen and respond to what they say with full attention. Be sure to remove distractions (eg turn off TV, gameboy etc) so you can both focus well.

Attention

Learning to pay attention and to concentrate on one thing at a time for an extended period is an important foundation for children's learning. Playing games like 'I Spy', 'Simon Says' and 'What's the time Mr. Wolf?' are creative and effective ways of developing attention skills in young children. As children grow older, they mostly become better at focusing their attention on a particular task and are less easily distracted. Attention also becomes more purposeful, with children gradually becoming better at selecting and focusing on the information most important to a particular task.

Parents and carers can help children learn to focus their attention by pointing out things that are especially important or interesting, or by asking children for feedback about what they have noticed. For example, asking specific questions such as, "Which was your favourite animal at the zoo today?" and then following up with, "What did you notice that was special about it?" helps to cue children to pay attention and extends their thinking skills.

Note: It is normal for many young children to have difficulty focusing their attention. This can generally be addressed with guidance and practice.

Memory

Memory is crucial for learning as children need to be able to retain previously learned ideas so they can build on them. As children get older, the amount of knowledge they can keep in their long-term memory increases, but the amount they can hold in short-term memory is limited. When there is a lot of information to remember, giving children a catchy saying or rhyme to tie it to can be very useful. For instance, when you were in primary school you probably learned a way to remember the number of days in each month. Using strategies like these make it much easier to remember certain types of information.

Planning and problem-solving

Simple planning begins early in life and becomes more effective with age. Primary school-aged children are more able than preschoolers to plan what they will do before they act. Skills for planning and problem-solving continue to develop as children are taught at school to think through and solve problems. Parents and carers can support this kind of learning by asking questions such as, "What if...?" or "How could we solve this?" and then guiding children through the steps of problem-solving.



The development of thinking skills – continued

Thinking about thinking

Children's cognitive development is boosted when they develop skills for keeping track of their own thinking processes. These skills help children to think through what to do, and know whether they are succeeding or when to ask for help. Thinking about their own thinking helps children become more independent learners. For example, if children can monitor their understanding of a story as they are reading it, they will know themselves if they need to re-read a particular section or look for clues in the surrounding text and pictures to help them understand.

Understanding the views of others

Understanding that other people have different views develops with age. Young children tend to believe that everyone thinks in the same way they do. Hearing the perspectives of others helps to stimulate children's thinking. For this reason, children often benefit from classroom activities that involve them learning together in small groups. Cooperative learning with other children also encourages positive social behaviour.



Key points for supporting children's thinking and learning

Parents and carers can support children's learning in many ways. Taking an active interest in the process of learning (and not just the product or outcome) helps children see that learning is fun. Getting to know your children's strengths and weaknesses allows you to match tasks to their level of ability and development. This also increases the likelihood that they will succeed, helping them build a belief in their own abilities and encouraging them to attempt further tasks.

Encourage children and build confidence

Praise and acknowledge children's attempts and not just their successes. Showing children you value their effort helps to give them the confidence to keep trying.

Remove distractions

Children need focused time to learn and think. Help children develop attention and concentration by making sure that quiet time is set aside for homework and other learning tasks without TV or other distractions. Encouraging and rewarding children for concentrating and persisting with learning tasks will support good study habits and effective learning.

Provide 'scaffolding' for children's learning

Extend children's learning by asking questions, giving children hints and prompts and guide them step-by-step to build their skills so they can reach the point of completing the whole task on their own.

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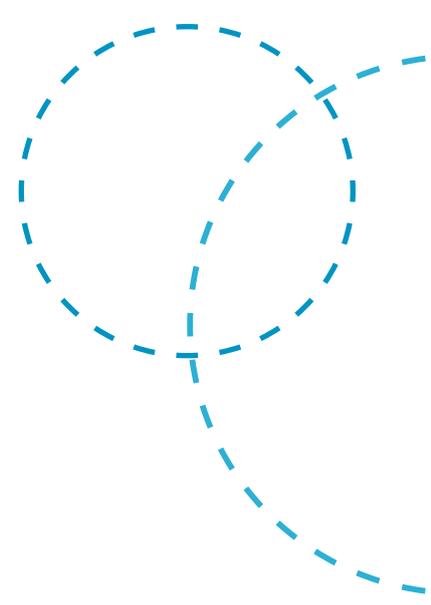
Thinking and learning: Suggestions for families

Parents, carers and school staff can promote children’s cognitive development by ‘scaffolding’ children’s thinking. Scaffolding involves supporting children as they attempt tasks that stretch their abilities just beyond what they can already do by themselves. Children can generally do more difficult things *with* an adult than they can do on their own.

It is important that the tasks you give children are challenging enough to engage them but not so difficult that they can’t succeed without your help. Scaffolding can involve explaining the goal of the task to the child, demonstrating how the task should be done and helping the child to complete the most difficult parts. This type of support from a more capable person helps children to think things through so that they learn more effectively.

In the following example, the father of a six-year old boy uses scaffolding to help him complete more of a jigsaw puzzle than he would be able to complete on his own.

What the parent or carer says	How it helps	What the child learns
“What we need to do here Jacques, is put all of these pieces together to make the picture on this box.”	Explains the goal of the task	Purposeful thinking
“Let’s start with the pieces for the corners and the edges. Can you see any pieces with the yellow sun on them?”	Demonstrates how the task should be done	Attention and planning
“Well done. Now, can you see any of these pieces that might fit together?”	Helps the child to complete the most difficult parts	Recognising patterns and organising
“That’s right. Now you have a go yourself.”	Supports child to try it independently	Problem-solving incorporating the steps above



How parents and carers can help

Break difficult tasks into smaller steps

If it seems that your child is struggling and becoming frustrated, the task may be set too far above his or her ability. Some signs that might mean a task really is too hard are when a child strongly reacts when he can't complete the task (eg cries or becomes angry), or when he or she takes an unusually long time to finish one part of a task. If this happens, try breaking the task down into smaller steps that are more manageable. Showing children how to do the first part of the task, then guiding them to think through and attempt the next part, helps them learn and supports their confidence.

Encourage persistence

When a child says he or she can't do something that you know he or she can do, try not to get caught up in the attempts to avoid doing the task. Instead, try and motivate the child by making the task fun and interesting. You might set a challenge to help make learning fun, for example: "I wonder how many spelling words you can get through in one minute?" Reminding children of positive goals can also help them to keep trying, for instance: "Keep practising a few more times. Just think how proud you will feel when you play really well at your performance in a couple of weeks."

Watch for signs of frustration

If you notice your child becoming frustrated by a task, try and step in before he or she gives up. It can be a good idea to encourage your child to take short break, or to try something else for a while. Taking a break and coming back refreshed can often make tasks seem easier.



Showing children how to do the first part of the task, then guiding them to think through and attempt the next part, helps them learn and supports their confidence.

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Thinking and learning: Suggestions for school staff

School staff have a very important role when it comes to helping children reach their potential. The guidance and support of school staff helps children learn and develop a sense of competence. Structuring learning activities, by providing clear and detailed instructions so that children know exactly what is expected, can help to encourage them to be independent learners.

Match learning to students' interests and abilities

Get to know your students' interests and design learning activities that will engage them. Find out what they already know about a topic and pitch your teaching so that it extends or challenges their existing ideas. This is very important for ensuring tasks not only interest and challenge children, but also for developing their thinking and learning skills.

Create an environment of inquiry

Asking questions is central to learning and curiosity. Sometimes children are too shy to ask questions or are unsure if they are allowed to. One way to encourage questioning is to provide a space and time for children to ask questions. For example, school staff can help all children to learn to ask and answer questions by inviting them to predict what will happen next in a book any time they read aloud. Be sure to clearly state that you want children to ask and answer questions, and that you allow enough time for them to do so.

Some other effective strategies that show questions are valued include:

- setting quiet 'thinking time'
- reserving a few pages in a journal for children to write down any questions they have so that they can be addressed in the future, either with the school staff or with peers
- starting a 'question board' where children can add to a class list of questions.

Be a role model

School staff can also use careful questioning to get children thinking in appropriate ways about a task, or to keep their attention focused on the important aspects of a particular task, for example: "I wonder what would happen if..." or "How else could we...?" This approach is also useful for showing children how to ask questions.



Encourage learners to use language and private speech

Private speech or 'thinking aloud' is a useful learning tool for everyone, including children. Learners can use it to monitor their progress and to guide themselves through challenging tasks or to master new skills. Talking things through in this way can help to better understand and remember. Encourage children to use language and private speech to support learning by modelling it and by asking children to describe their thinking as they work through a task.



Teach steps for thinking

Teaching children simple steps to guide their thinking and learning enhances metacognitive abilities and academic success. For example, to teach younger children to pay attention, you might use '1. Look, 2. Listen, 3. Learn'. Older children might be taught to use the '5Ws': 'Who, What, Where, When, Why' to analyse story plot.



Teach cooperative learning

Small group work with peers is a useful teaching strategy that encourages children's learning. It is very important to structure cooperative learning activities effectively to ensure that students participate productively. Effective cooperative learning creates an atmosphere of achievement where each member of the group is not only responsible for learning what is taught, but also helps other members of the group understand and complete the task. By listening to the ideas and perspectives of others, small group work can enhance thinking skills, as well as important verbal and social skills.

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Making sense of children's emotions

Ten year old Tom, his friend Louis, and Tom's six year old brother, Josh, were trying out Tom's new skateboard. Louis already knew a bit about skateboards, and he offered to show Tom and Josh how to do turns. It was harder than it looked. Tom slipped off and tumbled over. The others laughed. "Show me again," Tom said to Louis. After watching Louis carefully and trying again, Tom was starting to get it. "I just need to keep practising," he thought.

Then it was Josh's turn. "I can help you if you like," said Louis. Josh wanted to do it by himself, but he couldn't get the hang of it. When he tried to turn, the skateboard kept going straight and Josh landed on his bottom. The boys laughed, but Josh didn't think it was funny. He got really angry at them. Then he ran inside to tell his mother how mean the two older boys were.

Understanding emotions

Children's emotional reactions may be more complex than they appear. In the story Josh blames his hurt and angry feelings on the other boys. But was their behaviour the main problem for Josh? Or was it really that he was frustrated and disappointed over not being able to handle the skateboard as well as he would have liked?

Learning to manage feelings and emotions is a very important part of children's development. Emotions affect children's ability to learn and relate to others, as well as their overall wellbeing.



Everyone has feelings. It takes time to learn how to manage them effectively. Learning to think through emotional reactions helps children find better ways of managing them.

Emotions and self-concept

Children's emotions are not just a response to things that happen. They are influenced by what children think, especially by what they think about themselves and their abilities. Children often need support from parents and carers to manage their feelings effectively, particularly when they are young.

Showing that you understand and accept children's feelings is very important for supporting their emotional development. When children feel understood it is easier for them to learn to think through their feelings and work out effective ways to handle them.

In the story, when Tom fell off the skateboard he told himself he could do it if he kept practising. This helpful thinking allowed him to put aside feelings of frustration and embarrassment, and keep trying.



How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can support children's emotional development by tuning into feelings, helping children understand feelings, and encouraging them to work out ways to manage feelings effectively. The following suggestions may be helpful.

- Tune into children's feelings and try to understand things from their point of view. This allows you to help them identify their feelings and the ways that feelings work.
- Show that you accept and respect children's feelings. Accepting feelings is necessary before working out a way to manage them.
- Remember that it's not always easy for children to know what is bothering them, and they may not always want to talk about it.
- Show children how you manage your own feelings effectively. If you act calmly it will help to reassure them that they can manage even difficult feelings.
- Acknowledge children's efforts to manage feelings. This helps them see their progress and motivates them to use the helpful strategies they are developing in other situations.

Everyone has feelings. It takes time to learn how to manage them effectively.

Something to try

- Observe your child and take note of the situations that seem to trigger a particular emotional response.
- Think about how your child might be feeling given his or her age and stage of development.
- Talk and listen to your child about how he or she is feeling. Acknowledge both your child's feelings and his or her efforts to cope.
- Talk about helpful ways of managing feelings and encourage your child to try out different options.
- Use stories to help children understanding feelings of others.

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How temperament affects feelings

Meet Jasmine. She loves to read books and she also enjoys drawing and playing with her cat. She is most comfortable at home. Whenever Jasmine has to meet someone new, or do something she has never tried before, she gets very nervous and needs lots of reassurance. She has been like this since she was a baby.

Georgia, Jasmine's younger sister, is very different. She loves meeting people and being the centre of attention.

Georgia has always been independent. Before she was two, she was already telling her mother she didn't need her help, saying, "Me do it. You go away!" Though she is younger, Georgia often bosses Jasmine around. When Georgia decides she wants to do something it can be very hard to stop her. She tends to jump into things without stopping to think.

Different temperament patterns

It is sometimes surprising to find how different children in the same family can be. Their personalities, likes and dislikes, and the ways they react to situations, may vary a lot. These kinds of differences are known as temperaments.

Children's temperament patterns are usually noticed very early by parents and carers, often from birth. For example, some babies sleep well and seem to have an easy-going nature, whereas others can be difficult to settle. Some young children like to explore new places and meet new people, while others appear shy and can take a long time to get used to new situations.

These kinds of differences in temperament can mean that parenting strategies that worked well with one child may not work so well with another.

Understanding temperament differences can help parents and carers match parenting to children's needs.



How temperament makes a difference

Researchers have found that the main things contributing to different temperaments include:

- how strongly children react to people and events (eg getting angry or upset quickly and easily)
- how easily children approach new people or new situations
- how well children can control their attention, emotions and behaviour.

Children who are more naturally calm, open to new experiences and easy to get along with are easier to parent. Children who are highly reactive or shy often have difficulty with managing fears and worries. This may place more demands on parents and carers for support. Children who are highly reactive and have trouble managing frustration may show this through impulsive or challenging behaviour. These children are often more difficult for parents and carers to manage.



How parents and carers can help

Adapting your parenting style to match your child's temperament helps to support their social and emotional development and builds your relationship. Here are some suggestions and examples:

- Observe how your child responds in a range of situations to get a clear picture of how well he or she manages emotions and what triggers difficult reactions.
- Find out what it's like for your child. Talk about your observations and get your child's input, for example: "You seemed to get really nervous when your friend asked you to come over to play. What was worrying you?"
- Communicate caring and warmth (eg by showing you understand your child's point of view). This supports children who feel anxious and reduces negative reactions in children whose behaviour is challenging.
- **For children who are shy:** Avoid being overprotective. Provide support through helping them find strategies for managing fears and worries.
- **For children whose behaviour is challenging:** Use clear and consistent limit setting rather than harsh punishment. Spell out any consequences in advance and make sure that your discipline strategy is fair and is geared to encouraging appropriate behaviour.
- Be aware of the similarities and differences between your own temperament and your child's. Adapting your parenting style to suit your child's temperament can help to improve relationships and behaviour.

Adapting your parenting style to match your child's temperament helps to support their social and emotional development and builds your relationship.

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About emotional development

Why emotions matter

Children's responses to the different feelings they experience every day have a major impact on their choices, their behaviour, and on how well they cope and enjoy life.

Emotional development involves learning what feelings and emotions are, understanding how and why they happen, recognising one's own feelings and those of others, and developing effective ways of managing them.

As children grow and are exposed to different situations their emotional lives also become more complex. Developing skills for managing a range of emotions is therefore very important for their emotional wellbeing.

Parents and carers have an important role to play in supporting children's emotional development. They do this through responding effectively to children's emotions, through providing examples of how they manage feelings, and through talking with children about feelings and how to manage them. In similar ways, school staff can provide important support for children's emotional development.



Children's emotional development

Emotional development is a complex task that begins in infancy and continues into adulthood. The first emotions that can be recognised in babies include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Later, as children begin to develop a sense of self, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy emerge. Primary school children are still learning to identify emotions, to understand why they happen and how to manage them appropriately. As children develop, the things that provoke their emotional responses change, as do the strategies they use to manage them.

Very young children's emotions are mainly made up of physical reactions (eg heart racing, butterflies in stomach) and behaviours. As they grow, children develop the ability to recognise feelings. Their emotions are also increasingly influenced by their thinking. They become more aware of their own feelings and better able to recognise and understand other people's. Thus, an emotional reaction of a 10-year-old is likely to be far more complex than that of a three-year-old.

The **experience** of emotion includes several components:

- Physical responses (eg heart rate, breathing, hormone levels).
- Feelings that children recognise and learn to name.
- Thoughts and judgements associated with feelings.
- Action signals (eg a desire to approach, escape or fight).

Many things influence the ways that children **express** emotions, both through words and behaviour. These influences include:

- Values and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing emotions that children learn from parents, carers and school staff.
- How effectively children's emotional needs are usually met.
- Children's temperaments.
- Emotional behaviours that children have learned through observation or experience.
- The extent to which families and children are under various kinds of stress.

Developing emotional skills

The table below shows the main pathways in emotional skill development for children in the preschool to primary age range. It is important to note that the rate of children's emotional development can be quite variable. Some children may show a high level of emotional skill development while quite young, whereas others take longer to develop the capacity to manage their emotions.

Skills needed	Children with beginning skills...	Children with developing skills...	Children with more developed skills...
Emotional self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tend to have one emotion at a time act out how they feel flip between one emotion to another quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> start to understand that they can have more than one emotion in reaction to the same event as long as they are similar (eg happy and excited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> understand that they can have opposite feelings to the same situation (eg feel both happy and sad that the school year is ending)
Recognising other people's emotions (social awareness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rely on physical clues to identify emotions (eg tears equal sadness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take into account clues from the situation to help explain the emotion (eg understand that a child might be sad because his or her toy has been broken) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have a more complex understanding of the interaction between emotions, situations and people (eg feel sad because the thing that was broken was a gift from a loved grandparent who died recently)
Emotion regulation (the ability to manage emotions effectively)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> are able to use simple ways to manage emotions with support from adults (eg choose a different activity to distract them from feeling frustrated). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> are increasingly able to choose appropriate behavioural responses (eg asks and waits for assistance with a difficult task). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> are increasingly able to manage emotions by rethinking own goals and motives (eg decide that there is no point being angry about something he or she can't change).

Every child is different

There are a number of reasons why children vary in the way they express and manage their emotions. These variations may be due to events that impact on children and families at times, such as severe or chronic illness, trauma, or difficult social circumstances. Variations in children's emotional expression may also be influenced by specific family or cultural values and by differences in children's temperaments.

Children learn different ways of expressing emotion based on what is regarded as normal within their family and culture. Some families and cultures encourage children to express a range of emotions while other families encourage children not to display certain emotions, such as anger or pride. These differences also influence the ways children learn to regulate their emotions.

Learning to regulate emotions is more difficult for some children than for others. This may be due to their particular emotional temperament. Some children feel emotions intensely and easily. They are more emotionally reactive and find it harder to calm down. Some of these children react to frustration by getting angry. They may act impulsively and find it hard to control their emotions. Some children who are emotionally reactive get anxious more quickly and easily than other children. It is often difficult for children with anxious temperaments to develop strategies to manage their fears. They often try to avoid situations that worry them.

Helping children learn to accept feelings and to understand the links between feelings and behaviour supports their emotional development.



How children's sense of self influences their emotions

During the primary school years, children's sense of self is strongly influenced by the extent to which they see themselves as performing well, both at school and in other activities. This affects their emotional development. Knowing that they can be successful at what they do leads children to feel competent and confident.

When children have few experiences of success, they often have to cope with disappointment and may come to view themselves in negative ways. By learning to value their own strengths and efforts, as well as those of others, children develop the emotional resilience needed to manage disappointments and frustrations. Parents and carers can support children's wellbeing and emotional development by showing understanding of their feelings and by offering encouragement and specific praise for children's efforts.



Learning to manage emotions

Helping children learn to accept feelings and to understand the links between feelings and behaviour supports their emotional development. The following example shows how Josh's mother listens carefully and asks questions that help to identify the feelings that led him to be upset.

Josh became upset when he fell off the skateboard and the other boys laughed at him. He got angry with them and told his mother they were mean. Here Josh's mother supports his emotional development by helping him to explore his feelings.

Josh: "Those boys are really mean."

Mum: "It sounds like you're really angry with them. What happened?"

Josh: "They laughed at me."

Mum: "Oh, I see. Do you know what they were laughing about?"

Josh: "I fell off the skateboard. It wouldn't turn the way it was supposed to."

Mum: "It sounds like it was really hard."

Josh: "Yes."

Mum: "And you were trying really hard too."

Josh: (Nods.)

Acknowledging and exploring his feelings helps Josh feel understood. This makes it easier for him, with his mother's help, to think carefully about what he can do to improve the situation and feel better. Josh's mother could support this next step by asking him what he thinks would make things better for him. She might also suggest some options for him to consider.

Approaching Josh's difficulty this way shows him that difficult emotions are linked to problems that can be thought through and resolved.

Key points for supporting children's emotional development

Providing effective support for children's emotional development starts with paying attention to their feelings and noticing how they manage them. By acknowledging children's emotional responses and providing guidance, parents, carers and school staff can help children understand and accept feelings, and develop effective strategies for managing them.

Tune into children's feelings and emotions

Some emotions are easily identified, while others are less obvious. Tuning into children's emotions involves looking at their body language, listening to what they are saying and how they are saying it, and observing their behaviour. This allows you to respond more effectively to children's needs and to offer more specific guidance to help children manage their emotions.

Help children recognise and understand emotions

Taking opportunities to talk with children and teach them about emotions helps children to become more aware of their own emotions as well as those of others. Encouraging children to feel comfortable with their emotions and providing them with practice in talking about their feelings helps children to further develop ways to manage their emotions.

Set limits on inappropriate expression of emotions

It is very important for children to understand that it is okay to have a range of emotions and feelings, but that there are limits to the ways these should be expressed. While acknowledging children's emotions, it is therefore very important to set limits on aggressive, unsafe or inappropriate behaviours.

Be a role model

Children learn about emotions and how to express them appropriately by watching others – especially parents, carers and school staff. Showing children the ways you understand and manage emotions helps children learn from your example. This includes examples of saying "Sorry, I lost my temper" (because no parent is perfect!) and then showing how you might make amends.



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Emotional development: Suggestions for families

Understanding and managing feelings

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

Helpful ways of supporting children's emotional development

Listen and validate the child's emotional experience

Listen to what children say and acknowledge their feelings. This helps children to identify emotions and understand how they work. Being supported in this way helps children work out how to manage their emotions. You might say, "You look worried. Is something on your mind?" or "It sounds like you're really angry. Let's talk about it."

View emotions as an opportunity for connecting and teaching

Children's emotional reactions provide 'teachable moments' for helping them understand emotions and learn effective ways to manage them. You might say, "I can see you're really frustrated about having to wait for what you want. Why don't we read a story while we're waiting?"

Encourage problem-solving to manage emotions

Help children develop their skills for managing emotions by helping them think of different ways they could respond. You might say, "What would help you feel brave?" or "How else could you look at this?"

Set limits in a supportive way

Set limits on inappropriate behaviour so that children understand that having feelings is okay, but acting inappropriately is not. You might say, "I know you're upset that your friend couldn't make it over, but that does not make it okay to yell at me."





Some unhelpful things to avoid

Dismissing children's emotions

Telling children not to feel the way they do (eg, by saying, "Don't be scared/sad/angry"), can lead children to believe that their emotions are wrong and they are bad for having them. Remember that all feelings are okay and for children to learn how to manage them they first need to be acknowledged and understood.

Lying to children about situations to avoid emotional reactions

Telling children things like, "It won't hurt a bit" (when you know it will), can actually increase the emotional reaction. It teaches them not trust the person who has lied. It is important to communicate with children about difficult situations that affect them in ways they can understand. Providing information to children at their level, with reassurance, helps them be prepared and work out ways to manage their emotional responses.

Shaming children for their emotions

Sometimes adults tease children about their emotional responses or try to talk them out of feeling a certain way, which can lead feelings of shame. Saying things like, "Why are you crying like a baby?" or "You're such a scaredy-cat!" undermines children's confidence. Instead of helping them to feel brave it may lead them to feel guilty for experiencing that emotion.

Ignoring children's emotional responses

Sometimes adults may think that the child will just grow out of their emotional responses and ignore them. This can communicate to children that their emotions are unimportant and limits their opportunities to learn effective ways of managing their emotions.

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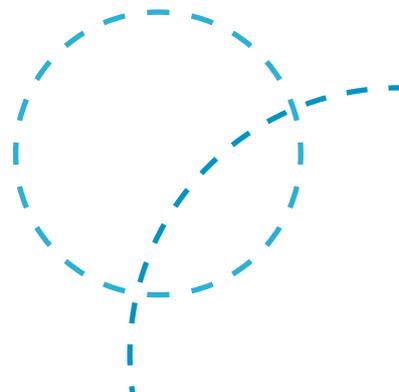
How thinking affects feelings

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

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

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

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



How thinking affects feelings – continued

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

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



Challenging unhelpful thinking

Unhelpful thinking is very common in both children and adults. Often we don't notice it because the thoughts happen automatically. By listening to the things children say about themselves and their experiences, parents and carers can learn to notice and gently challenge children's unhelpful thinking. The best way to do this is to help children think through the reasons why they think a particular way. Saying things like, "I can see how you might think that, but maybe there's another way of looking at it," or "Let's see how we can check that out," are very useful for helping children change their unhelpful thinking. It can help children to know they are not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts (everybody has them), but that learning to identify and change unhelpful thinking is a way of managing their feelings better.

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Good values guide good behaviour

I dare you!

"Go on, I dare you!" said Ella. The children were using the neighbour's fence post for target practice.

Tao picked up a stone and took aim. The stone hit the post and then bounced off onto the neighbour's car breaking the windscreen. "Oh no!" said Tao. "Good shot, Tao!" cheered Ella. "We're in trouble now," said Harry. "Come on, let's go before anyone sees us," said Tao.

Later that day, their neighbour came over. He wanted to know if anyone had seen what happened to his car. "Do you know anything about it?" asked Harry's mother. "We don't know anything about it," said Ella. But Tao began to cry, "They dared me to do it." "It wasn't his fault, Mum," said Harry. "It was that stupid game."

'Dare' games like this story are a common way for children to test the limits that adults set for them. At the same time, children try out their own strengths and each other's. While this kind of behaviour is a normal part of childhood, effective guidance from adults is needed to help children develop skills to make responsible decisions and to stand up to social pressure.

Influences on children's social development

Children's understandings of responsibility are influenced by their families, by school staff, by community members, by other children and also by the things children see and hear in the media. Young children especially watch and copy the attitudes and behaviour of those closest to them.

As children grow older, they become more aware of peer group values and of the behaviours of role models such as sporting heroes or media personalities. They learn to think through and discuss the values and attitudes they observe in others and use themselves. They think about whether decisions that are made are fair or whether someone is being 'mean' to them or to others.

When adults are fair, caring and respectful, children feel a greater sense of trust and belonging. Children are more likely to cooperate with adult guidance when they feel valued and respected. By contrast, when children feel they have been treated unfairly they are less likely to listen and more likely to try to avoid or resist discipline.



Teaching children values

Values are the internal guides we have for our behaviour. They help us to make choices, and to make judgements about what is right and wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair. While cultures differ in the emphasis they place on particular values (eg individual freedom or duty to family) there are many which are common to all cultures like respect, caring, and justice.

Parents and carers are children's first and most important teachers of values. Schools also have a major role to play in teaching values. Some of the ways that schools help children learn positive social values include:

- teaching children how to think about values and how to behave in ways that are caring, respectful, etcetera
- teaching cooperative behaviours inside the classroom and in the playground
- making sure that behaviour and discipline issues are managed in ways that are positive, consistent and fair
- providing opportunities for children to practise good citizenship – through peer mentoring, student representative council, community projects, etcetera.



How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can use a range of strategies to help children learn about social values. The following ideas can help.

Teach by example

Children often learn more from what you do than what you say. Your own behaviour is important for showing children how you would like them to behave. Talking about the reasons for your behaviour can help to make your values and expectations clear.

Read and discuss stories that demonstrate positive values

Choose children's stories that reflect the kinds of values you want children to learn. Talk about the story and what can be learnt. You might ask questions like: "How do you think that person feels? Why do you think he/she did that? Was it a good idea? How could he/she have done it better?"

Check what children are watching on TV

Make sure that the programs children watch and the electronic games they play are suitable for their age and reflect positive values. Watching violence on television and playing violent video games can lead to aggressive behaviour.

Teach children to learn from mistakes

Mistakes provide opportunities for teaching and reinforcing positive values. Support and acknowledge children when they admit mistakes and help them find ways to make up for them. Ask them to suggest ways of repairing any damage they have caused to relationships, people or property.

Help children to think about values

Talk with children about the social values and attitudes they encounter in everyday situations and on TV. Teaching children to question and think about social values helps them to be clear about their own values and strengthens their ability to resist pressure from peers, advertising and other media.

Teaching children about values supports their social development. It helps them develop the knowledge and skills they need to play a positive role in society.

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About social development

Social development involves learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to family, school and the community. This kind of learning is passed on to children directly by those who care for and teach them, as well as indirectly through social relationships within the family or with friends, and through children's participation in the culture around them. Through their relationships with others and their growing awareness of social values and expectations, children build a sense of who they are and of the social roles available to them. As children develop socially, they both respond to the influences around them and play an active part in shaping their relationships.

Influences on children's social development

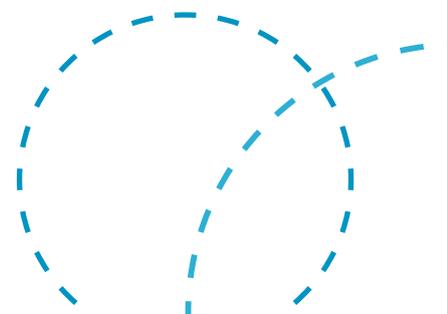
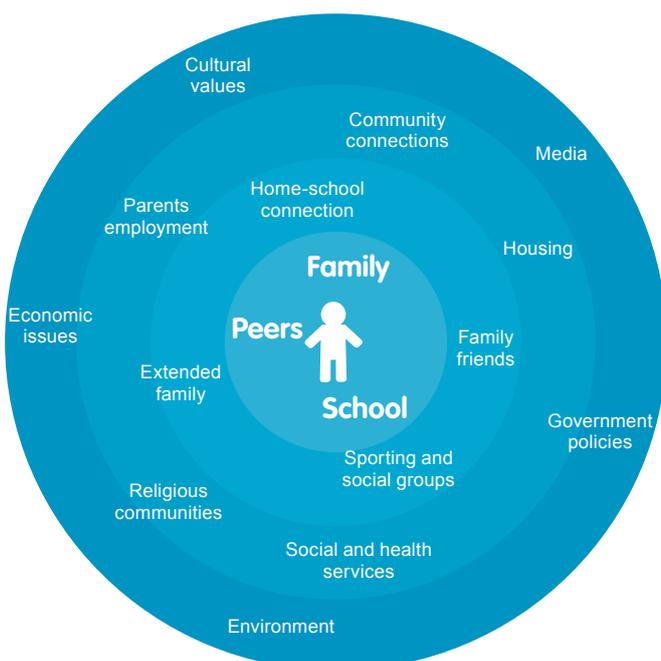
While parents and carers are clearly the first and most important influences on children's social development, there are many other influential aspects of the social environment. Examples of the many influences on children's development are shown in the diagram below.

The people and settings that are most closely involved with the child – family, school and peers – are shown at the centre of the diagram. Through their daily contact with parents, carers, family members, school staff, as well as with their peers, children learn about the social world and about the rules, practices and values that support it. By actively participating in these relationships, children also affect the ways that adults and their peers relate to them.

In addition, children's development is influenced by wider networks of social support (represented in the diagram's central circles), including extended family, friends and any community, cultural or religious groups a child may be part of. These networks provide opportunities for children to develop their social awareness and skills as they relate with different people and experience a range of roles and expectations.

As shown in the outer circle in the diagram, children's lives are also shaped by the broader social circumstances that impact on their families and communities, such as access to social and health services, parents' employment and income, or their ability to balance work and family time. In particular, children's sense of social connection is often influenced by community attitudes and by cultural values, including those they encounter in the media.

Through their relationships and connections with others, children build a sense of who they are and where they fit in the social world. Coming to an understanding about self and others is therefore a central goal of children's social development.





Developmental trends in children’s self-concept

The ideas, beliefs and knowledge that children have about who they are, what they can do and where they fit in society help to shape their understanding of themselves. Children base their self-concepts on feedback they receive from others as well as their own judgments. The kinds of things that primary school children take into account in developing their self-concepts include how well they are able to succeed with schoolwork and other activities, how they look, and how they get on with family and peers. Developmental patterns in the ways children typically describe themselves are related to their developing capacities for thinking and for understanding and managing their emotions and behaviour. As shown in the following table, preschool children often have very high opinions of their abilities. During primary school, children become much more aware of how their abilities and achievements compare with those of others.

Typical developmental changes in children’s self-concepts

Developmental stage	What children might say about themselves	What it shows
Preschool	“I am four years old. I live with my Mum and Dad and my little sister. I love to play football. I can kick the ball really far. Watch me!”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes physical appearance, family context and favourite activity • Has high opinion of own abilities and wants to show you
Primary school	“I am pretty good at maths because I get good marks. But I’m not so good at English, not like Sophie. Kids like to play with me because I’m happy most of the time and I’m kind.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compares self with others • Determines own ability level by ranking performance against that of peers • Able to make a (more) realistic assessment of own abilities
Secondary school	“I’m pretty talkative and funny with my friends. I’m an extrovert. At home I can be pretty moody. I get annoyed with my parents because they always seem to be on my back. But, I guess, where would I be without them?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to reflect on and evaluate own qualities • Understands and accepts that personal characteristics can be changeable and inconsistent • Is able to integrate them into a coherent sense of self

It is very important for children’s strengths and efforts to be recognised in order to support the development of a positive self-concept and to motivate children to be positively engaged in learning and in their relationships. Poor self-concept can be a significant contributing factor to children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Culture and self-concept

Having a strong cultural identity enhances children's self-concept and promotes a sense of connectedness and belonging. Children's cultural identity is nurtured when they learn about their own cultural traditions and when those around them show respect for their cultural values. Teaching children to respect and appreciate variations and differences between cultures is therefore very important for all children's social development.

Children from minority cultural groups can encounter differences between the rules and expectations required at school and those they are used to at home. When the differences are not acknowledged, or when the cultural traditions children identify with are ignored or minimised, it can negatively affect children's cultural identity development and sense of belonging.

Children from minority cultures may be subjected to stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, gender, appearance, social class or sexuality. Discrimination and bullying can have serious effects on children's mental health and wellbeing as well as their social development. By contrast, overcoming discrimination has been found to have positive effects on self-concept. It is very important for parents, carers and school staff to encourage and support children to take positive action against discrimination and bullying by speaking up and reporting incidents.

Learning social values

Children's ability to understand others and take their needs and views into account develops over time. Young children are naturally self-focussed. They often play beside, rather than with, other children and tend to think that everyone sees things the same way that they do. In early primary school children learn that others may see things differently from them. Then, as their thinking skills develop, children are more able to understand another person's point of view and, finally, to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation.

Teaching children how to put themselves in someone else's shoes helps them to relate better to others and manage conflict more effectively. It promotes caring, respect and fairness. Research shows that children who have learned to value others are more likely to include and appreciate children who are different from them or who are viewed negatively by others.

Research into moral development has highlighted how social behaviour reflects the attitudes people hold about social conventions and about themselves. Learning to take account of others' feelings, perspectives and expectations contributes to children's understanding of social values, and to the values and ethics they choose for themselves. Using an example where children have broken the window of a neighbour's car playing a game, the following table shows how children use different moral reasoning to decide what to do and say.

Example	Kind of moral thinking
Ella says: "I dare you." Tao says: "Let's go before anyone sees us." Ella says: "We don't know anything about it."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinking is focussed on impact on self• Decisions about right and wrong are based on avoiding punishment or on personal gain
Harry says: "We're in trouble now." Tao says: "They told me to do it."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasises responsibility and what others think• Decisions are based on gaining approval from others and/or on meeting laws and social obligations
Harry says: "It wasn't his fault. It was that stupid game."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasises understanding the particular circumstances and coming to a fair outcome• Decisions are based on principles of justice and compassion

Children learn to make ethical judgments through having practice in putting themselves in others' shoes and through being encouraged to reflect on issues that involve social and moral values. Families and schools can work together to help children understand and learn to act on values like respect, responsibility, caring for others, honesty, cooperation and acceptance of people's differences.



Key points for supporting children's social development

Children's earliest and most extensive learning about social relationships occurs in the family. Parents and carers can support positive social development when they model respect and consideration and encourage children to be similarly respectful in all their relationships.

- Provide care and support by tuning into children's needs. Show you are willing to listen and take children's feelings into consideration.
- Help children to develop social skills by providing coaching and teaching them to think through and solve the day-to-day social difficulties they encounter. Supervise and support children's social activities without taking over.
- Ask questions that encourage children to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Questions like, "How would you feel if...?" help children learn skills for perspective-taking. Asking questions in a supportive way helps children to think through situations and encourages them to take others' feelings and perspectives into account.
- Discuss moral issues with children and encourage them to state their opinions and reasons.

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Social development: Suggestions for families

Family relationships and expectations have a major influence on children's social development. Family relationships set the foundation for children to relate to others. Children learn how to manage relationships by observing the ways that parents, carers and other family members relate to others.



How parents and carers can help

Teach social and emotional skills

Teach children social skills such as listening to others, taking turns, making friends and resolving conflict. Emphasise skills for cooperative and respectful relationships and acknowledge children's efforts to use them. For ideas about how you can teach social and emotional skills, see the range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning.

Use positive discipline

Setting reasonable expectations for children's behaviour, and communicating them clearly and respectfully, sets the tone for cooperation. Being consistent and positive in your approach to discipline communicates to children that they are valued, even if a particular behaviour is not. For further ideas, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on effective discipline.

Talk about values

Read stories that emphasise values with your children. Ask their opinions on whether they think a particular action is respectful, responsible, caring etcetera. Discuss the pros and cons of different kinds of values for promoting effective social relationships. Make talking about values and opinions part of everyday conversation, for example, by talking about things you see on TV.



Capitalise on 'teachable moments'

When something happens that requires a response which draws on values, it presents a 'teachable moment'. Ask children to think about what the problem is and what they could do to improve the situation. For example, when feelings have been hurt you could ask your child's opinion of what the person might be feeling hurt about. Extend your child's thinking through asking questions like, "How could you find out what Jo is feeling sad about?" and "What do you think you could do to help?"

Involve children in family discussions and decision-making

Encouraging children to contribute to family discussions and decision-making gives them practice in listening to others' views and seeing things from different angles. Listening and contributing to family discussions helps children understand what your values are and shows them that their voices are valued. Involving children in these ways in family discussions and decision-making promotes respectful and responsible behaviours.

Promote a strong sense of identity

When parents and carers notice and acknowledge what children do to help, it shows children that their contributions are worthwhile. This gives them a sense of pride and encourages them to 'do the right thing'. Help children to work out ways to stand up for what they believe in and let them know that you are proud of them when they do. This helps children to build confidence in their own strengths and values.

Supervise media use

It is very important for parents and carers to supervise children's media use and ensure that the things they view are appropriate for their age and level of understanding. When children are repeatedly exposed to violent or inappropriate media images they can see these things as normal. Children often imitate the behaviour they see on TV or on the internet.

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Social development: Suggestions for school staff

School teaches children about society and helps them learn to find their place in it. All the experiences children have at school help them to learn about social rules and relationships. Having clear and positive rules and policies, providing an integrated social and emotional learning curriculum, and supporting children's social needs and relationships are some of the important ways that schools can support children's social development.



How school staff can help

Teach by example

Children learn a great deal about the most appropriate ways to behave by observing the actions of those around them. When teaching social values it is especially important not to just talk about them, but to show through your actions the kinds of caring, respectful and responsible behaviours you expect of students.

'Do' rather than 'don't'

Classroom and school rules are most effective when they are stated in clear and positive ways that children can understand. They are best kept simple and few. Discuss rules and expectations with students and show them the kinds of behaviours you regard as appropriate. Involving children in discussing your rules and encouraging them to suggest rules themselves are important ways for teaching staff to support children's social and moral development.

Be firm, fair and flexible

Being firm and consistent in applying rules that are framed positively and have been well-taught helps school staff establish and maintain respectful relationships which enables the classroom to function well and can also be transferred to other areas of the school. It also helps students to know where they stand. Being fair in applying the rules rather than singling out students for more severe punishment or favouring others is very important. School staff who are seen to be fair are more readily respected and are more effective at supporting all students' social development and wellbeing. Being consistent and fair does not mean being rigid. It is also important to be flexible and take into account individual circumstances that may impact on a child's ability to meet expectations, for example by checking if there is a reason why a child is late before deciding whether there should be a consequence.



Set the scene for classroom cooperation

Cooperative classrooms support both social development and academic success. School staff encourage cooperation in the classroom when they structure cooperative learning activities where children work together on a specific task or project and teach children the skills to work together effectively. Providing opportunities for all students to take on particular roles and responsibilities also helps to build a cooperative classroom environment and encourages children to take pride in their contribution to school life.

Appreciate social and cultural diversity

Find out about the social and cultural backgrounds and values of your students and their families and look for ways you may be able to accommodate their needs and perspectives. Be open to adjusting your style of teaching and communication and ensure that common classroom practices are clear and appropriate for all students. Create opportunities to include different perspectives and encourage children to explore and appreciate the differences.

Deal promptly with discrimination and harassment

Teach children about stereotyping and discrimination and make it clear that these are unacceptable behaviours. When discrimination, harassment or bullying occur ensure that you take action based on your school's policies.

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Catch them being good

Carley, aged eight, loves bouncing on the trampoline and playing with other children in the neighbourhood. When she comes home from school she has a quick snack and then goes out to play. She doesn't stop to put her school bag away, change her shoes or tidy up after her snack even though her mother, Sandy, tells Carley almost every day. It is so irritating. Sandy finds it difficult not to yell at Carley when she doesn't do what she is asked. Sandy has tried sending Carley to bed early for her disobedience, but all it seemed to achieve was an angry face and more dawdling at bed time.

Recently Sandy decided to try a different approach. She wrote a list of the things she wanted Carley to do after school, discussed it with her daughter, asked for her help, and put it on the fridge. Each night she made a point of ticking off the things Carley had done. She thanked and praised her for doing what she had been asked. Carley's father also told her how happy he was that she was doing things to help. Carley feels really proud to know her parents are so pleased with the things she can do to help at home.

Psychological research has shown that following up a person's behaviour with something positive makes it more likely that the behaviour will happen again. Praise and other kinds of acknowledgement are motivating, and are often needed to help children change their behaviour.

You can help children to learn positive behaviours by telling them clearly what you want and praising or rewarding them when they do it.

Sounds too easy?

What else might be needed?

- Is what you have asked the child to do clear enough? Saying, "I want you to pick up the clothes off the floor in your room before you go out to play," is clearer than saying, "I want you to tidy your room."
- Are you asking for behaviour that your child can do? Sometimes we ask children to do things that are too difficult for them without help.
- Are you asking them to do too many things at once?
- Do you find that you are getting angry with your child for things not done more often than praising his or her efforts?



Something to try during the week

Double the amount of praise you give your child for his or her efforts in the coming week. You may need to expand your own vocabulary so you have a variety of positive comments ready to encourage your child.

Catch your child being good

Keep a record of the behaviours you are pleased with. Reading them over together from time to time will be a positive experience for both you and your child.

You may ask, "Is praise enough to motivate my child?" Praise and acknowledgement work in most cases, but sometimes you may need to add an incentive plan with rewards to help change behaviour. If you do add an incentive plan, think carefully about your choice of reward. Incentive plans usually work best for a short period of time (eg a few weeks).

Ideas for a reward menu

- Play game with parent or carer
- Favourite (healthy) meal
- Stay up late
- Have a friend over
- Use sports equipment
- Use the computer

Tips for using rewards effectively

- Ask your child about what they like. If they suggest the reward, it will be more motivating.
- Make sure the reward is realistic for you to give.
- If the child becomes bored by use of the same reward, use a menu of 10 to 15 items to create variety. When your child meets his or her behaviour expectation, he or she selects one reward from the menu.
- A mystery reward is also very motivating for most children.
- If a child wants to earn a big reward (eg computer game, movie), you could use a token system. Each day he or she could earn tokens to be exchanged later for a bigger reward.
- Emphasise social rewards and privileges over material rewards. Material rewards (eg toys, money) are expensive and often don't work. Many children enjoy having time to spend with their parents or carers. Rewards involving time and activities with parents or carers can be reinforcing and promote good relationships at the same time.



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Using effective discipline

"Max, it's eight o'clock. Time for bed." Eight-year-old Max didn't move. He was watching TV. "Max, did you hear me?" said his father. "Just a minute," said Max. "My show's not finished." "You've got school tomorrow and you need your sleep." "I'm not tired," Max replied. "But you will be in the morning," said Dad. "Okay, just let me see the end."

At 8:20pm Max's Dad asked again, "Has it finished yet?" "Nearly," said Max.

At 8:45pm, when the show finished, Max still did not have his pyjamas on. By the time he got ready for bed it was 9:20pm. "Good night, Max" said his Dad. "But Dad, I can't go to sleep without a story."

Setting limits for children's behaviour

It's not always easy to get children to do as they are asked. Whether at bedtime or in other situations, children often try to challenge the limits adults set. An important part of positive discipline involves setting effective limits for children's behaviour. Setting clear and effective limits supports children's development. Knowing that an adult is in charge helps children feel safe. It can also help to reduce stress in family relationships and make parenting easier.

It's also very important not to unintentionally reward children for not meeting your expectations. In the story, Max's father unintentionally rewarded Max for ignoring his instructions. By being allowed to decide when to stop watching TV, Max got the message that bedtime was flexible and he continued stretching the limits.

Positive discipline techniques help parents and carers manage children's behaviour with less stress and maintain positive family relationships.

How to set effective limits

Be firm but friendly

Getting children to follow reasonable instructions does not mean you have to threaten or get angry. Getting angry heats up the situation and can also damage relationships. It works better to first get children's attention, and then tell them clearly and calmly what you want them to do.

It helps to get up close and look at children directly as you give them an instruction calmly. Making it very specific helps too. Giving them notice ahead of time with prompts can reduce conflict, particularly with older children, for example: "Max, you need to go to bed in five minutes. When I come back I want you to switch off the TV and go and get your pyjamas on."



How to set effective limits – continued

Set up rules and routines

Having some basic rules in place helps children understand what you expect of them. Setting up consistent routines for daily activities like bedtime, meal times, bath time and homework means everyone knows what to expect. Having routines also helps children to feel secure.

Rules work best when they are simple, few, and positively state what you expect children to do. Asking children to help you make the rules can improve their cooperation. For example, involving Max in advance when his parents decide on a reasonable bedtime would mean there is less to negotiate at night when everyone is tired. This would make it easier for Max's Dad to firmly say, "Max, we agreed on bedtime at eight o'clock. That's the rule on school nights."

Be consistent

Children are more likely to follow your instructions when they know you will follow up. If you are not consistent about enforcing the limits you set, children are more likely to test or stretch them.

When setting rules and limits, be sure they are enforceable and that you are prepared to stand by your word. Remember to set a good example by following the rules yourself!

Acknowledge, encourage, praise

Show you appreciate children's efforts in meeting your expectations by praising and thanking them. Your approval is a great encouragement for children. Using an incentive plan for a short period of time can be useful for providing more tangible encouragement for children to comply with the rules you set.

Setting effective limits is not about having lots of strict rules and punishments. It means making your expectations very clear and being consistent in following through.

Here's what worked for Max

Max's Dad set up a challenge for Max to see how many times he could get to bed before eight o'clock on school nights. Each day that Max got to bed on time, his Dad gave him a footy sticker (Max was a great footy fan and loved collecting stickers).

As well as the stickers, if Max got to bed on time two nights in a row, then he would be allowed to stay up on the weekend to watch the first half of his team's match on TV. If he got to bed on time for four nights, he would get to watch the whole match. And if Max could get to bed on time for all five weeknights, the deal was that Dad would take Max to see his team's footy match live.

Max's bedtime record

	Week 1		Week 2	
Sun	8:00	✓	7:45	✓
Mon	8:10		7:50	✓
Tue	7:50	✓	8:00	✓
Wed	7:55	✓	7:50	✓
Thu	8:05		7:55	✓
	3/5		5/5	
	Good effort Max! You get to stay up and watch footy until three-quarter time on Saturday night		Fantastic! Max and dad get to go and see a footy match live!	



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About effective discipline

What is effective discipline?

Often when we read or hear the word 'discipline' it seems to mean punishing children when they do something wrong. In fact, the word 'discipline' means to teach. Effective discipline helps to prepare children for knowing what to do and how to behave in a range of situations. Having good information about discipline practices that have been found to be effective for supporting children's development and mental health and wellbeing can help parents and carers make the sometimes difficult job of parenting a little easier.

Effective discipline is important for:

- protecting children from danger and helping them to feel safe and secure
- teaching children to understand and care about others
- teaching children emotional self-control and self-direction
- helping children to develop a sense of responsibility
- teaching children values
- helping children to be happy and well adjusted.

What effective discipline involves

Parents and carers who provide discipline as part of a loving and secure relationship with their children help children feel secure and self-confident. Children benefit from knowing that their environment is stable and that a competent adult is taking care of them.

There are three aspects to effective discipline

- 1 A learning environment that is positive and supportive
- 2 Strategies for building skills and strengthening positive behaviours
- 3 Strategies for decreasing undesired behaviours

Positive and supportive environments for learning

Building strong parent/carer-child relationships

Discipline techniques are most effective when children feel cared for and know that their needs will be met.

Quality time

Ensuring that there are times in your day for appreciating and enjoying your children's company is very important for building and maintaining positive relationships. Taking a little time for playing and having fun together helps everyone relax and encourages caring and cooperation. As children get older, you may find that having time to talk together is important for maintaining close relationships. Time to talk, and more importantly time to listen, helps children to feel understood and supports positive self-esteem.

Positive attention

Giving children regular attention helps to meet their needs for care. Providing attention to children when they are doing something positive makes it more likely they will continue to seek parents' and carers' attention through positive rather than negative behaviour. Simple acknowledgements are very effective ways for parents and carers to provide positive attention to children, for example: "Thanks for picking up your toys," "Well done for finishing your homework before dinner," or "You played really well today. It's great to see you getting along and having fun."



Strategies for building skills and strengthening desired behaviour

Praise

The most important part of effective discipline involves guiding children to recognise and use behaviours that are appropriate for the situations they encounter. Learning to manage feelings, help around the house, organise schoolwork and cooperate with others are some examples of behaviours that primary school children gradually develop with guidance and support. By noticing and praising children's positive behaviour, adults can effectively guide children to use desired behaviours. This is especially important when children are learning to manage new situations or behaviours.

When praising children for good behaviour, it helps to be very specific. Tell them exactly what behaviour, actions and words you noticed and appreciated, such as:

"Thank you for your help. You remembered to clear away the dishes without a reminder," or "I was really happy that you were so patient. You sat quietly and waited for me to finish my conversation." Providing specific and enthusiastic feedback to children in this way helps them to understand what you expect, and to feel good about making the effort to behave in ways you approve of.



The best reward is something that the child values. It should only be given *after* the child has shown the desired behaviour.

Rewards

As well as praise, other kinds of rewards can often be very helpful, especially when children are learning new routines or taking on new responsibilities. There are many possible rewards for children's behaviour. The best reward is something that the child values. It should only be given *after* the child has shown the desired behaviour. When used in this way, rewards help to demonstrate to children that you have noticed and appreciated their efforts.

Some parents and carers worry that rewards will 'spoil' children and lead them to want rewards for everything they do. When you clearly specify the desired behaviour and ensure that only that behaviour is rewarded, spoiling does not occur. However, if nagging and whining are followed by rewards, children will continue to nag and whine as they learn that this kind of behaviour pays off.

The key to using rewards effectively is to be specific about the behaviour you intend to reward and avoid rewarding unwanted behaviours. Select rewards that the child enjoys or values. After the desired behaviour has been learned, rewards can be phased out.

Sample reward menu

Provide frequently		Provide occasionally
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praise• A hug	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stickers• Stars on a chart	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A special outing• Stay up late
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A fun activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen to music or watch TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a friend sleep over
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read a story together	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A special food or snack	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Go to the movies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play with a special toy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit friends or relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A new game or toy

Routines

Regular routines, where the same things happen in the same way at the same time each day, are very important for supporting children's positive behaviour. Establishing routines for bedtime, meal times, bath time, homework and other things that happen as a regular part of their day helps children know what to expect. Routines provide a sense of security so that children feel more settled. This, in turn, is likely to increase their positive behaviour.

Setting expectations and limits

Setting limits for children involves communicating your expectations clearly and following through consistently. When setting limits or establishing routines, state directions specifically, positively and confidently so that children are in no doubt about what you want them to do and that you expect them to do it. Avoid overwhelming them by giving too many directions at once or by expecting things that are too difficult for their level of ability. The limits you set should be ones you are confident the child can meet.

It is very important to follow through on your expectations. Being consistent (but not rigid) shows that you mean what you say and can be counted on. When expectations are applied inconsistently (eg some days you don't bother about the mess they leave and other days you insist that they must clean up), children are more likely to test or ignore the limits you set. Keeping rules and expectations to the few that are most important to you helps parents and carers to be consistent.

Giving choices

Giving children choices helps them learn the skills for responsible decision-making. It allows them to feel part of decisions that are made and to understand that the ways they behave are under their control. Letting children make (some) decisions and praising their responsible choices supports the development of positive social values.

It is important to offer choices that are appropriate for the child's age and abilities. You might, for example, offer children a choice between two different household chores. Choices can also be used to reinforce standing rules, for example: "Remember that homework needs to be done before you go to your friend's house. You can choose to do your homework now and go to your friend's house later, or you can choose to relax now and do your homework later, but not go to your friend's as well." For more information on children and choices see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on making decisions.

Being consistent and applying consequences

Logical consequences relate directly to the behaviour or situation. For example, if a child is using a toy inappropriately or dangerously, a logical consequence would be to remove the toy. If children are arguing over what to watch on television, it could be turned off. Logical consequences work best when you explain clearly and calmly why you are imposing the consequence, for instance: "You are not playing safely with that toy, so I will put it away now until after dinner." Children respond most positively when the consequence is applied for a short time only and is followed with an opportunity for children to show they can behave appropriately, with your support and guidance. Be sure to acknowledge the appropriate behaviour with praise.

Strategies for decreasing undesired behaviours

Children can behave in undesired ways for many reasons. They may not have learned what the appropriate behaviour is, they may not have learned how to manage feelings such as frustration or anger, or they may feel confused or insecure in an unfamiliar situation. Parents and carers may unintentionally contribute to the pattern of undesired behaviours by giving children attention when they occur.

The most effective way to reduce undesired behaviour is to help your child learn an appropriate behaviour to replace it with. Teach children what it is you want them to do and provide them with rewards and positive attention for doing it. Shift your focus to the positive behaviour and avoid giving attention to the undesired behaviour. If necessary, apply logical consequences when undesired behaviour occurs. Maintain your calm when following through with consequences to ensure the child understands your intention.



Quiet time

When undesired behaviour is serious or repeated, you may find it helpful to remove the child from the situation for a period to calm down. In addition to making it clear to children when their behaviour is unsafe or not appropriate, this helps to teach them how to manage emotions that may be running high. To use quiet time effectively it is necessary to have a designated space where children can sit quietly, without distractions, for a brief period.

It is best to take firm charge in this situation. Calmly describe the undesired behaviour and the consequence, for example: "You hit your brother. You need to go to quiet time." It is important not to get into a debate or argument but to follow through directly. When children go to quiet time, let them know that they can come back after they have been quiet for a specified time – usually one or two minutes for younger children or up to five minutes for older children. After the time is up, let them go back to the activity and follow up with praise for appropriate behaviour as soon as possible.

Some children behave in ways that are persistently defiant and aggressive. When this pattern occurs often and is more extreme than for other children their age, they may need help for a serious behaviour problem.

For more information, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on serious behavioural difficulties.



Keys to effective discipline

Prevention is better than cure

Make sure your expectations are clear and well-matched to the child's age and capacity. Keep the emphasis positive and be sure to show you appreciate when children do what you ask.

Be firm but fair

Having a few simple rules helps children understand what the limits are. Set reasonable and enforceable limits and follow through consistently. Being consistent is easier when you focus on the things you think are most important.

Keep cool

Avoid getting into power struggles that inflame emotions. Recognise your own triggers and use strategies for cooling down, such as walking away and discussing the issue later when you are calm. 'Time out' for parents and carers, when you take time to relax, can be a very important strategy for managing your responses to cope with and building positive family relationships and discipline issues.

Teach rather than punish

Teach the behaviour rather than punish the child. Punishment focuses on showing the child what *not* to do rather than helping him or her learn what *to* do. The emphasis is often solely on the problem rather than on supporting the child to find more effective and appropriate behaviours. When punishment is blaming or hostile it can cause resentment and damage relationships.

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Making rules and setting limits

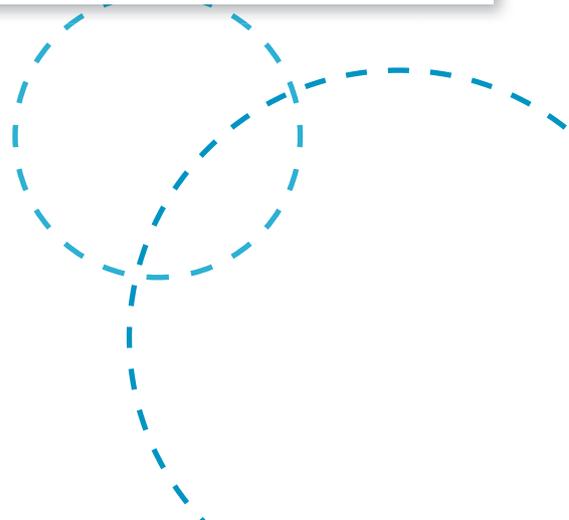
Rules and limits are important for guiding children’s behaviour

Children need to know what you expect of them in order to behave appropriately. This does not mean giving children lots of dos and don’ts – having too many rules, or rules that are too complicated, often confuse children.

It is often helpful to involve children in setting some basic rules. This helps them understand the value of having rules and motivates them to cooperate. For example, you might discuss as a family the sorts of rules that will help you all get on well together. These might include things like talking to each other rather than shouting, asking before borrowing things, putting away games and toys after playing with them, or taking a turn to wash up after dinner. Deciding as a family those things that are most important to you and stating rules positively so that children know what *to* do rather than simply being told what *not* to do works best.

Set limits for children by giving clear directions for what you expect of them. Providing reasons for the directions you give helps children accept your limits without becoming defensive. It also gives them a basis for understanding what you will expect of them in other similar situations. The following examples show how parents and carers can set limits for children in positive ways.

Kind of limit	Limit stated negatively	Limit stated positively with reasons
Protection from physical harm	“Don’t go outside the gate.”	“Stay in the yard. The street is too busy and you might get hurt.”
	“Stop poking at your sister.”	“Be gentle with your baby sister. She is too small for rough play.”
Looking after things	“Don’t leave your toys lying around.”	“Pack up now and put your toys away on the shelf so we can be ready to go out.”
	“Don’t do that here.”	“Take the ball outside if you want to play with it. Something might get broken if you play with it inside.”
Showing respect and care for others	“Stop being mean to him.”	“You need to play in a friendly way. Make sure Max has a turn too.”
	“Don’t take her things.”	“Be sure to ask first before you borrow something from your friend. You would want her to ask before taking your things.”





Following up

Providing positive consequences for positive behaviour is very important and effective for encouraging children to comply with rules and expectations. For example:

- When children do what you have asked, be sure to notice it and praise or thank them.
- Expect some lapses as changing or learning new behaviours takes time. Be prepared to offer reminders without nagging.
- Checklists and reward charts can be useful for keeping track of positive behaviour and motivating children to complete assigned tasks.

If children repeatedly ignore your clear and reasonable instructions, logical consequences may be necessary. Logical consequences are directed at stopping the undesired behaviour rather than punishing the child. Examples include:

- Withdrawal from the situation (quiet time) – use when behaviour is unsafe or disruptive.
- Withdrawal of privileges – use when an activity or toy is being misused or neglected. For example, remove a toy that has been used in an unsafe way or fought over.

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Effective discipline in the classroom

Effective discipline is important for maintaining a positive atmosphere in the classroom and supporting students' learning. Teaching strategies that support positive behaviours begin by making expectations clear, teaching children how to meet them and reinforcing children's appropriate behaviour. When needing to address particular behaviours for individual children, it can be very helpful to work with parents and carers to develop a positive discipline plan.

Example: Teaching Susie how to get focused

Susie's class two teacher was concerned that she always seemed to be losing or forgetting things and often distracted others in class. The teacher talked to Susie and her mother about the problem. Together they came up with a plan to get Susie focused and improve her attention in class.

What the teacher did

First, Susie's teacher made sure that Susie knew what was expected of her. She explained that it was important for Susie to be prepared for class with everything she needed so that she could keep up with her learning.

Her teacher asked Susie whether she could think of things that might help her remember to bring her things to class, including her homework. They decided that Susie would make a list each afternoon of the things she would need for the next day and she would check the list when she packed her bag for school.

The teacher also reminded Susie of their class rule about respect. She explained that when Susie distracted others it was stopping them from learning. The teacher asked whether Susie thought it was respectful to distract others. Susie agreed that it wasn't.

Susie's teacher explained how she planned to help Susie remember to get on with her work and stop distracting others. She would use a chart to record each time that Susie was able to keep on track with her lesson without distracting others. At the end of each day the teacher wrote about Susie's successes in her diary. Her parents told Susie how pleased they were with her progress and let her choose a privilege such as a special meal, a treat or an activity she liked each time she reached a new goal.

Susie's teacher also explained that if Susie did distract others she would give her one reminder. If it continued, Susie would need to come to the front of the class and sit near the teacher's desk.

Susie's teacher made sure to follow through. She praised Susie when she brought her things along and whenever she observed her being focused in class. On a few occasions when Susie began distracting others she gave her one reminder and then quietly asked her to come and sit near the teacher's desk. This was done without disrupting the class or embarrassing Susie.

How it works

Makes expectations clear

Teaches positive behaviours

Sets basic rules and refers to them

Reinforces positive behaviours

Collaborates with parents or carers

Uses logical consequences

Consistently follows through



Further follow up

After two weeks, Susie was bringing everything she needed to class and seemed to be more thoughtful about looking after them. She had managed to get through the day without distracting others four times, and had only had to sit near the teacher's desk twice. At this point Susie's teacher and parents decided that the note would go home after two days in a row of positive behaviour. After a whole week of positive behaviour her teacher nominated her as student of the week. She got an award from the Principal and her name was published in the school newsletter.

Remember

There are many reasons why children behave in undesired ways. As well as applying basic techniques of positive discipline, it remains important to address children's learning and emotional needs at school in order to provide effective support for mental health and wellbeing.

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Happy families work together

“Dad, will you tell Tina not to come into my room?” Twelve-year-old Luke was complaining about his six-year-old sister. Luke’s Dad, Robert, had only just got home and was still hanging up his coat. “Dad! She’s bugging me!” called Luke as he led Tina by the hand into the lounge room. “A ‘hello’ would be nice,” said Robert. “Yeah, hi. I’m trying to do my science project. I need my space,” Luke replied. “Tina, how about you stay out here with me?” Robert suggested. Tina was not very keen on this idea. “But I want to play and you’ll be too busy,” she whined. “Here we go again”, thought Robert. “If only we all got on better.”

Managing family relationships so that everyone’s most important needs get met can be hard work. All families have times when tempers get frayed, feelings get hurt and misunderstandings occur. Maintaining positive connections when these things happen requires good communication and creative management.

Effective communication means that everyone has a say and is listened to. This can be a challenge in busy families. Pressure to get things done can mean there seems to be little ‘quality time’ for talking and listening to each other. Whether or not time is a problem, negative styles of communication often undermine relationships. This occurs, for example, when family members speak to each other disrespectfully or use put-downs.

Building positive family relationships does not mean having no conflict. Dealing with conflicts positively, as well as making time to relax and do fun things together, help to strengthen family relationships.

Set the tone for positive communication

Research on communication in families shows the importance of parents and carers communicating warmth and caring *and also* setting clear expectations for children’s behaviour. Making time for family members, communicating effectively and supporting each other are important ways of strengthening families and building positive relationships.

Parents and carers can set a positive tone for communication through their own example. The way you listen, and the attention and importance you give to what family members say, is as important as what you say to them and how you say it. This may not always be easy, especially when you are tired or busy and have to deal with complaining or conflict. However, listening and acknowledging others’ feelings and wants helps to reduce conflict and improves communication.



Working together as a family

Discussing things as a family is often very helpful for dealing with concerns and negotiating solutions to conflicts before they get bigger.

- Talking together provides an opportunity to clarify roles and expectations.
- Be sure to talk about what is working well in family relationships and not just the difficulties.
- Build trust in family discussions by respecting and listening to everyone's views without judging or putting them down.
- Encourage children as well as adults to hear and understand each other's views and needs.

Discussing things as a family can encourage children as well as adults to solve problems creatively. For example, once he understands that Tina just wants him to play with her, 12-year-old Luke might negotiate to spend a half-hour playing with her after dinner in exchange for her giving him uninterrupted time to get on with his homework. Having a chance to express needs in positive ways encourages healthy communication, support and cooperation.

Things to discuss

- Set up chores roster
- Tina wants to play more
- Luke wants space when he has to do schoolwork
- Dad (Robert) wants more hellos and hugs



Listening and talking

It is easier for others to listen and accept your point of view when the way you say it communicates respect and care. For example, Robert could say to Luke, "I know you had to get your science project done but I still want you to say 'hello' when I come home." This shows that Robert understands Luke's position, and wants Luke to understand his.

Small things, like saying, "How was your day?" and really listening to the answer, make a difference to the quality of communication in families. Saying sorry when you make a mistake or hurt someone's feelings is also really important.

Ways to build caring family relationships

- Show affection (eg hugs and kisses)
- Offer help and support
- Do fun things and laugh together
- Make time to talk
- Really listen to each other

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When parents separate

Bella's mum was worried that her 10-year-old daughter was not coping well with her parents' divorce. Bella had been a great support for her mum when her dad first left, helping around the house and with the younger children. Now that her mum is feeling better, Bella spends more time in her room and doesn't want to talk so much. She goes to her dad's for visits on the weekends but, lately, she is very grumpy when she comes home. If Bella's mum asks how the weekend was she just shrugs.

When she asked, "What's wrong?" Bella said, "Nothing." But she didn't look happy. This time Bella's mum asked again: "Bella, are you sure there's nothing wrong? You don't look happy. What's up?" Bella sighed, "Dad's got a new girlfriend," she said. "Now he'll hardly have any time left for me."

When parents separate it is stressful for everybody, but it affects parents and children differently. For parents, separation signals the end of the relationship with their primary partner and a change in the parenting role. For most children relationships with both parents continue, but there are often big changes and strong feelings.

Though distress is unavoidable when families break up, most children recover without long-term negative effects. You can help children cope by reassuring and supporting them while they adjust to the separation.

How children react

Sometimes children talk about their strong feelings, but often the way they feel comes out in their behaviour. They may become anxious and want to stay close to their parents. They may be angry or get into conflicts with others more than usual. These are reactions to the sense of loss and powerlessness that most children feel when their parents separate and their family changes.

Some children try really hard to be good. They may be concerned about a parent's distress, or worry that if they misbehave the parent who has care of them will leave them too. Sometimes children become protective of one parent and blame and reject the other. Children from the same family may respond differently. Their feelings and reactions are likely to become more complicated when one or both parents start a new relationship.



How parents and carers can help

Children are affected by the ways their parents respond to the separation. Getting support for yourself to help you manage the stress of separation is very important. If you are coping, it helps your children to manage the changes better. If there is ongoing conflict and hostility between parents, it makes it much more difficult for children. When this occurs, children's wellbeing suffers and they are more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems.

Helping children cope

- Reassure children that even though you will no longer live all together as a family, they will not lose your love and care. Offer this kind of reassurance often and back it up with action.
- Explain what is happening as it relates to the child (eg where they will be living, how they will get to school). Let them know clearly what and how things will change, and what will stay the same.
- Try to maintain children's normal routines as far as possible. This helps children feel safer.
- Understand that children find it hard, and acknowledge and encourage them when they are coping well.
- Provide extra support before and after contact visits to help children settle.
- Recognise that it is likely to be difficult for children when you start a new relationship. Counselling can help you learn ways to make this transition easier for children and for yourselves.

Helping children maintain relationships

- Respect children's need to continue their relationship with the other parent (unless it is unsafe), as well as with extended family such as grandparents, and support them to do so.
- Try to ensure that visits to the other parent are regular and predictable.
- Help children to see the positives (eg two homes, adults not fighting) and to look forward to spending time with the other parent.
- Avoid criticising the other parent to your children. Sort out issues with the other parent rather than involving the children in your disputes. Seek mediation if conflict persists.

Managing your own stress

- Strong feelings and mood swings are part of a normal reaction when you separate.
- Allow time to come to terms with feelings of loss and grief.
- Don't be surprised if the demands of parenting seem much more difficult when you are under stress. Make allowances for yourself and develop strategies to help you cope.
- Look for support from family and friends. Professional counselling support can be especially helpful for dealing with difficult feelings and finding ways to cope better.



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About family relationships

Children thrive on feelings of belonging and affection that come from having caring and supportive families. Research affirms that the quality of family relationships is more important for children's wellbeing than the size or composition of the family. Whether families have one parent or two, whether they include step-parents, grandparents or other carers, they can build strong, positive family relationships that promote family wellbeing and support children's mental health.

The keys to developing strong and caring family relationships include making relationships a priority, communicating effectively and providing support for each other. However, building and maintaining positive relationships with children and with all family members is not always easy. Different needs arising within the family may create tensions between family members, and pressures that come from outside (eg work or financial pressures) may also impact on families and children. Sometimes these pressures can make the development of positive family relationships more difficult. Yet, even taking these influences into account, there is much the adult or adults in the family can do to build strong family relationships.

Families are different

Families vary in the expectations they hold regarding children's behaviour and the roles of parents and carers. This leads to differences in family relationships and communication styles. Many beliefs about what makes for strong family relationships are influenced by the values and experiences that parents and carers were exposed to in their own families while growing up.

Cultural background can also impact on the values and goals adults have for children's development. For example, it is common in Western industrialised societies like Australia for parents and carers to value children's independence, whereas parents and carers from other cultural backgrounds sometimes give more emphasis to family responsibilities than to children's independence. There are also many differences within cultures. Differences in the ways that families are made up lead to different relationship and support needs.



Meeting different kinds of relationship needs

Two-parent families are built on the primary couple relationship and this continues to have a major influence on relationships amongst all family members. Parents can find it a challenge to meet children's needs as well as their own needs as partners, however, ensuring that some time is set aside to attend to the couple relationship is very important. When conflict between parents is not resolved, it may impact directly on children and/or on parenting effectiveness. Maintaining effective communication and support for each other as parents enhances the couple relationship and supports positive relationships in the family as a whole.

Sole parents are a diverse group. They may miss the support that having another parent or carer would provide and may feel over-stretched by the responsibility of caring for children alone. For sole parent families in particular, having a support network of friends and relatives makes a big difference. Separated sole parents and children also benefit from having a positive co-parenting arrangement with the other parent. This can be achieved when parents and carers value and respect the importance of children having opportunities to develop their relationships with both parents.

Blended and step-families can have more complex relationship needs to take into account. Children may feel their prior relationships with parents or carers are displaced by the new couple relationship. Family members, especially children, may still be grieving the loss of their original family. New relationships between children and parents or carers need to be negotiated and old ones renegotiated. Children may spend time with two families who have different expectations of them. These changes can cause significant strain and stress to children as well as to parents and new partners. It is important to reassure children that they will still have the love and support of both parents. Taking things slowly helps by allowing time for everyone to adjust to new circumstances. Making realistic expectations and house rules clear to all step-family members is very important. For example, it is especially helpful for children and step-parents to recognise that they don't have to love one another but they are expected to treat each other with respect.



What supports strong family relationships

Two main dimensions of the parenting role have been found to have important effects on family relationships and on children's development, no matter what kind of family children are raised in. These are:

1 Communicating warmth and care

2 Establishing clear and appropriate limits for children's behaviour

Positive styles of communication are a common element that supports both of these dimensions.

All families experience ups and downs as they strive to do their best for children and deal with challenges that come along. A recent study¹ asked Australian families of different kinds to nominate what they considered to be the characteristics that made their families strong in spite of any difficulties they might face. This table shows the eight characteristics that were identified.

Family strengths as identified by Australian families

Communication – listening to each other and communicating with openness and honesty.

Togetherness – sharing similar values and beliefs that create a sense of belonging and bonding.

Sharing activities – spending time together doing things they enjoy, for example, sports, reading, camping, playing games.

Affection – showing affection and care on a regular basis through words, hugs, kisses and thoughtfulness.

Support – offering and being able to ask for support, with family members knowing they will receive assistance, encouragement and reassurance from one another.

Acceptance – understanding, respecting and appreciating each family member's unique personal qualities.

Commitment – seeing family wellbeing as a first priority and acting accordingly with dedication and loyalty.

Resilience – being able to withstand difficulties and adapt to changing circumstances in positive ways.

Families in this research also identified that the biggest challenges in family relationships were communication breakdown, parenting issues and difficult relationship dynamics. Acknowledging existing family strengths is a good starting point for addressing challenges and building stronger family relationships.

Communication skills for building relationships

Good communication is essential for healthy relationships. The way people talk and listen to each other builds emotional ties and helps make expectations clear. Effective communication helps family members feel understood and supported. The adults in the family in particular play a critical role in communicating to children values such as respect and caring. They do this by talking with children and especially by demonstrating their values in the way they communicate.



Listening

Listening attentively and actively is most important for creating a climate in which open and honest communication can take place. Focussing on what the other person is saying, rather than thinking of your own response while they are speaking, shows that you are genuinely interested. Listen for meaning and feeling and actively check that you understand the other person's point of view, for example: "It sounds like you're feeling sad because you wanted to have a turn like everyone else and you missed out." To listen actively to children, give them your full attention while they are talking and help to draw out their feelings and understandings. Taking a little extra time to listen also helps you and your child come up with better solutions for problems (rather than imposing your own solutions).

Talking with children

Parenting research has found that many parents or carers talk much more than they listen to children. While it is necessary for adults to communicate their expectations, children also need to be heard in order to feel connected and valued. The way that adults speak can encourage children to respond or to shut down. Listening well, paying attention to what children say and asking specific questions encourage children to talk more. Invite children to talk by giving them space. Often they find it easier to talk when they can be spontaneous, for example, while you are doing an everyday activity with them, rather than sitting down to talk face-to-face.

Tuning in

Paying attention to emotional connections is really important for supporting positive family relationships. As well as listening to words, effective communication requires paying attention to body language and expressions so as to notice and respond to feelings. Tuning into your own feelings and expressing them in ways that allow others to understand how you feel promotes caring relationships. Tuning into children's behaviours and the feelings they communicate is especially helpful for understanding children and guiding them as they learn to express their feelings in words.

What you do (or do not do) also sends a message which is interpreted by family members. Clear messages are less likely to be misinterpreted. Avoid giving mixed messages in which you say one thing and do another. Since actions often speak louder than words, try to ensure that there is a match between what you do and what you say. When this is not possible (eg you are not available when you said you would be) be sure to provide an explanation and apology.

Problem-solving

Addressing and solving problems supportively helps to strengthen family relationships. This involves:

- identifying the problem that needs to be solved, rather than judging the person
- making sure that everyone's concerns are listened to
- coming up with a range of options or alternatives and thinking them through together
- choosing a solution or action plan that everyone involved can agree with
- trying it out and checking how it goes.

Using a family problem-solving approach helps to avoid blaming, demonstrates support for family members, and helps to build togetherness.

It is also a very effective way of helping children learn skills for problem-solving and decision-making that they can use in many different situations.

When families experience conflict that is repeated or severe it is important to seek professional relationship counselling. Counselling can help to prevent problems worsening, so it is ideal to seek it early rather than waiting too long. Unresolved conflict can lead to aggression, intimidation, or violence. These are completely unacceptable behaviours that have particularly destructive effects on both individuals and family relationships.



Key points for building better family relationships

Emphasise positive communication

Remember that good communication starts with effective listening. Encourage talking by listening actively to other family members to better understand their perspective.

Make regular 'quality time' a priority

Families benefit from having time to unwind and relax with one another. Making sure you have un-pressured time to spend doing things you enjoy together makes for positive relationships.

Offer support

Appreciate more than criticise one another and be ready to offer help when needed.

Dealing with conflict

Conflict is a normal (and healthy) part of family life. Families are made up of individuals who will sometimes have different ideas, wants or needs. Since conflict is inevitable, it is important for families to have effective ways of managing it. Remember that conflict itself is not a problem – but the way it is handled might be. When conflict is managed in positive ways, family relationships are strengthened. When not dealt with effectively, conflict can be stressful and damaging to relationships.

Many parents and carers find that conflict between siblings is a recurring concern. Children in the same family often argue, tease and complain about each other, even though at other times they may provide good company for one another. When children fight it is important for parents and carers not to take sides, but to help children identify the problem behind the conflict and guide them through a process of peaceful conflict resolution. Though children may look to a parent or carer to judge who is right and who is wrong in a conflict, taking this approach can lead to more frequent conflicts. Assisting children to work through the steps of conflict resolution helps them learn how to manage conflict fairly and builds a basis for cooperation.

See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on problem-solving and decision-making, social and emotional learning, effective discipline, and resolving conflict for ideas on building stronger family relationships.

¹Geggie, J., DeFrain, J., Hitchcock, S. & Silberberg, S. (2000). Family Strengths Research Project. Newcastle NSW: Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.

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Building better family relationships

Caring and commitment are the basis of strong family relationships. This means making the wellbeing of family members a first priority and offering support when needed. Some families seem to pull together easily, while for others it takes greater effort. To build strong family relationships, start by identifying the strengths you do have and appreciating them. Paying attention to the things that work well and building on them will help to strengthen your relationships. The following suggestions may be useful reminders.

There are lots of ways to show you care even in busy families

Tune in

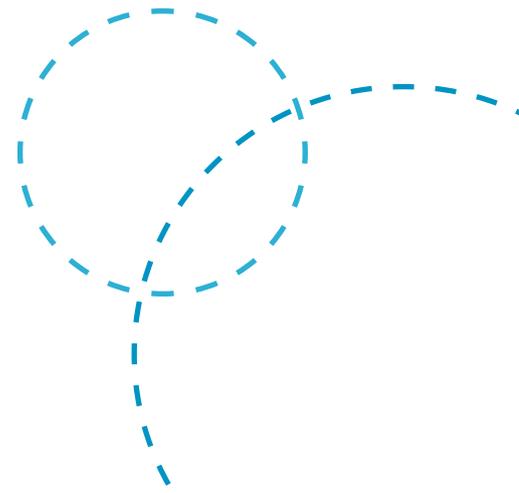
One way to show you care is by listening to what other family members have to say with interest and enthusiasm. Other ideas include doing things for one another, helping (without complaining!), celebrating birthdays and achievements, and taking the time to understand how other family members are feeling. Hugs are another favourite.

Have fun together

Spend time doing things you enjoy. Doing simple things that allow you to relax and play together is very important for building positive feelings and connections amongst family members. Playing games or sports, going to the park, having picnics, visiting with friends or just relaxing together are examples of family activities that help to build relationships.

Family rituals

Family rituals can help to build a sense of connection and belonging. These may include family celebrations that happen once a year, as well as everyday activities like bedtime stories, morning cuddles or cooking a special meal together once a week. Having family rituals and routines that you enjoy together helps to create strong family bonds.



There are lots of ways to show you care even in busy families – *continued*

Make time to talk

Regular time for talking and listening to one another helps families to plan and set priorities, strengthen relationships and build mutual understanding. Taking a few minutes to talk with children after school or before bedtime, and making time for adults to 'check in' with each other, is important for building connections and cooperation. Family discussions are often very helpful ways of resolving conflicts and maintaining positive relationships. Make sure that everyone gets a turn to share feelings and thoughts and contribute to finding solutions that can work for the whole family.

Share values

Sharing common values strengthens belonging and helps families work together when challenges arise. Discuss your beliefs and values or tell stories about your own family and cultural history. Demonstrate through your behaviour values like respect, care, compassion and responsibility. Remember that children are influenced by what you do even more than by what you say.

Appreciate differences

Family togetherness doesn't mean everybody has to be the same or always do the same things. It helps to appreciate that everyone is different, and to value and respect each family member's unique needs, wants and talents. Avoiding negative comparisons, and affirming what each individual has to offer, creates strong family bonds.

Share the load

Family life can get out of balance when one person feels they have the burden of responsibilities, or when one person makes all the decisions. Supporting each other includes sharing the chores and making sure that everyone gets to have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Get support

Family life has many challenges as well as rewards. Getting support when you need it – from extended family, friends, or professionals – is important for managing the challenges. Professional counselling is a particularly valuable strategy for helping many families who experience relationship problems.



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Effective family communication

Strong relationships are built on healthy communication and understanding

People communicate all the time, but communicating well – especially with those we are close to – takes thoughtful, ongoing effort. In close relationships it is important to be able to communicate effectively about feelings, needs and wants, ideas and opinions. The most important part of effective communication is listening. Children as well as adults will talk more if they are confident they will be listened to.

Make the most of opportunities to talk

Talking about everyday things helps family members feel connected. It builds trust and makes it easier to ask for and offer support. Making time to listen and show your interest encourages family members to talk and lets you understand how they think and feel. Listening actively helps to build relationships and communication skills.

To get children to talk more, notice the times when they do talk. Often this is while doing everyday things like household chores or playing games together. Use these relaxed times to get a conversation going with them. Similarly, it is important to make sure that the adults in the family have relaxed times to talk together.

Take extra care when talking about problems

Communication can get complicated when strong feelings are involved. For both children and adults, talking about things that are bothering them is often hard. When family members feel supported and safe, difficult issues can be addressed more effectively. Tune into feelings and take a caring approach.

Asking how the other family member feels, and listening non-defensively, allows you to work together to solve problems. Blaming, judging or criticising will quickly shut down real communication and very often leads to arguments. Listening well to others and explaining your own feelings and views (eg “I’m disappointed that...” or “I’m upset that...”), rather than accusing others (eg “You don’t care...” or “You’ve upset me...”), helps to defuse arguments and supports effective communication.

Avoid escalating conflicts

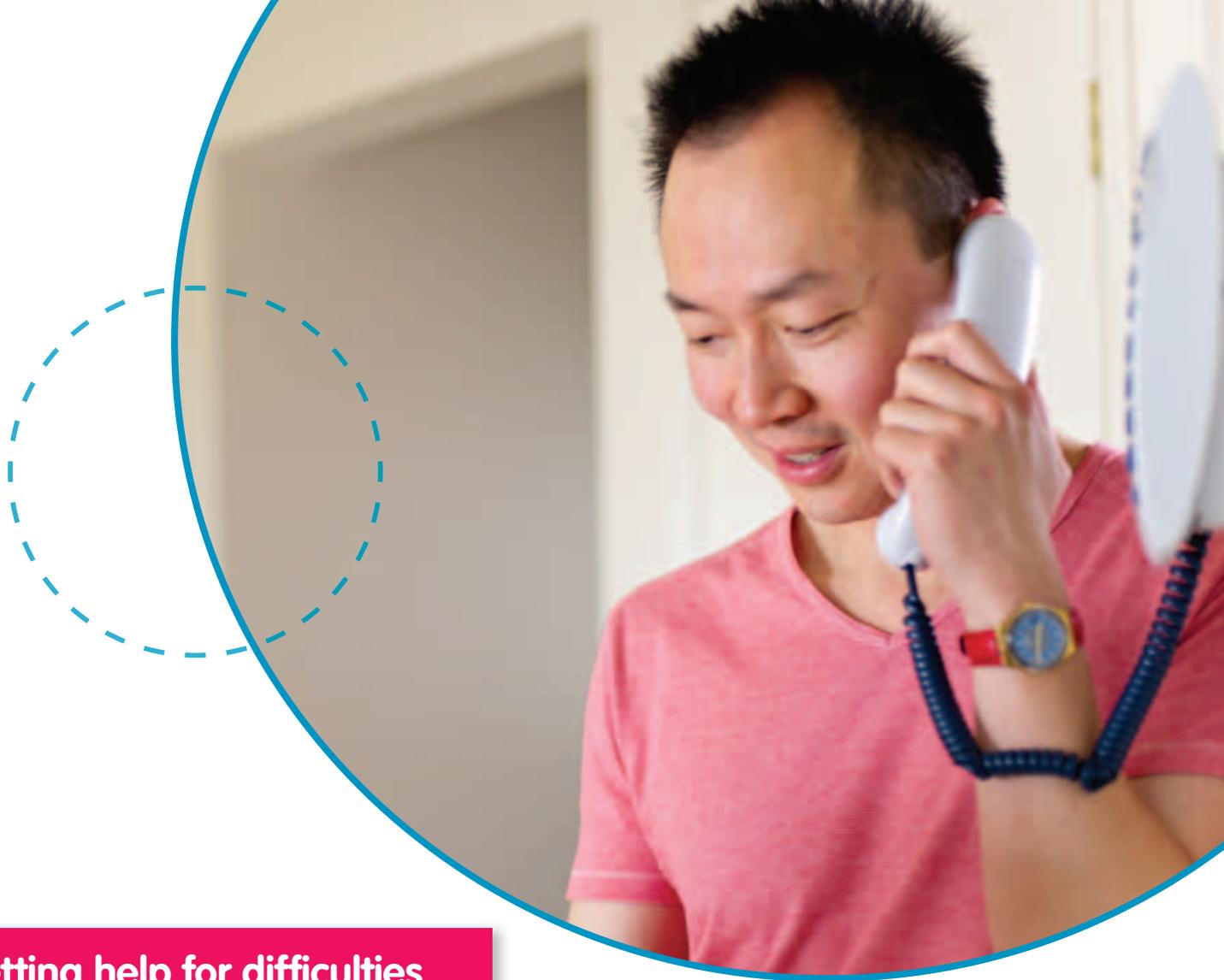
In any family there are bound to be conflicts and arguments. When conflict is handled constructively it can help to strengthen relationships. However, angry clashes and harsh words can lead to hurt feelings and cause damage to relationships.

If you find that anger is getting in the way of being able to see the other person’s point of view, take time out to calm down (eg go for a walk, do some active relaxation such as deep breathing) before trying to deal with the issue. Making angry accusations about the other person will very likely escalate the conflict. Own your feelings (eg “I’m *really* disappointed and angry about this mess”) rather than attacking others (eg “You’re always so selfish”).

Repair damage and rebuild relationships

In any family, as in any close relationship, feelings *will* get hurt. You may say things in the heat of the moment that you don’t mean or wish you hadn’t said. Being ready to apologise, to listen to how the other person feels, and to show you appreciate their position is a critical skill for building strong and supportive family relationships.





Getting help for difficulties

Relationship education

While family relationships can be a great source of strength and support, they can also create stress and frustration. Learning skills for effective communication can help individuals, couples and families to improve the ways they communicate. A number of services provide relationship education for individuals and couples.

Family counselling

Unresolved conflicts can escalate or cause ongoing distress. It is often very difficult for family members alone to recognise or change unhelpful relationship patterns. Professional counselling can help couples and families to identify and work through difficulties to improve communication and strengthen relationships.

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Children and hardship

Stuff happens

Looking after three children on her own has not been easy for Denise. Sometimes the pressure gets to her and she feels like she can't cope at all.

She doesn't know how she would manage without her 11-year-old daughter Alison. Every morning Alison makes the lunches and gets the younger children to school. She makes the dinner when Denise is not feeling well, and makes sure the washing up gets done.

Recently Denise got sick and had to give up her part-time job. Then they had to move house. Alison helped to organise things and looked after her little brother and sister too.

Just lately, though, something seems to be troubling Alison. She hasn't been as patient with the younger children as usual. The other day she lost her temper with Denise. "Why can't you look after us like other mothers do?" she said.

Denise was very upset. She wondered whether she had been relying too much on Alison. She worried that Alison might be having trouble coping too.

Life can be challenging

Families and children may experience pressures for reasons that they can't control. In the story above, Alison's family has had to face lots of challenges. Her Mum has been struggling with her health and her finances, while trying to bring up three children on her own. Alison has been her main support, but now it seems the responsibility may be wearing Alison down.

Is Alison likely to develop difficulties as her mother fears? Perhaps. It depends a lot on what else is going on for Alison, at school, with her friends, and with other important people in her life.



Mental health risk factors

The sorts of things that make it more likely that children will experience mental health difficulties are known as mental health risk factors. Risk factors are things that put stress on the child or family and make it harder for them to cope.

Examples of risk factors that can affect children's mental health include:

- experiencing serious illness – either the child or a member of the family
- having no friends and/or being bullied
- high levels of family conflict
- experience of trauma or abuse
- having a parent with mental health problems
- family financial problems.

Things that protect mental health

Just because one or more risk factors are present for an individual child it doesn't mean that the child will necessarily develop a mental health difficulty. When protective factors are present they help to balance out the risk of developing mental health difficulties. Examples of protective factors include:

- having a supportive parent, carer and/or teacher
- doing well at school
- having a positive coping style
- getting help with worries early
- having support from wider family, friends and community members.

How parents and carers can help

When children are exposed to mental health risk factors it is helpful to try to build up protective factors to support their mental health. Some of the ways you can do this include:

- Spend time listening to your child and help her or him to feel understood and loved.
- Take time out to have fun when you can – play games, go to the park, watch a movie together as a family.
- Set up a support network with people you trust (ie family and close friends). Talk through with them how they can best support you and your children during times when you have trouble.
- Teach your children what to do and who to contact when they need support.
- Help children learn coping skills for understanding and managing feelings. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning for further ideas.
- Ensure your child's class teacher knows about any difficulties that may impact on your child's attitudes and behaviour at school. Schools may be able to provide:
 - extra support from school staff
 - special programs aimed at boosting children's coping skills
 - information that can help your child realise that they are not the only ones dealing with 'family stuff'
 - information about where to get further support for your child and your family.



Stuff happens

- Life is full of challenges. Some families face greater challenges than others.
- Challenges may build up slowly or strike suddenly. In the case of chronic illness, they may come and go repeatedly during a child's life.
- Sometimes these challenges get in the way of a child leading a happy, healthy and successful life.
- Having support from family, friends and school can help to protect children's mental health and build resilience to help them cope with challenges.

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Children and grief

When life hurts...

Nine-year-old Serge and his family have been going through a tough time. Two years ago his Mum and Dad separated. Serge moved with his Dad to a new house and, for a while, Serge hardly saw his Mum. He had to move schools too. All these changes took a lot of getting used to.

Earlier this year Serge's grandfather died suddenly. Serge felt really bad but he put on a brave face because he wanted to cheer up his Dad. He did his best to help out at home too. It was hard, but things slowly started to get better.

Then, just as Serge was beginning to feel happy again, his pet cat disappeared. That was the last straw. Since then Serge has been miserable. He cries really easily and wants to be with his Dad all the time. He doesn't seem interested in having fun the way he used to.



How grief affects children

Like adults, children experience grief when they lose someone or something they feel close to. A death in the family is particularly hard for children, but this is not the only time grief occurs. Other kinds of losses can also lead to grief reactions. These may include:

- the death of a family member, friend or pet
- separation of parents and family break-up
- change of schools or moving house
- loss of a friendship
- relocating to a new country
- having a disability or medical illness
- having a family member in hospital for a long time.

Children's grief reactions commonly include crying, being anxious, having bad dreams and clinging to parents or carers. Children may also show their distress by being angry, irritable, unsettled, or losing motivation for school and other activities. Sometimes children show their distress by behaving in ways you would expect from a younger child. For example, they might start wetting the bed at night, sucking their thumb, or using baby talk.

Children need support to cope

Children need lots of reassurance and support from caring adults to help them come to terms with a major loss. While grief is a normal reaction to loss, feelings of anxiety or sadness may be intense and long-lasting – especially if the child loses a primary carer, or if the loss occurs in traumatic circumstances. Sometimes, like Serge in the story, children keep grief inside until they can't manage it by themselves any more.

How parents and carers can help

Knowing what to say and how to talk to children to help with loss and grief is not easy, especially when you are also experiencing a loss and all the feelings that go with it.

Acknowledge children's feelings

Let children know that you understand they are having difficult feelings. Offer support and reassurance. Let them talk about feelings and ask questions.

Children need to know

Explain what has happened in plain language that children can understand. Knowing what has happened helps children find ways to cope.

Maintain routines

Along with loss there are usually big changes. Keeping up normal routines as far as possible reduces the number of changes and helps children feel more secure.

Talk about your feelings

Children are sensitive to your moods and reactions. Telling children how you feel, and how you are managing your feelings, helps children make sense of their own feelings. It is important to be real with children, but try not to burden them with your emotional needs. By showing children that you can cope with grief, even though you are sad, you can help them understand grief as a normal part of life.



Get your own support

Sometimes your own grief will make it difficult for you to support your child. It can be helpful to seek support to help you through your own grief, whether from friends, family or a professional counsellor.

Let the school know

Letting your child's teachers know what has happened means they can support and monitor your child's wellbeing at school.

When grief is very intense, or when it lasts a long time, it can interfere with children's ability to manage everyday life. It may also lead to mental health problems such as anxiety or depression.

If you are concerned that your child is not coping with a loss you should consider seeking additional help from a health professional such as your local doctor or psychologist.

Parents and carers can help children learn to cope with loss and grief by providing support and reassurance to help children understand that loss and grief are a normal part of life.

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Children and bullying

Everyone has a right to feel safe

GINNY, aged 12 years, did not want to go to school. She felt sick in the stomach. Ginny's Dad thought she should go to school, but Dad did not know what had been happening.

Crystal and her group had been spreading rumours about Ginny. Ginny had seen them looking at her and whispering to others when she walked past. Now no one wanted her to sit at the same table with them in class. Even if she tried to act friendly towards them, they were mean to her. One of them had written 'weirdo' on her school bag. Ginny's older sister said to ignore them, but that didn't seem to work. They just got meaner and tried harder to upset her.

Ginny did not know what to do. She worried that if she told the teacher or her parents it would make things even worse.

What is bullying?

Bullying involves deliberately and repeatedly attempting to hurt, scare or exclude someone. It can include hitting, pushing, name calling, or taking someone's belongings.

Bullying can also be more indirect, for example, deliberately leaving someone out of games, spreading rumours about them, or sending them nasty messages. Cyber-bullying involves using mobile phones and the internet to bully others. The main purpose of the bullying is to have power over someone else.

Bullying is a mental health concern because it causes distress and can lead to loneliness, anxiety and depression. Bullying can also affect children's concentration and lower their achievement at school. When children have been bullied they may:

- not want to go to school
- be unusually quiet or secretive
- not have friends
- seem over-sensitive or weepy
- have angry outbursts.

You may notice that their property has been damaged or is missing.

Responding to bullying

It is very important to let children know that bullying is not okay and that they should report it when it does occur. Schools set standards for appropriate behaviour and safety. They also have guidelines for reporting and responding to bullying when it occurs.

The consequences for bullying should address what has happened and help to ensure it will not happen again. It is very important for the bully to understand how his or her behaviour has affected the other person and to be clear not to repeat that behaviour.

To help prevent bullying, children can be taught how to be respectful and caring towards others. Children who bully may appear confident but often lack skills for building positive friendships.

Learning to be more assertive can help those who are bullied to stand up for themselves. Learning the skills of assertiveness can also help those who bully find ways to communicate their wants, needs and opinions without becoming aggressive.

Both those who are bullied, and those who do the bullying, will benefit from learning effective social and emotional skills.



How parents and carers can help

If your child is being bullied:

- listen and provide support to your child
- try to understand what has been happening, how often and how long
- encourage social skills, like being assertive, to tell the bully to stop and to seek help
- support your child to think through different ways they could deal with the problem
- talk with your child's teacher and ask for help
- keep talking with the school until your child feels safe.

If your child tells you about bullying he has seen or heard at school:

- encourage your child to stand up for the child who is being bullied
- encourage your child to report what he or she has seen or heard to school staff.

If your child is doing the bullying:

- make sure your child knows the bullying behaviour is inappropriate and why
- try to understand the reasons why your child has behaved in this way and look for ways to address problems
- encourage perspective-taking (eg "How would you feel if...")
- help your child think of alternative paths of action.

To help prevent cyber-bullying:

- supervise children's use of electronic devices.
- teach children about ways of keeping safe when using the internet and mobile phones.

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Mental health risk and protective factors

Children's mental health is influenced by many factors

Some of the important influences include children's physical, social and emotional development, family circumstances, sense of belonging to school, and access to resources and support services. The influences that have been found to increase the likelihood that children will experience mental health problems are known as 'risk factors'. Other influences have been found to decrease the likelihood of children developing mental health difficulties, even when risk factors are present. These are called 'protective factors'.

This overview provides information about the kinds of risk factors that can affect children's mental health, and also about protective factors that can support children and help to reduce the risk of mental health difficulties.



What are mental health risk factors?

The idea that certain risk factors make it more likely that children will experience poor mental health is based on research findings that show how frequently, and under what conditions, children's mental health difficulties occur. Knowing what kinds of factors put children at risk of mental health difficulties helps health experts plan and develop the kinds of support and resources needed to be able to intervene early to improve children's mental health. It also helps to guide efforts to prevent mental health problems developing.

The following table shows examples of risk factors (identified by researchers and mental health professionals) that often contribute to the development of mental health difficulties in children. It is important to note that the presence of a risk factor does not mean that an individual child will necessarily develop a mental health difficulty.

Examples of key risk factors that influence children's mental health

Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complications during birth and early infancy• Difficult temperament (overly shy or aggressive)• Low self-esteem• Low intelligence• Poor bonding with parent/s
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family disharmony, instability or breakup• Harsh or inconsistent discipline style• Parent/s with mental illness or substance abuse• Siblings with a serious illness or disability
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer rejection and/or bullying• Academic failure• Poor attendance• Poor connection between family and school
Life events	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficult school transition• Death of a family member• Emotional trauma• Experience of physical or sexual abuse
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discrimination• Isolation• Socioeconomic disadvantage• Lack of access to support services

How risk factors affect children

While risk factors often indicate circumstances that may severely challenge children's mental and emotional wellbeing, predicting whether or not an individual child develops a mental health difficulty is not straightforward. For example, whether or not a child develops a mental health difficulty after experiencing a death in the family will depend on such things as the age and emotional temperament of the child; the closeness of the relationship between the child and the person who has died; the support available through relatives, friends and others; whether the death was sudden or anticipated; and the effects of any previous experiences of loss.

Sometimes risk factors result from isolated events, such as a death in the family. Often, however, several risk factors are related to one another, and it is their combined effect that leads to difficulties. For example, Denise, a sole parent, has been struggling to look after three children on her own. She has been sick and had to give up her part time job and the family has had to move. There has been disruption, economic hardship and parental illness, each of which is a risk factor for children's mental health. When several risk factors are present there is a greater likelihood that children will experience mental health difficulties.



Protective factors for children's mental health

Protective factors can help to reduce the likelihood of developing a mental health problem. The kinds of things found to be protective of children's mental health are presented in the table to the right.

Not all protective factors work in the same way. Some protective factors may help by shielding the child from experiencing a risk factor. For instance, a child who has an easy temperament (protective factor) cannot simultaneously have a difficult temperament (risk factor).

More commonly, protective factors operate to reduce children's exposure to risk. For example, a child with good social and emotional skills is able to make friends easily and is consequently less likely to experience social isolation (risk factor). Positive connections between family and school support children's academic achievement and reduce the likelihood of failure.

Other protective factors serve to reduce the impact of risk factors. For example, a caring relationship with a parent, carer and/or teacher provides children with a source of support to help them cope with difficulties. Similarly, when children have a strong sense of cultural identity it can help to buffer the negative effects of discrimination and increase resilience.

It is important to note that while the factors listed have been found to be associated with a reduction in the risk of mental health difficulties, this does not mean that a particular factor or combination of factors will necessarily be protective for all children. The impacts of any of these factors may vary widely for different children and in different situations.

Examples of key protective factors that influence children's mental health

Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy temperament • Good social and emotional skills • Positive coping style • Optimistic outlook on life • Good attachment to parents or carers
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family harmony and stability • Supportive parenting • Strong family values • Consistency (firm boundaries and limits)
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive school climate • Sense of belonging and connectedness between family and school • Opportunity for participation in a range of activities • Academic achievement
Life events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement with a caring adult • Support available at critical times
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in community networks • Access to support services • Economic security • Strong cultural identity and pride

Resilience: The capacity to bounce back

Though risk factors increase the *likelihood* of experiencing mental health difficulties, some people who are exposed to significant risk factors do not develop difficulties. Instead they find ways to overcome the particular challenge and, as a result, increase their ability to cope with difficulties. Research into resilience has sought to identify the kinds of things that allow children (and adults) to overcome risk or adversity and 'bounce back' in this way. This has led to a range of approaches that aim to build resilience by promoting the things that strengthen children's mental health and enhance their ability to cope with difficulties.

Many approaches to resilience emphasise the development of social and emotional skills, as advocated by KidsMatter Primary. However, it is important to recognise that resilience is most effectively promoted when (in addition to learning personal social and emotional skills) children are also connected through supportive relationships with family, friends, school and community, and have access to the resources needed to help them succeed and thrive. The factors found to be protective of children's mental health are therefore critical for helping to build resilience.



Responding to risk

Since children have different reactions to adversity and different ways of coping, it is important to take an individual approach when assessing whether a child is at risk of developing a mental health difficulty. The impacts on the child of both risk and protective factors, including any culturally-specific factors, should be taken into account when developing strategies for building resilience.

1 Reduce exposure to risk

Recognising the kinds of mental health risk factors children are exposed to can help to eliminate or reduce those able to be addressed. For example, by taking steps to address bullying and racism, schools can work to minimise this risk for their students.

Child abuse, neglect and exposure to violence represent very serious mental health risks for children's development, and frequently cause ongoing trauma and disadvantage that extend into adulthood. Action to stop abuse is critical to protect children's mental and physical health. Even when the immediate trauma has stopped, the risk of mental health difficulties remains high for children who have experienced abuse or trauma. When children have been affected by abuse or trauma, extra effort is required to assist recovery and build resilience.

2 Build protective factors to reduce the effects of risk

In many situations, it will not be possible for parents, carers or school staff to eliminate the critical risk factors affecting children. For example, chronic illness or disability affecting parents or family members are difficulties that place stress on children as well as families, particularly because they are chronic, demanding circumstances and are mostly not able to be solved. In such situations, a focus on identifying and building protective factors can help to reduce the effects of mental health risks.

Ensuring that support is available outside the immediate family (eg extended family, friends and school), and that children know how to access it, can be a particularly helpful strategy. Preventive programs designed to assist children to develop coping skills for their situations can also help to build protective factors. Examples include programs for children of parents with a mental illness, siblings of children with special needs, and children experiencing loss or family breakdown.

Key points for supporting children who may be affected by mental health risk factors

Build caring relationships

A caring relationship with at least one important adult – ideally a parent or carer – is a significant protective factor that builds resilience to help children cope with difficulties.

Be aware of risks and how your child is coping

Recognising when children are exposed to mental health risk factors and observing how well they cope can help you tune into children and provide support to meet their needs.

Establish a support network

Children, parents, carers and families cope best when they have support. Support may be available through friends, extended family, schools, community organisations or professionals. Being able to draw on a network of support is especially necessary during challenging times.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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Building protective factors: Suggestions for families

Things can happen in children's lives that make the risk of developing mental health problems more likely. It is usually not possible to eliminate all the risk factors that affect your children, but there are things you can do to reduce the impact of stress and help them build strengths for effective coping. The following suggestions identify the sorts of things you can do to support children's resilience in the face of challenging circumstances.

How you can help

Listen to children's concerns

Having a caring adult to turn to when they are troubled, someone who will listen, understand without judging, and help them solve problems, is a critical protective factor for children's mental health. Listening to children and understanding their concerns lets them know they are important to you. Remember, however, that children may not always be able to explain how they feel. By observing their behaviour and gently inquiring about it you can often get a clearer picture of how they are feeling.

Provide reassurance

Children often worry that the bad things they experience will happen again or get worse. For example, in a family breakup, when one parent or carer leaves the family, children often become anxious that the remaining parent or carer will also leave them. Similar worries are common when someone dies or is hospitalised. Often these kinds of fears are expressed through behaviours rather than words, such as becoming clingy, or being fearful about sleeping by themselves.

Showing you understand children's fears and providing reassurance and support is important for helping them cope. Making sure that children know what to do and who to seek help from in case you are unavailable or unwell is also very important – particularly when chronic illness or stress may affect your capacity to provide support.

Provide security

Various kinds of stress and change can be very disruptive to family life. Maintaining regular routines, such as bedtimes and mealtimes, reduces disruptive impacts and helps to provide a sense of stability and security for children. Similarly, children are reassured by knowing that a responsible adult is taking care of them and looking after their needs.



How you can help – continued

Build children's strengths – and allow for vulnerabilities

Providing encouragement and positive feedback for children's developing coping skills helps them to build confidence in their ability to manage difficult situations. Acknowledging and appreciating the help and support that children provide to you during stressful times also helps to build their strengths.

At the same time, it is important to give children permission to not always have to be strong. Children who take on significant caring roles when parents or carers are struggling often hide their vulnerabilities. Their desire to avoid burdening parents and carers can cause additional hardship for these children, who need to know that support is available to them as well.

Talk to school staff

School staff can provide more effective support for children at school when they understand some of the pressures they may be facing in other parts of their lives. It is often very reassuring for children as well as for parents and carers to know that teachers or other school staff understand their difficulties and are ready to provide support. Staff at your child's school may also be able to provide you with support and advice, or help you find support services that can assist you and your children.

Seek additional help

If your child shows signs of emotional or behavioural difficulties, it is important to seek professional help early, so that problems can be addressed before they get worse. Getting support for yourself, through family and friendship networks, your child's school, or mental health or community services, is also very important. Getting support helps to build your own resilience so you can provide more effective care for your children.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.



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Building protective factors: Suggestions for school staff

A sense of belonging to school is an important protective factor for children's mental health and wellbeing. It helps to reduce the impacts of risks that children may be exposed to. School staff can help children gain a sense of belonging to school by taking an interest in their wellbeing, and by relating to them in ways that are consistently respectful and caring. This can provide children with a sense of stability and security through periods of stress and challenge. School staff can also help families who are experiencing difficulties by providing them with support and relevant information.



How school staff can help

Develop supportive and caring relationships with children

Get to know the children in your class and take an interest in their lives. Show you respect and care for your students by listening to their concerns non-judgementally and helping them think through problems. Respect their privacy when they share concerns with you.

Provide safety and stability

When children are experiencing disruptions to their home life, a stable and nurturing environment at school can provide a sense of reassurance and safety. A reliable daily routine and a welcoming environment can provide children with dependability and a chance to relax and be themselves. It is also important for school staff to be aware of mental health risk factors associated with school settings and to take steps to address safety issues such as bullying.

Support children's social and emotional development

Teaching children social and emotional skills helps them learn about managing emotions, relating to others, solving problems and managing conflict. A number of curriculum-based social and emotional learning programs are available for use in the classroom. Many of these have been reviewed in the KidsMatter Primary Programs Guide. The Guide also includes information about targeted co-curricular programs designed to assist children who may be facing difficulties associated with grief and loss, family breakdown, parental mental illness, and more.



How school staff can help – *continued*

Build relationships with parents and carers

Working together with parents and carers enables school staff to provide more effective support for children who have difficulties. However, it is not always easy for parents and carers to approach school staff, especially if they are going through difficulties themselves. Listening, respectfully and with empathy, when parents and carers talk about the things affecting them and their children can be very supportive in itself. You may also be able, where appropriate, to provide information about services that can assist them. Being open, empathic and non-judgemental is very important for establishing trust and building a cooperative approach to meeting children's developmental, mental health and wellbeing needs.

Monitor children's mental health and wellbeing

Getting help early is important for preventing mental health difficulties and reducing their impact. School staff can assist by observing children's behaviour and identifying when they have concerns about the wellbeing of children in their care. As much as possible, this kind of monitoring should involve school staff working together with parents and carers in supporting the child. When significant concerns about a particular child are identified, the support and advice of the school welfare team, school psychologist or school counsellor should be sought.

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Support for parenting

Raising children can be rewarding and enjoyable. Yet, as every parent and carer knows, it also has its challenges.

Attending to children's physical, emotional, social and learning needs is sometimes very demanding, and it can help to have support. Research into Australian families shows that parents and carers who have support from family, friends, schools, or community-based services are better able to manage these demands.

Just as families come in all shapes and sizes, there are many different ways to parent children. There is no single 'right way' and no parent or carer is perfect. However, there are some general principles that can make a positive difference to everyone.

Practical support

All parents and carers can benefit from support with the everyday tasks of caring for children. Asking for, and receiving, help with things like child care, transport, and household tasks means your responsibilities are shared and stress is reduced. Depending on your circumstances, this kind of practical support may be provided by extended family, close friends, other parents, or even community organisations.

Receiving advice and practical support makes parenting easier and helps to sustain your own wellbeing. This will benefit your child too!





KidsMatter helps schools identify relevant resources and programs to make available to parents and carers.

Supportive relationships

It's important you are able to discuss the joys and challenges of parenting with others in your life. Schools are in a great position to be able to build on this kind of support for families. A school is a wonderful place for parents and carers to make connections with each other and create positive relationships. Staff are also in a position to work collaboratively with parents and carers, involving them in children's learning and development, and providing parenting advice when needed.

Parenting information

Reliable parenting information is another valuable method of support for families. For example, information about children's development can help parents and carers to understand children better and respond more effectively to their changing needs. Or information on effective discipline can help parents and carers to find positive ways of managing children's behaviour.

See the KidsMatter Primary parenting information sheets online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au.

Parenting education

As children develop, so too do their needs. This means that the challenges and demands of parenting change.

Education is one way parents and carers can adapt their skills and strategies to suit their family situation.

Parenting education may be presented in different ways, including the following.

Information sessions on parenting and child development

- Sessions run by people with expertise on parenting issues that may be offered at school or in the community.

Parenting programs offered by trained parenting educators

- Programs delivered over several sessions focussed either on general parenting issues or on a particular topic – for example, resilience, step-parenting, or children with challenging behaviours.

Parenting education provided by a mental health professional

- Private sessions with a mental health professional to deal with specific difficulties. This is especially helpful for developing strategies to support an individual child.

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