

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Communicating with your toddler during adversity or tough times



A toddler or young child can pick up when parents are upset

This resource will help you to connect with your toddler or young child when you are facing adversity, so they feel secure and nurtured. It steps you through:

- **understanding how the adversity affects you**
- **thinking about what your toddler or young child notices and experiences**
- and
- **communicating with your toddler or young child to support a nurturing connection.**

“I guess I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong.”

Sophie, parent (NSW)

Your relationship with your toddler

As a parent it can be very challenging to think about how your toddler or young child views what is happening to you. It may be useful to talk with your health professional or another trusted support person about the impact of adversity on your role as a parent.

Parental adversity can take many shapes and affect parents in different ways. Just because you are a parent it doesn't mean you are unaffected by life's challenges.

It is important to remember that your experience of adversity does not make you a bad parent. It is possible to have a great relationship with your toddler even when things are tough.

For some parents, adversity can become overwhelming and stop them from having the kind of relationship with their toddler that they would like.

Start with the reflective exercise on the next page.

A reflective exercise

Do not do this activity if you are feeling particularly distressed or overwhelmed today

Think about the effects of your experience of adversity or hard times on you and what others may notice. Mark them in the list below to get started.

- Talking and moving slowly
- Worrying a lot
- Suspicious thoughts
- Traumatic flashbacks
- Feeling sad or teary
- Feeling over-sensitive
- Self-harm
- Struggling to concentrate
- Seeing or hearing things
- Low motivation
- Not mixing with others
- Feeling anxious
- Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs
- Feeling numb
- Very tired
- Sleeping a lot
- Irritable, short-tempered
- Angry outbursts
- Suicidal thoughts
- Feeling restless

Are there any others? List these below:

Write five of the effects of adversity that worry you in the space provided below. Focus on those that have an impact on you as a parent. Then reflect on what you think your toddler might see, hear and feel when they are with you. Write your thoughts in the space below.

1.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

2.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

3.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

4.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

5.

Effect:

What does my child see, hear and feel?

Understanding what your toddler or young child notices and experiences

Although a toddler or young child may still be developing their understanding of what you say, they will be sensitive and responsive to your emotions and to the tone of your voice. Toddlers and young children are very perceptive and can detect even the smallest change in their parents' behaviour and body language (despite a parent trying to 'hide' any change). You might notice that when you are going through difficult times, your child's responses may also change. Your child may be reacting to behaviours or situations they do not understand. They may need help to manage and name their feelings. Thinking about how you might react in tough times:

- What might your toddler or young child see in your face?
- What might they hear in the tone of your voice?
- How might they have made sense of this?
- Which of your behaviours might worry your toddler or young child?
- What have you noticed about their reaction?

Communicating with your toddler or young child to support a nurturing connection

Quick tips for communicating and connecting with your toddler or young child:

- Using simple language, let your child know that you are going through difficult times and it is not their job to worry as you are taking steps to overcome adversity.
- If you are feeling down and your child is distressed, try to manage your own feelings first before trying to comfort them. Use a calm voice, gentle facial expressions and slowly lower your body to be with them.
- Sit quietly and have a cuddle, read a story or sing a song. If you do not have the energy to sing, listen to music together or just snuggle.
- Start to link words to feelings. If you are feeling irritable, reassure your child by saying, "Mummy/Daddy is grumpy/angry right now. You are not making me grumpy/angry. It is just how I am feeling and I can see that this is making you sad."

You might start a conversation about your experience of adversity with:

"I know I used my angry voice. I want you to know I am not angry with you. I can see it makes you sad/scared when I use my angry voice. I will try to use my quiet voice when I am talking to you."

or

"Mummy/Daddy is going through a tough time right now. I do not like feeling this way, but I do like to spend time with you. Can we do something quietly together?"

Tips to remember

- Toddlers and young children communicate feelings, frustration and their need for attention through their behaviour.
- Toddlers and young children need to trust that you can respond to their needs in a calm and positive way.
- Encourage your toddler or young child to use words to express their feelings. For example, "I can see you are looking sad. Are you feeling sad?" or "I can hear you using your angry voice. Are you feeling cross/frustrated?"
- Spend time with your child each day. Plan ahead if you know you will not have a lot of energy. Tell stories, read a book, listen to children's music or play in the sand.
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Small conversations can build on your child's and your family's shared understanding over time.
- Your child needs to know that they have not caused you to be upset, it is not their fault, and that you are taking steps to make things better.

Other trusted adults can be helpful when explaining your experience of adversity to your child. Consider grandparents, other family members or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Tell them about the information you have given to your child and the information that you would like them to share. You can also tell them if there is anything that you do not want to be shared with your child.

Delivery partners:



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