

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Communicating with your primary school age child during adversity or tough times



Most parents wonder how they should talk to their child about going through tough times

This resource will help you to prepare for conversations with your child about your experience of adversity, so you can help them to have a better understanding of what is happening. It steps you through:

- **understanding how the adversity affects you**
- **thinking about what your child notices and experiences**
- and
- **preparing to talk with your child.**

“I think it’s best coming from us. I’d got to a point where I had accepted my diagnosis, I was getting some treatment, and I knew enough about it to explain it to them in an age-appropriate way.”

Craig, parent (TAS)

Your relationship with your child

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

Conversations with your child about tough times can help them to make sense of their experiences. If you are trying to understand your own experiences, or need to talk about your circumstances, discuss this with either an adult that you trust, a health professional or a peer worker. Do not expect your child to help you understand your experience of adversity.

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 child even when things are tough.

For some parents, adversity can become overwhelming and stop them from having the kind of relationship with their child 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 child 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 child notices and experiences

Children at different ages will notice and react differently to your experience of adversity. Primary school age children are very perceptive and pick up on even the smallest changes in their parent's behaviour and body language (despite a parent's attempts to 'hide' them).

Children can believe they are somehow at fault for their parent's behaviour and can feel responsible for making their parent feel better.

Thinking about the effects of adversity that you listed:

- How might your child have made sense of these?
- What have you noticed about their reaction to them?
- What do you think they might be feeling?
- What might they understand in the language you use?
- Which of your behaviours do you think might worry your child the most?

Preparing to talk with your child

Conversations with your child about experiences of adversity are important. These conversations can help your child to understand the family situation and to make sense of what they are experiencing. When your child does not understand the situation, they can worry, feel alone and misunderstand what is going on. They may feel personally responsible and worry about you and your health and safety.

Helping your child to understand your circumstances and what it means for your family will:

- help them to know that it is okay to talk about tough times
 - allow your child to ask questions and get the correct information
 - help them come to you (or others) when they are worried or feeling overwhelmed
- and
- build an understanding that can strengthen relationships.

Starting the conversation with your child

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

- “You may have been worried about.... or noticed....”

(Use the effects of adversity list to get started)

- “I want you to know what I am worried about. You have not caused this. It is not your fault.”

You might invite your child to talk about what they have noticed or are worried about:

- “What have you noticed that worries you?”

You can then follow with:

- “I am here to talk to you if you have any questions or are worried.”
- “If you feel you can’t come to me, you can talk to....”

An example of how you could start the conversation:

"You might have noticed I don't seem to have much energy and I am always tired. This is because I am going through a tough time. I want you to know you have not caused this and it is not your fault. I don't like feeling like this and it must be hard for you to understand when you see me tired and sleeping a lot."

Write your own starting script here:

[illegible]

Tips to remember

- Talk to your child at their level, using words they will understand.
- Stop and pause after each new bit of information.
- Give your child time to think and to ask questions (the questions might not come straight away, and your child may need thinking time).
- If you do not know the answer to a question tell them that you will find out, or even look for the information together.
- One discussion is never enough. A shared understanding takes time and your child's questions and need for information will change as they grow.
- Encourage your child to ask questions or raise concerns whenever they want. Set up a process so that if you are feeling overwhelmed or do not have the energy to answer questions, they still feel valued and know that you will make time for it later.
- Set up a support network for your child so that if you can't answer their questions they can seek answers from a person that you both trust (e.g. a family member, a family friend or a health professional).
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Often the first discussion is the most daunting. Small conversations can build on your child's and your family's shared understanding over time.

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.

"I didn't know...that some kids really do think they are responsible for their mum or dad's struggles. I've since gone back and reassured them that none of this is their fault and they are not responsible for my moods or behaviours... I'm responsible for all of those things."

Jenny, parent (SA)



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