

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Communicating with your primary school-age child during 'tough times'



Most parents wonder how to talk with their child about adversity

This resource will help you to prepare for conversations with your child about your experience of 'tough times' (e.g. relationship conflicts and separation, financial difficulties, illness, job stress, etc.), 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. You may even find it helpful to work through this resource with them.

Conversations with your child about difficult 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 upset or overwhelmed today. If at any point you feel distressed, please seek immediate help. Lifeline (13 11 14) offers free, confidential, 24/7 support. For emergency support, dial 000.

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. You may like to fill this out with the help of your health professional or another support person.

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

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?

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)



Delivery partners:



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