



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Supporting children's social connections in tough times

Connection and belonging

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who've been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas for helping children find and sustain threads of connection and belonging.

Social connections provide an important network for supporting children's wellbeing and helping them get through tough times. When things are difficult for families, it can be hard to support these connections.

What are social connections for children?

A child's social connections are the relationships they form outside the home and can include extended family, friends, neighbours, educators at childcare/early learning or school and the people they meet through their wider community by being part of sporting groups, clubs or other local organisations. These relationships can help give children a sense of belonging and help their wellbeing, especially when times are tough.

Definition of 'parent'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

It can be hard to see our children struggling to form social connections, but it is understandable that they might find it hard to connect with others when our families are impacted by things like:

- money struggles or poverty
- housing insecurity or homelessness
- disability
- discrimination; and
- ongoing distress or mental illness.

As parents we play an important role in helping kids find and sustain meaningful social connections when times are tough, but these are often the times when we're carrying a lot as well.

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Friends have been a good source of help and understanding and support especially when they have the same problems.

CHILD, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, IN *SPEAKING OUT SURVEY*¹

What gets in the way for parents?

Some of the things that parents told us get in the way of supporting children's social connections are:

- having the mental space to pay attention, notice, or bring it up in useful ways
- feeling lots of uncomfortable emotions when thinking about it
- figuring out how to support children to be safe while being social
- dealing with big issues like health, family violence, family court, homelessness or having to move
- not having enough time or energy to support and manage your or your child's relationships with school or childcare/early learning; and
- not having enough money for children to be involved in or travelling to activities and social events.

What gets in the way for children?

Some of the things that families and children told us get in the way of children's social connections are:

- not having enough money to pay for social activities
- having ongoing health issues in the family
- not being able to afford lunch orders
- being bullied
- moving all the time and not being in one place for long

- being homeless
- having a distressed parent
- not feeling you can trust people because of family violence
- feeling embarrassed to have friends visit; and
- not being able to afford clothes or things that other kids have.

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There aren't many buses, so I don't go out with my friends much because my parents have to drive me.

CHILD, TASMANIA, IN *WE CALL IT HAPPY*²

Take a moment to think about...



- What things are your family up against that might be getting in the way of your children's social connections?
- Have you noticed anything about how your children are responding to the challenges your family is experiencing?
- What might help you work together with your children to support them with connections that are right for them?

Learning about children's social connections

Finding ways to learn about our children's social connections can help us to:

- understand each other better
- work together to feel more connected within and beyond our families; and
- help us navigate through tricky times in these relationships.



TIA, 8 YEARS OLD

Sometimes our children may be already telling us about relationships that:

- are important to them
- they wish for; or
- are making them feel unsafe.

But we aren't always able to hear what they're telling us, especially when tough times are making life stressful.

We can try asking children about their interactions at school or in other parts of their life to learn more about their social connections and how we might be able to support them. We could also help them to reflect on their relationships by asking themselves questions like:

- Does this person accept me for who I am?
- Do I feel safe with this person?

This can also be really useful if we're worried they are in a difficult friendship or relationship, and can give them a chance to think about the kinds of relationships they want to have and what is not OK for them.

Other questions you might want to ask your child

- If you were feeling sad or worried, who could you talk to?
- Who did you hang out with at school today? What did you do together?
- Who are the other people in your life that you feel safe and supported by?
- Who do you like to have fun with other than us (parent/s)?

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I didn't have any friends in primary school because I was different ... I came to high school and found one friend who has been really nice to me. She is my only friend, but she still makes me feel like I belong and makes me want to come to school.

12-YEAR-OLD, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, IN SPEAKING OUT SURVEY¹

Take a moment to think about...



- What do you know about the social connections that are important to your children right now? Are they with your family dog, their grandmother, their netball teammates, or an imaginary friend?
- What do you already know about things that make social connection harder for them?
- What might you not know about these things? How could you find out and work out how best to support them?

Skills for supporting children's social connections

Let's hear from some of the families we worked with to create this resource about what helped them support their children's connections in tough times.

Listening to our children's wishes

'I learned the hard way that it is important to know how to listen to kids. It can be easy to tell them what to do, but we get better feedback if we listen properly and give them a chance to talk without putting our own judgement or ideas onto them.'

'In the busyness of life, trying to manage everything I have to, sometimes I forget about the kids' friendship needs, or I think they get enough of it at school. They do remind me though, and will ask me to organise playdates. I need to stop and show interest in who they want to invite, show interest in their excitement about friendships, and find a way to make time. This also means explaining clearly when we aren't able to (like if we have to work) so they know it's not their fault.'

'I usually speak Farsi with my son. I personally am proud of it, it is our language. But my son told me it embarrasses him at school. So I am respectful of his wishes at school and speak English to him. If I forget and speak Farsi, I will say it again in English.'

I think he was worried that his friends wouldn't understand what we were talking about. If we are respectful to our children's wishes we will get respect back from them.'

'One of the things I learned was not to speak for our children, but to let them speak. My kids have autism and when they were younger they couldn't verbalise their wishes, and so we had interpret what we thought they wanted for others. But as they got older we kept doing it, and we realised we needed to support the kids to connect with others themselves, and not speak for them.'

'When we were living in family violence, one of my kid's ways of staying safe was to completely isolate at school. At the time I was really worried, and the teachers were also worried. When I spoke to my child about it, they said "Mum I don't want any friends right now, I'd rather read a book." I realise now, that's what they needed to do to keep themselves safe. And after some time they actually did end up making some very good friends at that school. I needed to step back and not push. And I had to say to the teachers that was what my child wanted at that time and I had to help advocate for them. I did that by talking to my child and reflecting.'

Valuing different kinds of connections

'There is often a feeling that kids friendships need to be long, strong, meaningful and go into adulthood. But very often, that's not necessary. Especially when you're going through difficult times or you're moving around a lot. Short-term connections can be just as important as the long ones. At times when we moved a lot, my kids had connections that could go for a few days or weeks, and those were still valuable and just as important as the long ones.'

'Some connections are really deep, soul connections. But there are others that are about having fun or being silly, that are just as important. Friendship can look like coming together in lots of different ways.'

'I have noticed my kids friendships can be intergenerational. I'm not talking about grandparents. Kids can connect in a friendship way with people that are older than them. Like an older sibling's best friend or a special teacher at school. Those kinds of connections can happen sometimes as well.'

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I had a really close friend, and when we had to move I wanted to be able to still stay in touch with her. But I was too young to have my own social media or a phone. Mum was able to help me keep that connection by messaging her and sending letters.

I had to change schools and was alone, I had no friends. Having this one friend who I was so close to, being able to hold on to that one friendship, helped me ease my way into a new school, a new state, a new education system. It made it so much easier because I didn't have to start everything from the beginning.

Eventually the friendship did die off in the end, but it was so worth just that extra year of connection and regular communication. I would have been in a lot worse place mentally if I didn't have that.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Being active in the community

‘When my kids were younger, I was president of the community garden. It doesn't matter what it is, it could be scoring the football game. But it was really important for my kids to see that I was active in the community and knew lots of people in the community in a positive way. It made it easier for the kids to feel like they belonged.’

Asking for help with fees

‘We found that when we were honest enough, people were understanding of our situation and actually could provide help. One time we wanted to book the kids into a school holiday program, and asked if we could pay it off over time, and they were happy to let the kids attend for free. We found when we were brave enough to be honest, we had a lot of fees waived for kids activities. It was still difficult, the kids and us still felt shame and stigma in the community. We shouldn't have had to feel like that, it wasn't our fault we couldn't work.’

Supporting our kids' worries

‘My son was nervous going out to places he didn't know anyone. But he wanted to make friends. He had one friend who told him about an anime club at the library. He asked us if he could go, but said he was nervous and wasn't sure if he wanted to go. We told him he didn't have to talk to anyone if he didn't feel comfortable. He could just go and observe. Over time it has evolved and he now enjoys it and is going to another community event as well. His friendship network has grown a lot from that first step of being brave enough to go to that first activity and just watch.’

‘My kids and I are Chinese Australians and we were planning to go to a Chinese community event. I asked my kids how they were feeling about it, and they said they were feeling nervous and unsure. I asked them why they were nervous, because the Chinese community are very friendly and the parents all know each other. My kids don't speak Chinese very well, and they asked if the other kids there could speak English. They were nervous about feeling excluded. So I told them the other kids might speak English, but it would be a good opportunity to learn Chinese, if they would like to try. I also told them that it is normal to feel nervous in a new group, adults do as well. It's OK to feel that way. As soon as we got there, all the kids started speaking English between each other. As adults, we speak Chinese so the kids can see that and be connected to their culture, that is important.’

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As a kid, when I was struggling to make friends and form social connections, I brought up these struggles with grown-ups but they would just say: ‘You've just got to put your foot in the door, you've just got to try.’ But that wasn't enough. I already knew that, but it wasn't working. Looking back, what I needed was someone to sit down with me and help me understand why it wasn't working, why I was having trouble. And help me come up with solutions specific to my situation. I couldn't find the understanding and solutions by myself.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Helping our children find safe spaces

'One of my children is in the rainbow community. And once when we were living in a refuge, I wanted to find somewhere for them to connect that I knew would be understanding about being homeless, and queer and young. I connected in with their worker, and I also did some internet searching. And I looked through the local council, mental health and welfare organisations, because they often run groups for certain people. Because things were so hard at that time, as a parent I jumped ahead and got all this information and presented it to my child, and they chose to go a group specifically for rainbow youth.'

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When I was young, I went to a drama club run by a youth service. I originally went because Mum suggested it. But it ended up being a safe space that I knew I could go to, that I could escape to when home was too much. There were times when home was so intense that I wanted to run away and leave. So I would get on my bike and go to the youth centre, and I knew people knew me and understood me, and would be on my side. It was separate to school and separate to home. It was really good, really important. And I enjoyed it. The workers there, the adults there knew what they were doing, they knew how to work with young people. They changed my life a bit. A lot of growth I can attribute to that youth centre.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Connecting with the help of workers

'My teenage son said friends, extended family and support workers were important to him. Because he doesn't have a lot of communication outside of the home, the support workers are giving him that ability to go out and connect in the community, to go to the shops or, interact with staff at the stores, they go out and do stuff together. They are part of his world now.'

'Homelessness can really upend kid's connections. When we got to the refuge, I couldn't expect the kids to make any social connections. It was beyond their capacity. But they had their own kid's worker that was allocated. What that meant was their worker could work directly with them to expand their own social networks in a safe way. There were programs that they ran for children. Because it was run through a specific children's worker, I knew they would be safe and it would be OK. I was always aware of the activities they were doing though, and considered if they were safe and aligned with my values.'

Being clever about birthdays

'For kids birthdays I would spend hours and hours looking for presents that were low cost but also really unique. It was one way, when we had no money and the kids were feeling 'less than' their friends, that I could help them feel important and have some social status amongst their friends.'

'We had all our kids parties at home. They always wanted to have their parties out, but we couldn't afford it. So we would plan ahead as much as we could, and go to a big effort to make nice birthday cakes and throw special parties at home. They were low cost, but we made a big deal to make them feel special.'

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One thing my mum did, they would make a huge effort to instill the idea that birthdays are to be celebrated as a family, and then hang out with friends after. So it made it a real connecting moment for our family, but it also meant they didn't have to spend a huge amount of money on big birthday parties. As a family we would have cheap snack foods and cake, then presents. The next day we would hang out with friends all day: bike rides, the beach, going to a friend's place. It made hanging out with friends into a birthday treat, and made the birthday last longer. It made it into a special birthday weekend.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Making time for extended family

'We try and make time to video chat with family who live interstate. And we have a regular, theme-night dinners for family who live close by. These relationships can be difficult, but we can see the networks and connections are good for the kids.'

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When I was a kid, going to OSHC was a real treat, a real fun thing. The OSHC teachers were so much more chill and fun than the real teachers. We got access to all this fun stuff and games that we wouldn't be able to do at home. At home we didn't have expensive games, so we got that at OSHC. I saw it as more time to have fun and muck around. And small things too, like I learned how to finger-knit at OSHC. So many positive memories.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Using childcare or out of school hours care (OSHC) sometimes

'My daughter is a single mum, and even though it is a huge financial pressure, she books her daughter into OSHC and other activities when she can to try and give her more chances for connection when times are really tough at home. It's two-fold – my granddaughter gets chances for making friends and my daughter gets some time to rest.'

'When I was isolated and had no support, I accessed a social worker and found out I was entitled to 13 weeks of free childcare. That was a huge help because I was struggling with family court and I was so alone. I needed time for myself. It was very difficult to start with, but after going for a while, he made friends and enjoyed it.'

'One of my kid's closest friends now, he made in childcare when he was young. It was a struggle for us to pay for it, but we needed the break, and the kids needed a break as well and a chance to connect outside the house. We had to give things up: no takeaway, no movies, so we could afford the fees. We had to do free activities like going to the park instead.'

Safety

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When I was a child I had one or two teachers I knew I could trust. Looking back, if I had had a bit more confidence, I could have told them everything that was happening to me and what was going on at home, and they could have helped me. Now that I have a child, I tell him that he can always tell his teachers anything. Even if someone has told him it's a secret, teachers don't count, teachers are allowed to be told secrets.

ELLIOT, YOUNG PERSON LOOKING BACK ON THEIR CHILDHOOD, KAURNA COUNTRY

Depending on our children's ages we might need to support them to be safe with social connections in different ways. This means having clear conversations about how to stay safe with different people. For younger children we might need to choose for them in some situations. With older children if you've got alarm bells ringing, it's OK to ask directly about safety, whether they feel like they're going to be safe, how they are planning to keep themselves safe, what kind of support do they need from you to stay safe? If children tell you they are feeling uncomfortable, it is important to pay attention to that, and be prepared to act on it, which may include [reaching out for help](#).



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My 6-year-old, he is very social. I need to teach him about safe people, unsafe people. When he's connecting to strangers easily I'm concerned for his safety. When we go out swimming at public places, he finds friends, he plays with them. I tell him: 'I need to see you.' And he likes to play with bigger kids, and if they play rough with him, he doesn't mind. He likes that he's part of a big group. I don't like big kids hurting him, but he doesn't mind. So I talk to him, say that 'That's not OK. You have to say stop to those kids, if they hit you or hurt you, you have to say stop. And then if that happens at school, you have to tell your teacher.' So I just try to support him.

M, PARENT, KAURNA COUNTRY

Thanks for taking the time to read these stories. What might be missing from them? What ideas do you have for supporting your children's social connections?

Resources that can help you to support your child's connections

- Raising Children has information on [social connections for children](#) and [school-age friendships](#).
- [My child's support network guide](#) might help you to think about the relationships in your child's life. It will also help to identify how these relationships can support your child and your family.
- Emerging Minds' has [resources on bullying](#) that might be useful for some families.

More connection and belonging resources

Have a look at the following options and choose what feels right for you and your family.

- [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#)
- [Feeling connection and belonging outside our families](#)
- [Finding connection beyond family, friends and community](#)
- [Skills for connecting through social media](#)
- [When we're really struggling to parent](#)
- [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)
- [Songs for connection and belonging](#)
- [See all resources on connection and belonging](#)

Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?
[First check out our practitioner guide.](#)

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References

1. Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia. (2021). [Speaking out survey 2021: The views of WA children and young people on their wellbeing – A summary report](#). Perth: CCYPWA.
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