

# Emerging Minds Families

## FACT SHEET

# Supporting your child's development during tough times

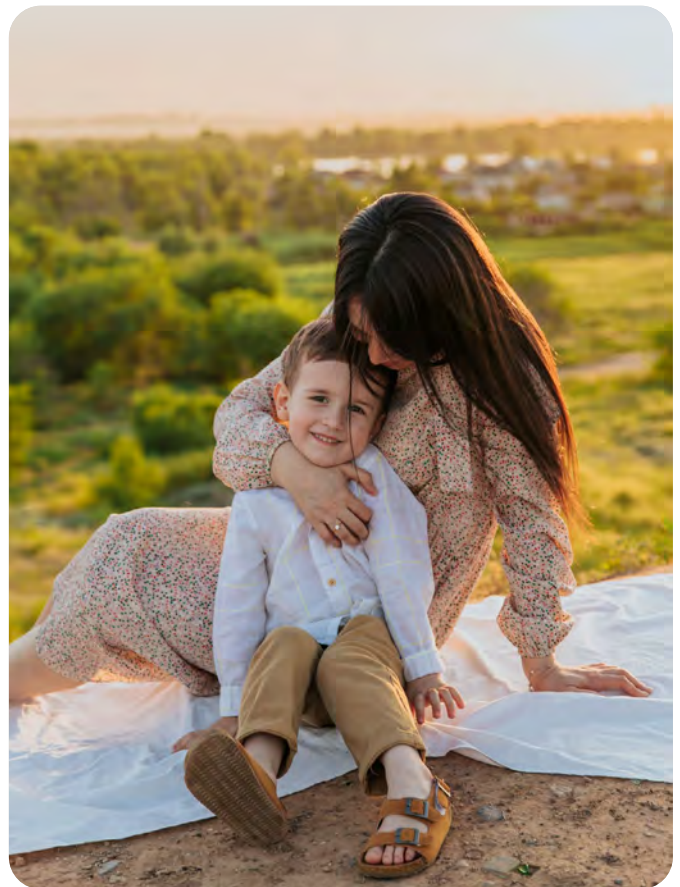
Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

When a family is facing difficulties – such as financial or housing stress, health issues or relationship breakdown – it impacts everyone in the family, even very young children. It's normal for a child's developmental process to be interrupted and different to what's described in [our other resources on infant and child development](#) if they, you or the whole family is dealing with tough times.

Understanding the child development process – including how it can be impacted by what's happening in a child's life and the ways children often react to stresses – can give you some clues about why your child might be behaving in a certain way and help you work out how to respond.

This fact sheet is about how children of different ages commonly react and behave if their parents or families are navigating difficulties or stressful times. It offers strategies for parents and families of:



- [infants and toddlers \(0–3 years old\)](#)
- [preschoolers \(3–5 years old\)](#)
- [early school-aged children \(5–8 years old\)](#)
- [pre-teens \(9–12 years old\)](#).

## Infants and toddlers (birth to three years old)

If you're dealing with a stressful or traumatic situation, it's normal to be less available, physically and/or emotionally, for your child. Infants and toddlers won't understand exactly what is happening, but they will notice if their usual caregivers aren't able to respond to their needs. They can't understand the 'why', but they can pick up on how their parent is feeling.

Even very young children can sense when their parent is upset and this, in turn, can cause them to become upset. They might become irritable and difficult to comfort, have trouble sleeping, or start displaying difficult behaviour such as screaming or crying, especially when routines are disrupted or they feel they're not getting enough attention.

## What you can do to support infants' and toddlers' development during tough times

- As much as possible, try to maintain some routine, like keeping bedtime the same, or still going to daycare on the same days. For example, if a child has to change locations or share their time between houses after their parents separate, taking familiar toys, storybooks or a favourite blanket can help them cope.
- It can be hard when you are struggling with your own stresses and emotions, but try to make time to connect with your baby or toddler. Even just a few minutes of your time and attention will make a difference.

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**Everything is brand new for babies and infants, and so going for a walk and being outside, having someone chat to them, that's a really rich experience for a baby. Laying down on the floor, bub's next to you and you just lay down there and you're just next to each other – baby might be reaching out for you or doing tummy time, but you're looking towards them. All of that is really rich interaction.**

VICKI MANSFIELD, MENTAL HEALTH ACCREDITED SOCIAL WORKER

- Ask for support. Which family member or trusted friend could you ask to come over and hold the baby, or take your toddler to the park for an hour? Is there a friend or health professional you can talk to about the stresses you or your family are facing and how you're feeling?
- When you're experiencing challenges or your family is going through tough times, it is really important to look after yourself. Make time to do things that help you manage your emotions and that nurture you, so that you can support your relationship with your child and parent the way you want to.

## Preschoolers (3–5 years old)

Preschoolers aren't able to understand other people's perspectives, which means they usually cannot understand what a parent or another family member is going through. Instead, they might be angry or frustrated if you're not noticing or meeting their needs.

It's common for children around this age to create their own 'story' about what's happening, and they

will often blame themselves. For example, they might think 'Mum/Dad is ignoring me because I'm bad' when you're preoccupied with other worries.

When preschoolers are feeling upset or afraid, it can show up as behaviours like separation anxiety, sleep troubles, bedwetting or regressing (acting younger than they are, like talking in baby talk).

Children at this age generally can't understand that some changes are permanent, and may ask a lot of questions before they can understand death or a stressful event. It's normal for them to keep asking when a deceased pet or loved one is coming back, or when they can go 'home' to a house destroyed by a fire, for example.

Because preschoolers are egocentric (they think the world is all about them), they may feel the death of someone they love as rejection or being left.

## What you can do to support preschoolers' development during tough times

- It can be difficult when you're dealing with challenges and stresses yourself, but try to tune in to what your child might be thinking and feeling about what's going on. It's important to understand that they're not intentionally being demanding or 'naughty'. Imagine an iceberg – the behaviour is just the tip of it, the bit you can see. Try to understand what's going on below the surface.
- Always explain what is happening, and answer your child's questions honestly and in simple ways they can understand. Sometimes parents think it's better not to say anything, to protect their child from worrying or getting upset. But children often see, hear and understand more than adults realise and will make their own meaning of events. They might blame themselves, or think what's happening is even worse than it is.
- Reassure your preschooler often that you love them and will be there when they need you. Often children at this age are afraid of being abandoned or rejected. They might need lots of reassurance that what's happened or is causing stress in their family is not their fault. If you're concerned your child might be experiencing anxiety, find out more about [anxiety in preschoolers](#) or make an appointment with your GP.
- Routines and family rituals are very important for children around this age. Preschoolers can experience anxiety or distress when routines are disrupted. As much as possible, try to maintain some predictability. If there are changes to daily routines, make sure your child knows who will be taking care of them and that they're told about changes before they happen.

- In the event of parental separation or the death of a loved one, it can be comforting for young children to have something familiar or special that reminds them of the parent who's not at home with them or the person they have lost. It might be a photo of Daddy, or a special blanket from Nan's house, for example.
- Ask for support, especially if your child is experiencing separation anxiety and wants to stay close to you. Is there a family member who could come over and play or read with them for an hour so that you can get something done or have some time for yourself? Is there a friend or health professional you can talk to about the stresses you or your family are facing and how you're coping?

### Early school-aged children (5–8 years old)

In the early school years, children are beginning to understand that parental issues and behaviour are separate from them. However, they're also starting to compare themselves (and their family) to others. Their feelings about themselves can be impacted by how they see their parent's behaviour, emotions and reactions, or how they think other people are seeing their parent. Children can become upset or withdrawn when they feel a parent is disappointing, embarrassing or acting in ways that are different to other children's parents.

While friendships outside the family are becoming more important, a child's family is still their central influence. This means any changes to the family structure or routines are likely to impact on children.

Early school-aged children may express how they're feeling through their behaviour or physical symptoms. For example:

- Their increasing interest in the world and developing capacity to think logically means children may ask a lot of questions and ask for specific details about an adverse event. This can be challenging for parents who are dealing with stressful events, loss or grief.
- Often children around this age struggle to express their feelings and might refuse to acknowledge events or losses that are distressing for them. These feelings can instead appear as angry or frustrated outbursts or fearfulness.
- Children might start having unexplained headaches or tummy aches. They also might regress (act younger than they are, for example talking in baby talk or wetting their pants), experience nightmares or sleep troubles, or express violence in drawings or play.

### What you can do to support early school-aged children's development during tough times

- It's important to be open and honest with children, in a way that's appropriate to their age and where they're at in their development. Keep in mind that their increased capacity for imagination and thinking about future events – including possible harms – means they might worry about the death of a parent or loved one or their own death or injury. [Separation anxiety](#) is most common in children of this age, as they may become anxious about keeping a parent or siblings safe and not wanting to be apart from you.
- Be curious about what's behind or underneath your child's behaviours. If your child is often saying they have a headache, stomach-ache or 'feel sick', it can be helpful to book an appointment with your GP. They can help to rule out any physical health problems and explore what your child is experiencing. Sometimes small changes in behaviour or mood can be signs that a child is struggling to express or cope with their feelings. You can let your child know you understand, and maybe open a conversation about what's going on for them, if you explain how emotions can be felt in our bodies. For example, you might say something like, 'Sometimes I feel a bit sick in the tummy when I'm worried about things. Can you think of anything that's been worrying you lately?'
- If their parents separate, children may need support to maintain their relationship with both parents. While younger children may blame themselves if their parents argue or separate, children at this age are more likely to feel angry or blame one or both of their parents. Emerging Minds Families has information about [how parents who are separating or separated can support their child's wellbeing](#).



- Maintain daily and weekly routines and allow children to continue their usual activities like sport or music lessons, as much as possible. At this age, children's friendships and doing things they are good at are really important to them. As much as possible, ensure your child can continue to go to school and do the activities they enjoy, so they can stay connected to friends.
- Ask for support. Which family member or trusted friend could pick up your child from school, or pick up some groceries for you? Is there a friend or health professional you can talk to about the stresses you or your family are facing and how you're coping?
- Just as it's important for you to draw on the support of family and trusted friends, it's important to help your child identify who's in their support network. Often children know best which people (or places or things) in their lives they feel most connected to and who give them the support they need. But you can help your child identify who is in their support team. Talk about the people closest to your family who know what's going on, so they know who they can talk to openly about how they're feeling. Ask them to consider which other adults in their life they can trust and talk to.
- By this age, many children know what works to help them feel better when there are stresses at home or they're dealing with a problem at school. It might be spending time alone, maybe reading or colouring; jumping on a trampoline; or playing with their pet. Notice and support whatever works for your child.



## Pre-teens (9–12 years old)

During tough times, pre-teens can fall back into 'magical' thinking and blame themselves for 'bad things' that happen to their parent/s or family. Even though they can think logically and know it doesn't make sense, they might feel that being too demanding, too selfish or a 'bad person' has caused an adverse event, or their parents to separate, for example.

Your child may feel distressed, hopeless or intensely worried about the future. Because they're now developing the ability to think about abstract things, like death and loss, more deeply and imagining how they would be affected, children around this age can experience feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness.

Pre-teens may become confused about their role in the family and can feel pressured to adopt a parenting role if their caregiver is not coping. They might resist or have trouble expressing emotions like sadness and grief, because they think that showing those feelings is being 'childish' or 'babyish', or that they'll upset their parent/s or other family members.

Around this age, children are beginning to compare themselves to others and have a strong need to fit in. A large part of their self-identity is based on how they (and others) perceive their parent's behaviour, emotions and reactions. Pre-teens might internalise (think about but not show) any difficult emotions that arise when parents are disappointing, embarrassing, or act in ways that are different from other children's parents.

Pre-teens are also more aware of financial issues and 'status'. They can feel embarrassed by changes in their parents' or family's circumstances that highlight differences between themselves and their friends, or that mean they're unable to go to school camp or a sporting competition, for example.

### What you can do to support pre-teens' development during tough times

- As a parent, you can support your child to make meaning and avoid self-blame by talking openly and honestly about what's going on.
- Help your child to understand the things they can control, and what they can't. Talk through the facts and consequences of an adverse event or challenging situation in a 'matter of fact' way. Show them you're feeling hopeful about the future and believe things will get better.
- Encourage your child to express whatever they're feeling. Tell them it's perfectly OK to feel that way and offer them comfort in the way that makes

them feel safe and supported – for example, by holding or hugging them while they cry, or just listening while they get out their anger or worries.

- Focus on quality time and connection with your child. Try to find even small pockets of time to talk, play or just hang out together – and give your child your full attention. When you show interest in whatever they're doing or telling you about, your child feels valued, important and supported – and that helps them to cope with stress and adversity.

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**We started a thing called “walk and talk”. So, the kids could ask to go for a walk, and they would talk out problems as we went. It was beneficial, the exercise, and a good thing to practice for getting things out in the open. It has been so helpful, yet so simple. Even the older kids still go to this regularly if they need it.**

KIRSTY, MUM OF FOUR

- Keep up routines and continue children's activities as much as possible. It can be difficult when family circumstances change or finances are tight, but those activities – and the friends they have there – are an important source of support for children. Include your child in some of the decision making so they feel their views are valued and that they have some control.
- Just as it's important for you to draw on the support of people like family members and trusted friends, it's important to help your pre-teen identify who's in their own support network. Often children know best which people (or places or things) in their lives they feel most connected to and who give them the support they need. Talk about the people closest to your family who know what's going on, so they know who they can talk to openly about how they're feeling. Ask them which other adults in their life they can trust and talk to.
- By this age, many children know what works to help them feel better when there are stresses at home or they're dealing with a problem at school. It might be hanging out with their best friend, talking to an extended family member or other adult they trust, like an aunty or teacher, or listening to music. Notice and support whatever works for your child.

- It can be helpful for pre-teens to connect with other children around the same age who have had similar experiences to them. This can help them to normalise the emotions they're experiencing, to understand that change is a part of life, and to differentiate between changes they can and can't control. Ask your GP or a counsellor at your child's school to recommend peer support groups or networks (online or in person) that your child could attend.

Living in a family where there is domestic or family violence can seriously impact children's development and mental health. But these impacts can be reduced if an adult takes steps to help the child.

If you have experienced domestic or family violence you can contact [1800 RESPECT](tel:1800737732) on 1800 737 732 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) or [chat to a trained counsellor online](#). You can support your child's recovery and healthy development by taking steps to increase safety in the family, helping them to develop relationships with other supportive adults, and encouraging them in school or other activities that make them feel happy and proud.

This resource from the Australian Psychological Society has important [advice for parents who are leaving a violent partner](#), including how to help children cope with strong feelings and to regain a sense of physical and emotional safety.

## More information

This fact sheet is part of our series on key developmental experiences for children from birth to age 12. This collection of resources looks at what parents and other adults can do to support healthy development at different points in a child's developmental journey.

AVAILABLE HERE

**More resources on  
child development**



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