

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Support networks: Building support networks for you and your child

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.

At all ages and stages of life it's important to be able to get the support we need, when we need it. Feeling connected to family, friends, neighbours or your community and having a support network you can rely on can protect and boost both your children's mental health and wellbeing, and your own.

Support can look different for each family and situation. It may be that at times the extra support you need comes from extended family members or trusted friends. Or it might be talking to your child's teacher or early childhood educator.

At other times, finding support might involve looking online for reliable information about a challenge your child or family is experiencing and getting some strategies or practical ideas that you can try at home.



In this video (2 minutes, 57 seconds) parents and practitioners discuss the importance of building a support network and helping children identify who's in theirs.

We know it can be challenging to reach out to others and uncomfortable to ask for help. But staying connected with the people who support you is especially important when times are tough.

It's common as adults to feel an urge to withdraw when things get challenging, or to think we should be able to cope alone. But the people around us often want to help and are just waiting to be asked – so think about how the people in your 'village' could support your family.

For example:

- Is there a family member who could take your toddler to the park for an hour?
- Who would be happy to pick up some groceries for you?
- Which friend, or health professional, can you talk to about the stresses you or your family are facing and how you are feeling?

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I never understood the idea and importance of “your village” until I had my children. It really does take a village in the hard times, and it can take many forms. I had to learn to ask for help from family and friends and outsource anything I could ... I had to realise I couldn’t do it all and give myself permission to ask for help.

MELISSA, MOTHER OF TWO

Building support networks

Building a support network beyond your family can take time.

If you feel like you don’t have people who will support you when you need some help, it is important to look for opportunities to make these connections. You might try:

- a free parents’ group, [play group](#) or toddler music group at your library
- your child’s school – go to events where you might meet other parents, volunteer at the school canteen if you have time, and get to know your child’s teacher/s
- your local council or community centre, to find out about groups or activities in your area.



Helping children to build their own support network

There’s lots of evidence that feeling supported can help protect children from harmful impacts. It also protects their mental health when they experience things like bullying, parental separation or disasters in their community.

Help your child to build a team around them that includes their peers (friends, siblings and cousins around their age), extended family members (e.g. aunt, grandparent) and other supportive adults (e.g. a sports coach or favourite teacher). There is no perfect size for your child’s support network; it might be made up of several people, or just one or two key individuals you and your child trust and can rely on.

Children often know best which people (or places or things) in their lives they feel most connected to and who give them a sense of belonging or support when they need it.

If your child has trouble identifying or choosing people to be in their support network, brainstorm together. Try asking them:

- ‘Outside of our family, who do you like to have fun with?’
- ‘Who do you feel safe with? If you were sad or worried about something, who could you talk to?’
- ‘Who do you hang out with at school?’
- ‘If you had a problem or felt upset at school, which adult could you go to?’

Remind them it doesn’t have to be their current homeroom teacher – it might be a previous teacher, the school counsellor, a year level coordinator or someone else they feel comfortable talking to.

Talk to your child about who’s in their support team and the different roles they have. For example, Grandma might be the person they go to when they don’t want to talk about problems, they just want a hug and to watch TV together. Their older sister might be the person they talk to when they want advice about how to deal with stuff at school.

If your children are around six to 12 years old, you could show them our [video with young people talking about the ‘support heroes’ in their lives](#). Then have a chat with your child about the people in their life who support them in different ways.



With preschoolers or young children, ask them to hold out their hand and tuck in a finger each time they name:

- someone who is safe
- someone they can trust
- someone who is kind;
- and so on.

See if they can think of enough people to 'fill' both their hands. You can trace around their hand on a piece of paper and write the names of those people on the fingers, then stick it up on the fridge or in their bedroom as a reminder of who's in their support team.

What to do when you need more support

Sometimes the stress and worries of everyday life pile up and families get overloaded. There are resources and services that can help lighten the load – but it can be hard to know where and how to access further support when you need it.

Your family doctor/GP or another health professional can be a great source of support, and can point or refer you to other resources to help you and your

family. If you're unsure who to speak to, check out our 'Practitioners speak' video series about different professionals and the services they provide.

If you have any concerns about your child's, or your own, mental health, speaking to your family doctor/GP or another health professional is a great place to start.

Thinking about your family's support networks

Take a moment to think about your own support network, and who's in your child's support team.

- Who are the people you can rely on and call on for support (practical and/or emotional) when you need it?
- Who supports you as a family? Would they talk with you if they were worried about how you were coping, or noticed your child might be struggling to deal with something?
- Have you met your child's teacher or early childhood educator? How would you go about talking to them if you felt they could help support your child?
- Have you helped your child identify who's in their support team?
- Who does your child like spending time with, outside of their immediate family? Who are their close friends?
- How do you support your child to stay connected with their friends and with other important people in their life?



More resources for building support networks

We know it can be hard to ask for help, find the right health professional or service, and navigate the sometimes-complicated systems they work within.

Emerging Minds Families has several resources to help you identify or access the right support when you might need it:

- Our 'Practitioners speak' series includes [videos with many different health professionals](#). They explain what they can do to support you and your family, what you and your child can expect, and how to make the most out of your visit.
- Find out about getting professional support if your [child is experiencing anxiety](#).
- Developed for parents living with mental illness, these resources have helpful information for all parents about the [importance of your 'village'](#) and ways to build your support network. They also have advice around [helping your child build their support network](#) (including a guide you can use with your child).
- [Supporting children's social connections in tough times](#) has helpful tips from families about sustaining children's relationships outside the home when times are tough.

Other support services and resources we recommend:

- Healthdirect's [National Health Services Directory](#) can help you to find a GP, counsellor, psychologist or other health professional in your local area.
- [Child and Family Hubs](#) across Australia provide various supports and services to families in one place.
- The Raising Children Network has compiled a list of [parent support helplines and hotlines](#).

[Kids Helpline](#) offers free 24/7 support for both parents and children (over five years old). You can [call Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800](#), [chat with a counsellor online](#), or [send Kids Helpline an email](#).

This resource is one in a series of five ways you can support your child's mental health. Find out more about the other ways you can nurture and protect your child's mental health, now and into the future.

AVAILABLE HERE

Five ways to support your children's mental health



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