

# Emerging Minds Families

## FACT SHEET

# Communication and meaning-making: Why good communication is key to children's mental health

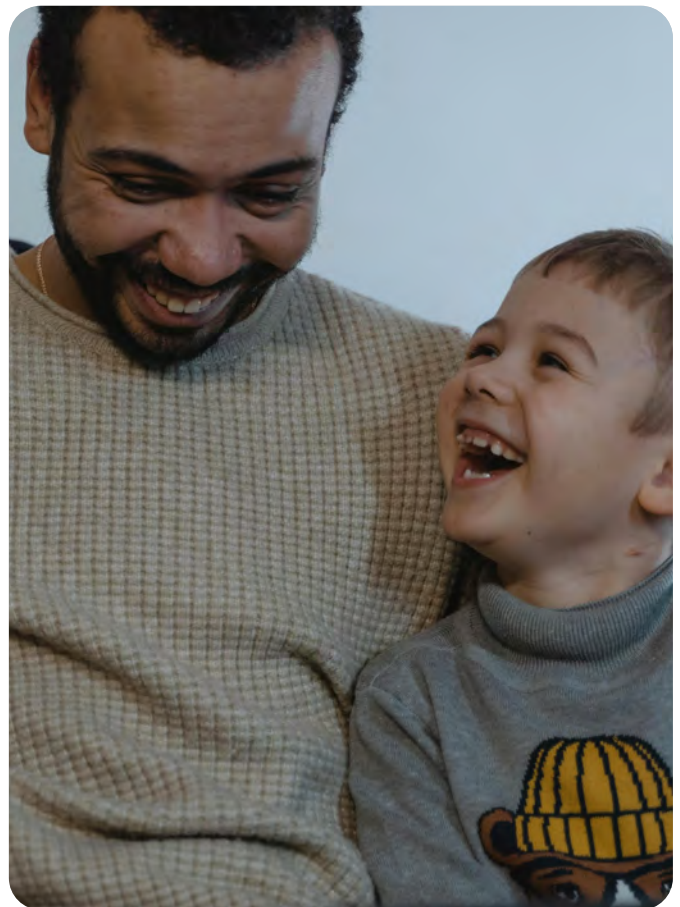
Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

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

Communicating clearly with children ensures they have the information they need to understand or 'make meaning' about what's going on in their world. Being open and talking regularly with your child about all sorts of things also builds trust and strengthens your connection.

Good communication in families doesn't mean talking a lot or telling children everything. Clear communication is about:

- sharing information truthfully with children, in age-appropriate ways
- clear and consistent words and actions



- allowing space for questions and checking what your child is thinking and feeling, so you can uncover any misunderstandings or worries
- communicating in ways that work for your family – for example if you have a child who's non-verbal or prefers to get information in bite-size chunks rather than long conversations.

It's common for family members to have different understandings of an event or issue. Children often see and hear more than we realise, so their understanding might be based on bits of information they've overheard and their own thoughts and feelings about what's going on.

## Open communication and age-appropriate truth-telling are important

Often parents think it's better to protect their children from difficulties by not telling them what's happening, or by pretending everything is 'normal'. But children pick up on tension and stress within the family. If they aren't told about the cause– such as money struggles

or a parent being unwell – children can make guesses based on their own ideas and sometimes their worst fears. And often children will blame themselves for what’s happening.

For example, when parents separate many children think it’s because of something they did. It’s important to tell children, in age-appropriate ways and words, what’s going on, and reassure them the separation is not their fault. (For more information, see our resource on [talking to your child about separation and divorce](#).)

Talking to children honestly can help them:

- ask questions and get the correct information
- make sense of what’s going on (in or around your family)
- know it’s OK to talk about difficulties and any worries they have
- be reassured that what’s happening is not their fault
- feel connected to you and part of the decisions that affect them
- learn problem-solving skills
- be hopeful that things will improve (if you explain actions you’re taking, for example)
- build skills and resilience to deal with challenges they might face in the future.

In this video (2 minutes, 34 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about what good communication within families looks like and some of the challenges of talking with children and helping them make meaning of their experiences.



## Tips for talking with children

- Find a time that is good for both of you – when you have space, won’t be interrupted and you are as calm as you can be.
- With younger children, it might be while they’re having a snack or drawing, or you’re doing a puzzle together.
- Often children, especially teens, are more likely to open up if there’s no eye contact – while you’re walking the dog or in the car together, for example.
- Be as honest as is appropriate – depending on the situation and your child’s age.
- Use simple, straightforward language to explain what’s going on, and address any fears, worries or feelings of self-blame your child might have. For example, you might say, ‘Mum and I are arguing a lot at the moment. We know that it’s not ideal and we are trying to work it out. We want you to know that it’s not because of anything you did, and that we both love you.’
- If you are concerned about getting emotional, take a few minutes to plan and practice what you want to tell your children. It can be helpful to talk it through with another adult beforehand.
- Allow space for children to ask questions and express their feelings. It’s understandable they might cry and need a cuddle, or be angry and need reassurance. Make sure your child knows their reaction doesn’t affect your love for them. If your child asks a question that you can’t answer now, tell them you will come back to them with an answer as soon as you can.
- Open the door to ongoing conversations – tell your child they can ask questions, or talk about it more, anytime they need to. Talk about other trusted adults they can talk to and either set up a conversation or make sure they know how to contact those people.

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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, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

## Helping children make meaning of their experiences

When children have new or difficult experiences – like starting school, parents separating, a disaster in their community, or experiencing bullying – they need your support to make meaning or make ‘sense’ of their experience.

Many children have a deep understanding of themselves and the skills and imagination to:

- make meaning of experiences – including negative or difficult ones
- know what helps them feel better
- solve problems or cope with challenges
- join in family conversations and offer ideas.

Children often understand much more than they can express. To help your child make sense of a situation – especially stressful or distressing ones – take the time to talk with, and really listen to, them. Be curious about what they already know and what they are thinking and feeling, and be ready to answer their questions truthfully. Helping a child to make meaning – to understand how an event or experience relates to them – often takes time and more than one conversation.

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**It is all confusing as a kid, nothing anyone says makes it really OK. Just being with my family was helpful, and Mum telling me it would not be forever, and that lots of other people are going through the same thing, was the only thing that was OK. And that I was loved.**

LIAM, 11 YEARS OLD, REFLECTING ON BEING HOMELESS AT AGE NINE

## Keep the communication going

It's important that communication in your family is open and ongoing.

If you have more than one child, making time for one-to-one chats with each of your children gives them space to share their thoughts and feelings. It also gives you the opportunity to tune in to any individual concerns or challenges they may be experiencing. Listening and answering their questions helps children understand and make meaning of what's happening in their world.

Whole family conversations can also be important. Often siblings react to challenges in different ways, which can create tension within the family. Help your children understand that no one's feelings are wrong and it's normal for people to have different perspectives.

## Thinking about family communication and meaning-making

Considering these questions can help you notice what's working well now, and any ways you might like to improve communication in your family.

- When have you found is a good time to talk with your child?
- What does your child most like to talk about?
- If you've had to talk about a tricky topic, when and how did you handle that? How did your child react?
- If you, your child or your whole family has been through a tough time, how did you help your child understand what was happening?
- If your family is going through a stressful experience, what do you want your child to know and understand about it?
- How do you keep communication ongoing with your child (e.g. check-in about how things are going for them)?
- What do you think your child would say are the best times and places to chat with you about things?



## More resources for talking with your child and helping them make meaning

The following Emerging Minds Families resources offer tips for planning and having conversations with children of different ages when your family is navigating difficulties:

- [Communicating with your baby during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your toddler during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your primary school-age child during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your teenager during tough times](#)
- [Talking to your child about separation and divorce](#)
- [Talking to children about family money struggles](#)
- [Talking to children about homelessness](#)
- [Podcast: How communicating well can keep separated families connected](#)

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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