

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Emotions and behaviours: Understanding and supporting children's feelings and responses

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.

To reach their full potential, children need to feel safe and nurtured. They also need to be able to express their emotions and have them 'seen' and responded to in a supportive and caring way.

Understanding your child's emotions and behaviours and knowing how to support them makes a positive difference to their development, learning, relationships and mental health.



Understanding behaviour as communication

Children may not yet fully understand, or have the language to express, their emotions, so their behaviour can be a way of exploring and communicating their feelings and needs.

If your child's behaviour is challenging, it's normal to feel concerned or want to 'fix it' as quickly as possible. But this is not always the best way to support your child.

Instead of only focusing on the behaviour itself, try to be curious about what's behind it. For example, you might say, 'I've noticed that you've been hitting your sister. I want you to know it's never OK to hit someone. I wonder if you were feeling angry about something when you did that?'

Create opportunities and space for your child to talk about what's going on for them and how they're feeling. When children experience big emotions like anger or frustration, connecting with you (or another trusted adult) can help them to feel safe and calm down.

Trying to understand what your child might be experiencing, feeling and trying to express can help you to understand their emotions – and help your child to understand them, too. Helping your child recognise and name their emotions can also [strengthen your connection and parent-child relationship](#).

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A lot of the times I feel because I am a parent, I have to have a solution. But 99% of the time it's not about me doing anything. It's me just walking alongside [my kids] and letting them know that they're loved.

FLICK, MUM OF FOUR, NEW SOUTH WALES

It's not always obvious or easy for you or your child to pinpoint what's behind their behaviour. As adults, we don't always understand our emotions or reactions either! By taking the time to be curious and show empathy, you're showing your child that their feelings and thoughts matter.

In this video (2 minutes, 53 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about ways children express emotions and the importance of being curious about what might be beneath a child's behaviours.

Taking care of yourself

To support your child's emotions and mental health, you need to first look after your own wellbeing.

Taking care of yourself will help you to 'tune in' to how your child is feeling and coping and be better able to support them. Also remember that children notice and learn from the behaviour of those around them – so watching you take care of yourself and use positive coping strategies will benefit them (and the rest of your family) too.

If you regularly find your child's behaviours and emotions difficult to understand, it can be helpful to get some advice and support for yourself. Not all adults grew up with the support to understand and regulate their own emotions. It's often not until we become parents, and we're helping children understand emotions, that we realise how important that is.

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We went through so much terrible stuff, and I didn't manage that very well. But when we came out the other end, one of the goals that I set myself was to be the best parent that I can be at all times. And that meant putting my kids' needs at the forefront, and making time even when it wasn't suitable. And I'm really glad that I was able to do that because that's been hugely supportive and helpful for their mental health.

EMI, PARENT OF FOUR, NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

Thinking about your child's emotions and behaviour

What have you noticed about your child's emotions and behaviour?

- What is your child like?
- What do they enjoy? What are they good at?
- What happens for them when they're upset?
- If your child often gets upset, angry or worried, what have you found helps them to cope with those big feelings?
- What do you think your child would say helps them?
- When you're finding it hard to deal with your child's emotions or behaviour, what have you found helps?



Learn more about children's emotions and mental health

To explore more about children's emotions and mental health and ways parents can support them, we recommend the following resources:

- [In focus: Understanding children's emotions and behaviour](#)
- [In focus: Understanding children's mental health](#)
- [In focus: What shapes children's mental health](#)
- [Podcast: Supporting your child's emotions](#)
- [Tuning in to Kids](#) courses for parents
- [Learning about emotions](#) (Raising Children Network)
- [Emotions and play - for preschoolers](#) (Raising Children Network)
- [Emotions and play - for school-aged children](#) (Raising Children Network)

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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