



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

## Families standing up to shame and stigma by Making their own meaning

### Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

### Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and share new ideas about how to stand up to shame and stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

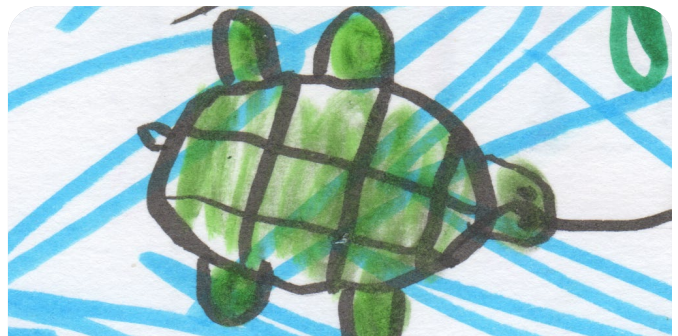
We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see [emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples](https://emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples)

### Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Shame and stigma often try to take over our sense of identity and tell stories about who we are in ways that make us feel small, trapped or worthless.



ANNA, 6 YEARS OLD

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**Our brains are meaning-making machines. Whatever we experience, our brain will try and come up with a story to explain it. Sometimes those stories are bad, but we don't realise that and we carry those stories for life. Someone abused as a child comes up with a story that they are worthless, stupid, bad because why else would their parent abuse them? It's so hard to recognise these as stories because they feel like facts, and they're hard to shake because if they're wrong, what else has our brain come up with that is wrong? Can we even trust what we think anymore?**

EMI, PARENT, LIVING ON NGARRINDJERI COUNTRY

It's only when we question the stories that shame and stigma try to tell us that we can make new meanings out of our experiences and find a new way to tell our family stories. Retelling stories about our families in ways that make us feel stronger can steer us back towards dignity, and help us care for ourselves and each other. Parents and carers can play an important role in helping our children tell and retell these stories so they become the loudest – for ourselves and others.

But how can we do this? It might help to:

- think about the way we speak about our children and ourselves:
  - What are the stories we tell day-to-day?
  - How do those stories make us feel?
  - Are there different stories we could be telling?
- use resources to have age-appropriate conversations with our children to help them see and understand stigma (e.g. the Stigma Stevie video at [youtu.be/wn6yBysl3PE](https://youtu.be/wn6yBysl3PE)) and discrimination (e.g. *Dealing with discrimination* on the Kids Helpline website [kidshelpline.com.au](https://kidshelpline.com.au))

- ask our children questions about what they think about their experiences, listen with curiosity, and support them to gain the skills they need to understand their own experiences
- take our family to cultural events or community spaces that uplift and celebrate our cultural heritage, or share food, stories and practices with them.

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**It's amazing if you have more knowledge about shame and stigma – you don't take it inside, you get less pain. You feel like you can develop some self-confidence. Otherwise, it's painful, it's sad, it's difficult to feel like you are the worst one in a crowd. You are bad and you can't do anything about it.**

M, PARENT, LIVING ON KAURNA COUNTRY

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**What helps me stop stigma turning into shame? To talk about it. Correct people – I learnt this by watching others do it. Knowing the truth about what happened when I was a kid helps me not turn comments into shame. Having confidentiality about my past. Having a fresh start was something that helped me. I like where I am, I have a pretty good foster family.**

A CHILD IN FOSTER CARE

Next, families who have been through tough times share their thoughts on the ways that making meaning of our experiences can help us get through and overcome the effects of shame and stigma.

## Helping children understand the situation

'Think about teaching your children the skills of understanding the situation. If you are really broken down by something and your kids just see their parent really struggling, cranky, not present, and the parent doesn't have the capability to have that conversation to say, "It's not you, it's not me, it's this outside issue", then the kids just see Mum, you know, "effing up". But if you can have the skills to be able to say, "Yeah, I'm really messing up right now and I don't like who I am, but it's not me and it's not you, it's this ..." then that teaches them that you can have these bad moments, but it doesn't mean it's gonna be like that forever. And you don't have to take that on as something that's a part of you because you are teaching them to externalise it and to put things where they're meant to be.'

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Skills for responding to harmful service experiences](#).*

## Modelling pride in our culture

'I feel happy my kids don't think it's shameful to speak Chinese. As a parent, it's very important to model I'm proud of our cultural background, our language. And if some people try to put it down, whenever I feel safe, I would stand up, speak up for it. But again, we have to assess if the environment is safe enough.'

## Taking control of the story

'When we were homeless it was very important for me to try and control the narrative of our lives. We had been homeless before but living in refuges when we first escaped violence. But this particular time, I had moved interstate with the kids to escape my ex and our housing had fallen through. I knew no one, my girlfriend who had come over with us had left and I didn't know how the support services worked. It was just me, the kids, our dog and a car and tent. It was pretty hard.'

'We could easily have fallen into that narrative of "bad parent, can't provide for their kids, can't get their life together, the kids are going to be damaged; it's hopeless and it always will be". But I was determined we would be more than that because we were. I was strong and showed it in how I interacted with people. I stood up for myself and my kids and did the things that needed to be done – trudging to places, organising and packing the car, finding somewhere to sleep, making food where we could, making sure the kids' needs were met. We were a small, tight-knit unit, the kids knew that.'

## Thinking about what makes your family unique

'When we are feeling powerless, or experience loss or disenchantment, we want to try and make sense of it. It's important that you own your meaning-making and don't let services or the people who front those services, or other institutions like the media, or mainstream society decide what your family is and make your meaning for you. It takes mental space, which you don't always have. Sometimes you can only do it after the acute phase [the most stressful part] has passed.'

'And by "meaning-making" I mean thinking about what it is that makes your family unique, the values, the special understandings, the things you do ... When you're in poverty, for example, it's very disempowering. Often there's other things that sit alongside poverty, contributing to the effect of disempowerment – discrimination, disability, violence, homelessness. All these things mean that you are often without a voice that is listened to. You are often at the mercy of services because you really need them and don't have a choice over whether to use them or not.'

'What this can mean is that you will have other people deciding for you what your family is. They may decide that your family is hopeless, dysfunctional, unhealthy, unhappy. Maybe it is those things sometimes. But having your own identity means that you have something to look at when you are being told things that you know aren't right or aren't the whole picture. If you have a strong sense of who your family is, and that's built on concepts of strength and positives, then you can remind yourself that that other person's idea of your family isn't the truth or the whole truth. I think that can be really helpful when you are trying to get away from that self-blame.'

*This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Experiences and skills of families living in poverty](#).*

## Teaching our children to think for themselves

'The knowledge that I pass to my child is like, I keep telling him, "Whatever anyone said, you got a brain, so think with your own brain. Even if your mum, dad, or teachers say something, still think about it."

'I accepted shame and stigma and I don't want my child to accept that. I want him to fight back. I want him to just be strong, have his own opinions, to think and research and try to learn. I don't want him to accept whatever anyone tells him.'





ANNA, 6 YEARS OLD

### Finding strength in our caring role and in faith

‘When I became a mother, I changed completely. I was another person. I found the reason to fight. I found a reason to survive. Giving up was not an option for me, no matter how hard the situation got. I didn’t let myself give up because I was responsible for my little one. So that was a huge driving force. Before that, I just accepted all the shame, all the negative stuff that maybe I deserve, that maybe it’s just all these things happening to me because of who I am. But when I became a mother, I had a beautiful angel in my arms. That beautiful baby got me. And without me, he wouldn’t survive. I should do the best that I can for him not to feel shame and stigma, not to feel poverty, not to feel racism, not to face all the difficulty that exists. I went through some of them, and I tried my best. I couldn’t avoid all of them, but I tried my best.’

‘My faith helps me a lot. I was praying and I believe that some extraordinary power is looking after me. For me personally, it was having my child, having the faith and just being patient, just waiting, and gradually, gradually things got better.’

### Remembering what was within our power and what we did right

‘Sometimes I still feel a bit of stigma, a bit of shame around how I behaved when I was unwell, but then I think, “But I was unwell. I had no control

over that.” So I say to myself, “Well, don’t be unkind to yourself because you couldn’t help it. You couldn’t help those situations you were in. Let’s look at turning it around. What did you do that was right?” I went to my doctors, I kept going, I kept pushing for change in medication, I kept trying to focus on the family and children, trying to do all these things. And I think that that is what makes me who I am now.’

### Getting angry at injustice

‘Outrage is so important because outrage is about recognising that something is wrong and it’s not really to do with you, but you need to be angry about it. When the kids and I were in the refuge, and leading up to the refuge, experiencing family violence, all that kind of stuff ... because we didn’t have that stability and that kind of sense of security, we were really kind of vulnerable to experiencing shame. We were very raw. Meaning-making around the shame was very important. That looked like getting angry at the injustice we were experiencing. And I guess it’s purposeful anger. So, not just general anger, but purposeful anger: “This is so unjust!” or “This is not fair.” I don’t think it’s helpful in the long term, but in those really tight times when you’re feeling really exposed and you’re really getting that sense of shame, that kind of “us and them” mentality can be really helpful. It gives you a bit of your own personal safety net that you can wrap yourself in.’

*It can be unhelpful to stay in an ‘us and them’ mentality in the long term. Read more about it in our fact sheet [Families standing up to shame and stigma by reclaiming connection and finding belonging](#).*

### Using humour

‘My mother is quite stigmatising in the way she speaks to me about my mental health challenges and also my transition (I’m a trans man). She also criticises my children, particularly about their autism. After years of trauma from my childhood, living with her, some days it got overwhelming when speaking to her.’

‘One day I was on my weekly phone call to my mother and she started saying stigmatising things ... I was getting more and more upset, so I closed my eyes and pictured myself sitting by a stream, and the wind was howling and the leaves were falling around me ... and in that moment, every comment was overwhelming. So, I found the biggest leaf and put my mother on it and sent it downstream ... and over the edge of a waterfall. It sounds absolutely terrible, but I laugh every single time I do it now. Every time I talk to her, I just imagine that scenario and it makes me laugh and relax and redirect the negative thoughts. Because sometimes we have to use humour to defuse moments of horror; it does no good to hold onto the words, but rather send them off with a smile.’

## Take a moment to think about ...



- What stood out to you from reading these stories?
- What did they make you think of in your own life or in your family?
- Are there people, places, stories or songs that help your family feel strong and proud in spite of any stigma you experience?
- What will you think about or do differently after reading these stories?

Next, you might like to read our fact sheet [\*Families stand up against shame and stigma by reclaiming connection and finding belonging.\*](#)

## Recommended resources

Kids Helpline ([kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)) has some useful articles for children and young people:

- [\*Dealing with discrimination\*](#)
- [\*Your rights\*](#)
- [\*Sexual, gender and body diversity discrimination\*](#)

Art and crafts can be another awesome way to make our own meaning, even with something as simple as colouring-in. There are some freely available colouring-in resources:

- [\*We believe you: A colouring book for survivors and supporters\*](#) from [care.purdue.edu](http://care.purdue.edu)
- [\*Gender diversity-positive colouring pages and posters\*](#) from [genderwheel.com](http://genderwheel.com)
- [\*Colouring books, pages and clip art with disability representation\*](#) from [disabilityequalityeducation.org](http://disabilityequalityeducation.org)
- [\*Crayola's free colouring pages of cultural celebrations\*](#) at [crayola.com](http://crayola.com)

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Shame and stigma resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: [emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma](http://emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma)

## Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit [emergingminds.com.au/families](http://emergingminds.com.au/families)

Or you can follow us on social media or our podcast channel:

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