



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Families standing up to shame and stigma by Making home a safe haven

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

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.

When our family experiences shame and stigma, it can be overwhelming. Often, it is in tricky circumstances that may be beyond our control.

But if it is possible to create safety and belonging within our family, even in the smallest of ways or briefest of moments, it can help us – and especially our children – get through tough times and remember we are worthy, valuable and loveable.

If you are experiencing homelessness or have to move around a lot, home might just mean being wherever your family is.

“

The greatest support has been from my parents who encouraged me to stand up rather than take stigmatising actions lying down.

ZAC, YOUNG PERSON FROM A RURAL AREA

Before you continue, take a moment to think about ...



- What little things can we do to help the people in our family feel loved, accepted and valued?
- How do we create a space where our children feel more comfortable talking about their experiences and emotions?
- How do we celebrate our children's and family's achievements and strengths?
- What are the ways we try to have quality time together, especially when we are stressed, unwell, struggling with money or experiencing homelessness?

We appreciate that questions like these can be difficult to answer.

A safe haven will look different for different families. There is no manual on how to create one, but you know your family best. Start small, try things out – it's OK if not everything you try fits for your children or it takes time to learn new skills and ways of doing things.

What if we didn't grow up with safety?

It can be especially tough to imagine how to make our families feel safer if we didn't grow up experiencing home as a safe place. But sometimes, those of us who have grown up having really tough experiences learnt even more than other families about how to make our children feel safe when they are facing shame and stigma. It's important we value what we know and trust in our skills, but also ask for help when we feel like we don't know the answer.

What if our children are cared for by others?

It can be overwhelming to work out how to create safety for our children when we have to co-parent with people who:

- have different parenting values to us
- don't work together with us; or
- use violence or abuse against us or our children.

While we do our best to ensure our children always feel safe, it's not always possible, especially when we share their care with others. But know that doing what you can do when your children are with you does make a difference.

Families share their tips

Some tips from families for making home a safe haven include:

- stopping and making the time
- telling our children we are here for them
- noticing our own tricky emotions first
- tuning in when our children are struggling
- helping our children navigate their emotions
- trusting our children
- finding the best ways not to hurt them more
- connecting with our children and our culture; and
- finding small moments of connection throughout the day.



MADISON, 8 YEARS OLD

In the following stories, you'll read about how the families we talked to made their homes safe havens. As you read them, have a think about what safety feels like for you and what you think it feels like for your children – these ideas might be quite different.

Stopping and making the time

'Making sure you always have time to talk. When I got into recovery from drugs, alcohol and violence, I had a lot of guilt about how I had parented. One of the ways I managed that was to be the best parent I could be at all times. So if my kids wanted to talk to me, I would stop what I was doing and make the time. I almost always did this and if I couldn't then and there, I would tell my kids when I could.

'As a result, they know they can bring pretty much anything to me. If they ever bought something to me that was not good, I also wouldn't overreact or get angry. We would talk about it. I tried very intentionally not to criticise them and to meet everything they did with love and compassion. If I did something that didn't sit with these values, I would apologise as soon as possible.'

Telling our children we are here for them

'Our kids have autism so we've got all these situations where we've got to show them that there's love, there's compassion, there's understanding, there's support. So if something does happen, we're here. We've always said, "If there's anything that happens to you, it doesn't matter what it is, come and talk to us. We're here all the time. We won't be angry. We just want to help you." And that's how we set it up so that they can come to us at any time with any problem. And they don't have to feel ashamed. Instilling in them that they can trust that we will understand. Being a parent is just building those little foundational stones for them to move along.'

Noticing our own tricky emotions first

'One of the biggest challenges as parents, is to learn to manage our own emotions. In reflecting back, so many of my actions were motivated to control the behaviour of my children, so my irritation, frustration, impatience, anger, etcetera would go away. If they were doing things that were winding me up, instead of me managing that emotion inside me, I would manage them and make them stop. It's a juggle as a parent. We need to manage our own tricky emotions and manage our children's emotional states at the same time because they haven't yet developed the ability to be self-aware, have insight or have the maturity to manage their own emotions. Tough gig.'

Tuning in when our children are struggling

'Noticing changes in routines and behaviours can be a sign kids might be struggling. For example, one of my kids will go very quiet and internalise everything. Another child would be very emotional, aggressive and started wetting the bed. Sometimes sibling fights started up. These were signs I needed to talk to my kids and figure out what was going on.'

This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Managing family health and money struggles at the same time](#).

Helping our children navigate their emotions

'Our children need to see us be honest about our emotions and show them how we process emotions. If they don't see it and we don't have conversations about it, they learn [stoicism](#) and become avoidant/emotionally unavailable. When my kids were little and I didn't understand this, if they had a bit of a meltdown (note the judgemental label) in public, I would get in their ear in almost a threatening way and tell them, "We don't behave like this" and they "better shape up" or they're in "big trouble". I used fear to make them suppress their emotions. I would have loved to have gotten down on their level and explained to them that they're experiencing really strong emotions right now, that I love them, it's tough to have those emotions, but to reassure them that they will pass and I'm here for them.'

Trusting our children

'One of my children was being bullied at school at one time. It was ongoing and unpleasant. When my son told me about it, we talked about different responses and what to do. I also asked him what he wanted me to do. I brought it up regularly to check in on how he was going with it. He didn't want me to go into school but he knew if things got out of hand I would. From talking about it with him, I could see he was managing it and he knew I was there for him. The bullying lasted a few months and it was not nice, but my kid got through it and he ended up having a really good group of friends at the school who were all a bit alternative like he was.'

You can find more information about this topic in [Emerging Minds' bullying resources](#): emergingminds.com.au/families/bullying

Finding the best ways to not hurt them more

'I've got an ongoing challenge. My child came back [from staying with his father every week] and said, "You're stupid," repeating very nasty or racist words. I say: "When you say this, you're hurting my feelings. Don't repeat what other people say, use your own brain. Use your own judgement." I try to talk to my child directly, not giving comment about other people's behaviour. He gets poisoned. They use him as a weapon against me. I have to find the best way not to hurt my child more.'

This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Families responding to racism](#).

Connecting with our children and our culture

'We can do activities together that don't cost money or are cheaper. For example, there are lots of YouTube videos with cultural practices or traditions from our home countries. These kinds of things can help us to connect with our kids, connect with culture, and foster a sense of pride and identity without much cost or leaving the home!'

This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Families responding to racism](#).

Finding small moments of connection throughout the day

'For example, colouring in one small drawing ... you don't need to play elaborately for hours. Also, pointing out small things to take pleasure in when we were out, like finding the wonder in nature – "Look at the clouds, aren't they beautiful today?" or "Look at that little plant, isn't it unusual?" That kind of thing of thing.'

This story and more like it can be found in our fact sheet [Tips for families experiencing homelessness](#).

Take a moment to think about ...



- From reading these stories, what stood out to you?
- What did they make you think of in your own life or in your family?
- What story or idea would you add to this list and share to help other families create a safe haven?
- How might you think or do things differently after reading these stories?

Next, you might like to read our fact sheet [Families stand up against shame and stigma by making meaning](#)

Recommended resources

Parenting

- Read about the five key areas you can focus on to support children's development, learning, mental health and overall wellbeing in our resource [Five ways to support your child's mental health](#).
- Hear from some families about ways they found to care for and connect with each other when life is difficult in our fact sheet [Connecting and caring for each other in tough times](#).
- Are you a parent struggling to look after your children? Read more about moving towards 'good enough parenting' in our fact sheet [When we're really struggling to parent](#).
- The website [peacefulparenthappykids.com](#) shares ideas on [how to break the intergenerational cycle of shame](#).

Talking to children

- For ideas on how to explain the family's financial situation without introducing shame, check out our fact sheet [Talking to children about family money struggles](#).
- In our fact sheet [Talking to children about homelessness](#) families share how having age-appropriate conversations with children can help them make meaning of their family's experiences and reduce feelings of stigma and isolation.
- You may also find the following age-appropriate guides on planning and having conversations with children useful:
 - [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](#)

Understanding child mental health

Child mental health does not mean child mental *illness*. If you would like to learn more about children's wellbeing, you might be interested in Emerging Minds' resources on [understanding and supporting children's mental health](#).

Emotions

- peacefulparenthappykids.com has some ideas for:
 - how to teach children about emotions in daily life
 - helping children work through their emotions; and
 - managing strong emotions.
- In the children's movie *Inside Out* (2015) animated characters show how it's important for young people to experience a full range of emotions, even the negative ones like sadness. It also suggests that it's important to **show** your emotions, so that other people will **see** how you are feeling and know when you need care and attention, especially when you don't have the words to say what you need. Read more about *Inside Out* on raisingchildren.net.au/guides/movie-reviews/inside-out and check the library for a DVD or book version to borrow.

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

Emerging Minds Families

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit emergingminds.com.au/families

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

 [instagram.com/emergingmindsau](https://www.instagram.com/emergingmindsau)

 [facebook.com/EMFamilies](https://www.facebook.com/EMFamilies)

 emergingminds.com.au/families/podcasts