



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Families standing up to shame and stigma by Responding directly – on our own or with help

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.

It's not always possible for families and children to respond directly to stigma, but when it is, it can help counter the stigma and stop it turning into shame.

There are many different ways of responding directly to stigma, whether it's on our own or with the help of others. We might use:

- humour
- knowledge and facts
- protest
- silence
- curiosity; or
- anger.

Or we might want to make a formal complaint, or seek the help of [advocates](#) or others to support us.

Sometimes it takes a lot of trial and error before we find ways of responding to the stigma we experience in ways that work for us. Even when we respond, it might not lead to the outcome we'd hoped for, but it can still have ripple effects in our lives and in our communities that we might not get to see.

Children, young people and parents who experience stigma often have to make quick assessments about whether it's safe or possible to respond directly. How we respond can depend a lot on our different circumstances, especially if we are exhausted from the daily work of surviving poverty, homelessness, racism, violence or [ableism](#). Just because we don't say or do something in the moment **does not** mean we are not responding. Children and families are always responding. To get a sense of other kinds of resistance we might choose, check out Emerging Minds' [other resources on responding to stigma that are part of this series](#).

Take a moment to think about ...



- When was a time you found it possible to respond directly to the stigma your family has experienced?
- What made it possible to respond in that instance?
- What kind of a difference did it make? What do you imagine might have been different if you hadn't been able to respond in that way?
- What have you appreciated about the way your children have responded directly to stigma?
- What do you pay attention to when deciding whether or not it's safe or possible to respond directly to stigma?

Remember, it is not the responsibility of people experiencing stigma to address it. Check out our [Standing against stigma](#) fact sheet to read stories and get inspiration about how we can all challenge and dismantle stigma.

Next, you can read a few stories about ways that young people and parents have responded directly to stigma. These ways of responding might not feel possible or be what you would choose to do, but perhaps they will remind you how you have responded to stigma or spark some new ideas.

Staring and moving away

'I ignored stigmatising actions by staring at the perpetrator and then moving away. Staring and moving away communicated my disapproval of the stigmatising action without escalating the matter by me moving away, and helped me to preserve my self-esteem by not just moving away in the first instance. I used to run away when I was young. As I grew up, I developed the courage to take a stand by staring before moving away. 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

Using curiosity

'My daughter was having a hard time at school with another girl saying mean things to her about how she acted and the things she liked. So one day my daughter said in response, "I'm just wondering if you meant for that comment to be really mean?" I thought that was such a smart and curious way to stand up to these comments.'

Using humour

'I have a foster sister who I count as my sister. When people ask me, I say she is my sister. I have a friend who has met my foster sister, but doesn't know we aren't biologically related, and thinks we look so alike. I laugh to myself and say, "Yeah, we do!"

- A child in foster care

'If a family member says something stigmatising I try to call it out but in a light hearted way ... like I might say, "Well that is a Karen thing to say"... so I am still calling it out, but trying to keep it light, so the person doesn't feel attacked and it doesn't start a problem.'

- KC, young person from a rural area

Letting children know they have a right to defend themselves

'If my children get bullied at school, firstly I need to tell my children, "You have to make sure you're safe, walk away for whatever reason. But you can defend yourself if people are getting too much." I found that's a dramatic difference because all my white friends, they never mentioned you can defend yourself. But my point is, you can tolerate people's behaviour. But to a point, you have your right to defend yourself - but make sure you're safe.'

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

Educating myself and expanding my vocabulary

'I have a bigger vocabulary now and that truly changes the way people perceive me, which in itself is a stigma. We have a weirdly classist idea and ideal around language in this country, and unfortunately, it affects kids who have no reason to know what the word "epistemic" means. But when you're a kid, you can't properly advocate for yourself because people don't trust you, they think you don't use proper language, which you have no reason to know – you're a kid. For me, the biggest change has been expanding my vocabulary and educating myself and making it so that I can say the big fancy words that make people listen to my opinions.'

– Harley, young person from a rural area

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Remember, it's not the responsibility of people experiencing stigma to address it.

Talking with schools or childcare

Another area where families might need to respond to stigma directly is at schools or childcare. Families worked with us to create a fact sheet that provides ideas for talking about your children's wellbeing to people working in education settings.

As shown in some of these stories, stigma can show up in the form of bullying behaviour for children at school, kindy or childcare. Take a look at Emerging Minds' bullying resources for guidance on what it is, how it can impact children and what can be done to address it:

emergingminds.com.au/families/bullying

Making a complaint

When we experience stigma in the course of accessing a service, one option is to find out about the process for making a formal complaint. Families we talked with shared some of the things they have learnt about responding in this way.

They said that making a complaint ...

... can be empowering and create change

'I've made a complaint about a worker when they were really rude unnecessarily. And I've advised other people to do the same if I've heard stories that are unjust. If you could turn that lens away from yourself and outside, that's one way of being an activist. And that doesn't mean going to marches and things. I didn't have the energy or the ability to do that. It means doing it in whatever capacity that you can. I think it's really, really important. I tried to do that in the times I was able to. Standing up against ignorance and discrimination.'

... can take a lot of time

'One way to complain is when you just get angry and you say then and there, you know, "Your service is stupid." That's the one way, and it's completely valid, but that's probably not gonna be that efficient. So have a think about why you're complaining and what you want to complain about. So, if you want your complaint to have an impact, then you wait till you've calmed down and you write it out and you work out how you're gonna do it. Are you going to do it in writing? Are you going to phone someone? Does the organisation have a complaints process? You can say, "I want to hear what the resolution is," and you can ask for it to be anonymous or to have your name to it. So you need to put some time into it. And then if you're going to do that, you've gotta think, is it worth it? You know, how important is this to me?'

... can be worth it, but still give an unfair outcome

'I had one experience that was distressing and I made a complaint and the complaint went nowhere. And there was so much emotion and it was completely wrong and unfair. Sometimes you've just gotta let it go. And that's what I decided to do with this service, to just let it go. Even though I knew that it was wrong completely and I knew that they made assumptions and judgements and did the wrong thing, I had to let it go.'

These stories and more like them can be found in our fact sheet [Skills for responding to harmful service experiences](#).

Speaking up

If it feels possible, another option is to contact your local Member of Parliament (MP) or council to let them know about the barriers you are up against and what kinds of things might make a difference. Search for your federal MP on electorate.aec.gov.au or type 'who is my state MP' into Google and follow the oxfam.org.au guide on **writing to your MP**.

Seeking support of advocates and legal protections

Advocates and legal supports can sometimes help families respond to stigma and find their way through tough times. **Legal aid** (nationallegalaid.org/for-individuals) and community legal services help people who can't afford the cost of legal support. They can provide representation in court, maintain privacy, and educate families about their rights.

There are other types of advocates and supports too, with slightly different roles like:

- rights-based advocates
- social workers
- support workers
- peer workers
- court companions
- ombudsmen
- rights or legal information phone lines.

Sometimes health workers, school counsellors or faith-based community leaders might take on these roles. Friends, family or members of our community may also be able to provide [advocacy](#) and support.

Some of the things advocates can do include:

- helping you find your way through unfamiliar processes
- giving you information about what you are entitled to and the choices you have
- supporting you to ask for what you need, or in some cases, speak on your behalf
- phoning people on your behalf or going along with you to challenging appointments
- connecting you with support networks and referring you to other services that may be able to help.



'THE WOLF IS A SYMBOL OF BEING COURAGEOUS.' AMELIE, 12 YEARS OLD

It can take time and persistence to find an advocate you trust to support you without judgement. But having someone walking alongside you who has your back and really understands what you are up against can make a big difference. They should be open and honest with you about what they can and can't do, share the information you need to make decisions, and not make decisions for you, coerce you or speak on your behalf without your consent.

Read the following stories about times when families found having an advocate made a difference in the face of stigma.

Court support in family court

'The Women's Information Service saved my life because I didn't have anyone to take with me to the court. And when I realised that service is available, that they send a female – it was like a really, really big support. Just someone to sit next to me because I didn't wanna sit in the courtroom alone.'

You can find this story and more like it in our fact sheet [Collaboration and care between families and service providers](#).

A respectful children's advocate in reunification

'I remember we were at this family reunification meeting and child protection was saying all the s*** about us. And we ended up getting so angry that we just got up and walked out. And the advocate for our kids, she comes running out after us and she was like, "Hang on, hang on. Have a chat with me." And we stopped and had a cigarette and she said, "Let me tell you one thing: your kids really f***ing love you. And they really wanna come home." And I was just like, "Well, I will do whatever the f*** it takes to get them home." It was people like that. They didn't care if we swore. They didn't care how we acted. She was more on our level. Not like, "I've got a degree – I'm better than you." They were more interested in actually helping us do the right thing.'

You can find this story and more like it in our fact sheet [Collaboration and care between families and service providers](#).

My sponsor became my unofficial support person

'When I first started to take proper steps to get stability for the kids and I after escaping violence, I was a very scared and struggling person. I was very deep in trauma and a lot of conversations that I needed to have to get support would put me in a trauma response where I couldn't communicate. I was in a 12-step program and my sponsor at the time was an amazing person. She became my unofficial support person. She would come with me to key legal appointments or health appointments and when I couldn't communicate, she would talk for me. She was amazing, kind and gracious.'

Support at school from a children's disability advocacy group

'We had an advocate to mediate with us for the children at primary school. When you have neurodivergent children and are battling distress, it is a bit difficult to keep up the fight and that is why we wanted someone to help advocate for us. The experience was unfortunately not successful for the children because the school staff weren't willing to admit they weren't experts in [neurodivergence](#) and learn and work with us.'

'But it was definitely worth a try having the advocate, as we were running out of steam, options and patience. They were from a children's disability advocacy group. There was only one person in our region. The advocate came to any meeting we asked them to and reassured us that it wasn't us doing anything wrong. We felt supported and understood, even though the school was dismissive and the outcome wasn't what we were hoping for.'

Being persistent in finding an advocate

'I asked the first time at school and said, "I don't want to be in here. Can I do my work elsewhere?" And I got told "no". If it stopped there, I don't think I would've ended up finishing school. So being persistent or asking somebody else, talking to the guidance counsellors or one of the other people ... Just keep asking, find that person that you do feel comfortable with and that is advocating for you. Keep asking different people. It is definitely exhausting, don't get me wrong. I think it still took me a year or so to find the right person that really cared about not only me but my education. And they could see that I generally wanted to do my education and I just was struggling with the school system of how they wanted it done. So, I just had to keep asking. It takes a lot of patience and a lot of spoons* get wasted, but eventually you'll find someone somewhere.'

– KC, young person from a rural area

**Curious about 'spoons'? Watch Ben Carpenter explain spoon theory on YouTube (please note the video contains a few words that might not be considered appropriate for little ears):*

youtu.be/kHHk5lagliO

How to find advocacy and support

Finding an advocate or supports can be hard – sometimes interactions with such services can cause families harm, humiliation or distress. If this has happened to you, the stories shared by families in our fact sheet [Skills for responding to harmful service experiences](#) might give you some ideas for how to respond, heal and recover. Here are a few ideas about how to find advocates and supports to get you started:

- Try searching the internet for 'advocacy service near me'. Advocacy services help us navigate health and social services so we can get what we need.
- There are a range of **legal assistance services** created to help people (ag.gov.au/legal-system). Different legal assistance providers operate in all Australian states and territories. Each of these services provide different levels of legal information and advice.
- Community Legal Centres Australia has links to organisations that might be able to help with legal issues: clcs.org.au/legal-help
- 1800respect.org.au offers supports for people impacted by domestic, family or sexual violence. You may also want to refer to this list of women's legal services by location: wlsa.org.au/members
- On the Disability Advocacy Network Australia website you will find local disability advocacy services: dana.org.au/find-an-advocate

- If your children were removed from your care, or they may be at risk of being removed, check out FISH (finclusionnh.org), an organisation that supports families with children in the child protection and out-of-home care systems. You can talk to a peer worker by calling [1300 942 598](tel:1300942598).
- If you are a kinship or foster carer, try searching online for an independent advocate to find someone who might be able to support you.
- The Australian Human Rights Commission can provide support for discrimination and breaches of human rights at: humanrights.gov.au/complaints
- Children's Commissioners and Guardians across Australia might be able to assist with complaint processes – select your location from the following:
 - Australian Capital Territory: hrc.act.gov.au
 - Northern Territory: occ.nt.gov.au
 - New South Wales: acyp.nsw.gov.au
 - South Australia: gcyp.sa.gov.au
 - Tasmania: childcomm.tas.gov.au
 - Victoria: ccyp.vic.gov.au
 - Western Australia: ccyp.wa.gov.au

Take a moment to think about ...



- These are just a few ideas about ways of responding directly to stigma. Did any of these stories stand out to you or remind you of experiences you have had?
- What skills of responding would you or your children add to this list?
- In times when it's been possible to respond to stigma directly, what beliefs or hopes for your family's lives have you been standing up for?

Recommended resources

- The Family Care Centre shares ideas from parents about their families' experiences of dealing with stigma: family.cmho.org/dealing-with-stigma

Bullying

- Stigma often takes the form of bullying behaviour. Bullying is a common childhood experience, but it's no longer considered 'a normal part of growing up' or 'just something children do'. Emerging Minds' bullying resources can help families understand childhood bullying, how it can impact children and what you can do to address it: emergingminds.com.au/families/bullying

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

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

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