



Wellbeing Support: Encouraging Emotional Expression

We all feel better after we have had a conversation with someone about how we feel and we have felt truly seen, heard and understood. Most of the time, we know what we need to do, but we just want someone to listen and to understand us. More so than adults, children do need guidance and support, but they are often not able to receive this and take in a lesson until they have felt emotionally understood. This is the reason why many parents want to know further ideas on encouraging their children to express themselves emotionally.

Empathy and Emotion Coaching

Children build their ability to name their feelings and feel calmer as a result with the support of their loved ones and with plenty of empathy. In order for a child to build emotional literacy and resilience, they need:

1. Adults to **empathise** with what they are feeling e.g. “I can see you are really sad about the end of Year 4”
2. **Validation** of what they are feeling e.g. “I’d be really sad if I were you too, you have absolutely loved this year and you are going to miss your teacher so much aren’t you?”
3. **Set limits** on behaviour (if needed) e.g. “I know you’re really sad and I understand why, but that doesn’t mean you can be unkind to your sister”
4. **Problem solve** with the child e.g. “Let’s remember how sad you were when you left Year 3! You were really nervous for Year 4 but you have loved it! Shall we make a card for your new teacher so you can start building a relationship with them?”

Engaging in empathic relating can feel counter-productive when we want children to focus on the positives or the solutions ahead. However, making space and time to talk about your child’s anxiety, feeling of loss, frustration, injustice, or struggle will help them process the feeling and move on more smoothly.

Play

Children tend to not say ‘I’ve had a hard day, can we chat?’, they say “Please can you play with me?” and this is how children best communicate their worries, feelings, fears and hopes. Spending time playing with your child and letting them lead the direction sometimes gives you the opportunity to ask how the toys or characters in the play are feeling. We can offer guidance, advice, support and empathy in the play rather than directly to our child.



Children respond really well to asking them how a teddy or favourite toy might be feeling, as they tend to be more honest about how they feel speaking from a teddy or toy's perspective rather than their own. You can share your feelings too and together have shared experiences of managing anxiety and building resilience.

Asking children to write or draw what they are feeling is a very helpful way to encourage expression. Doing this together is also relaxing and connecting which is helpful in the face of an emotional time as well.

Metaphors

For older children, encouraging them to share their opinions, thoughts and feelings about films they have watched or books they have read is a helpful way to gain insight into how they are feeling. Asking what characters may be feeling and what they would do in those situations is helpful. Many popular children's films contain incredibly deep and helpful themes to encourage emotional discussion including 'Inside Out' which is about the 5 core emotions in a child's brain, 'Encanto' which includes themes of loss, self esteem and pressure and 'Coco' and 'Onward' which can encourage reflection on bereavement and loss.

Further things to say or do instead of "don't worry, it will be fine":

- "Can you tell me what you are most worried about?"
- "Can we paint/draw/make it?"
- "Can you show me what it feels/sounds like?"
- "What kind of weather does it feel like?"
- "What do you need from me? How can I help you?"
- "Shall we try some big deep breaths together?"
- "What would you like to say to your worry? What do you think your worry would say back?"
- "What does it feel like in your body?"
- "Match your breaths to mine"
- "Let's think up some endings for what might happen" (Together, think of realistic endings as well as silly, dramatic and anxious endings)
- "What's something we can do together that might help you feel different?"
- "What has been hard for you today?"



Further helpful responses:

- “I get scared too sometimes, especially when I am doing something new. But I don’t stay scared forever.”
- “Big feelings are like the rain, they come and make us wet but they do go away and we dry out.”
- “I am here with you. You are safe.”
- Just sitting together and having a cuddle.

Helpful resources

- Happy, Healthy Minds - The School of Life
 - A children’s guide to emotional wellbeing covering topics including anxiety, bullies, identity, anger, feeling misunderstood, separation and confidence.
Excellent for adults too!
- An Emotional Menagerie - The School of Life
 - A book of poetry for KS2 age children to help develop emotional vocabulary
- Emotions cards such as ‘The Bear Cards’, ‘Blob Cards’ or ‘Elemotions’ to help children connect to their emotions through images. Talking together about what emotions the images depict is very helpful.