



Wellbeing Support: Explaining Difficult Situations to Children

We are sorry that you are facing a difficult situation in your family and hope this can offer some support, guidance and reassurance in your time of struggle. Thank yourself for reaching for support and know that all your efforts to manage your situation in the best way you can have immense value.

Explaining The Facts

When children hear adults whispering, shielding them from conversations, or saying “you won’t understand that don’t worry”, it can make them feel quite paranoid and afraid. They then often jump to the absolute worst case scenario because they assume that something is being hidden from them because it is so terrible. Children also have a tendency to blame themselves if they don’t understand a situation well. That is why it is really helpful for children to understand exactly what is happening in clear and age-appropriate language, no matter what the circumstance.

You Don’t Need all the Answers Right Away

It is absolutely fine to say “I don’t know” if a child asks you something you do not have the answers to yet. You do not need to pretend to have all the answers to help a child manage any difficult situation. Instead we can say, “I don’t know the answer to that, it’s really difficult when we can’t know what we want to know, isn’t it?”. Offering empathy is really calming and supportive in the times where we cannot answer all children’s questions.

Similarly, when you don’t know the answer or if you want to think about how to answer and want to think about it, you can be honest with your child and say, “Can I have a think about that and come back to you?” It is not true that we need to have all the answers right away to help children remain calm and regulated.

Role Modelling

Children usually respond to a situation happening in their life as the people around them are responding. If we can be calm as we explain the facts, they will take this calmness on board.

Being calm does not mean pretending everything is fine and shielding children from your emotions. It's okay, if anything it is actually really positive, to model that we're anxious, sad or worried too. This shows our children that anxiety is manageable and doesn't overwhelm us (even if we do feel overwhelmed inside). We can cry and show children that we



understand it's normal to be upset in response to sad situations and that we'll feel better soon (often after a long hug). This is the same for all our emotions and responses to the world. We can help children learn that their feelings are normal by expressing them together and remaining regulated as we do so.

Practising breathing techniques together might be helpful (breathing OUT calms down our nervous system), or perhaps incorporate some 'sharing how we feel' time into the day. 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's perspective rather than their own. You can share your feelings too and together have shared experiences of managing emotions and building resilience in the face of stress. Children will then have these skills for the rest of their lives.

Clear Language

It is really helpful to avoid phrases or unclear sayings such as 'passed away' or 'money troubles' as children don't usually understand what these phrases mean. It is often helpful to ask children to tell me what they understand or repeat back in their own words what that have just been explained. We can then clarify any incorrect assumptions they have made about the information they have digested. This process may happen over several different conversations.

Empathy

Whilst the facts are really important, sometimes, before we jump to the facts, children might need lots of empathy to feel like their feelings have been heard. Empathy calms children (and adults!) down enough so they are able to listen to and digest the facts.

Empathy is telling children we understand how they feel and that their feelings are valid. It also comes in the form of hugs and non-verbal communication. For example, making soothing sounds or saying "I know, I know" in a calm voice is very comforting and helps children manage their emotions. Empathy can look like stopping to regulate before we reason together. For more information on this and using an empathic approach to manage anxieties and emotions, please see the handout on 'Managing Anxiety' and 'Encouraging Emotional Expression'.



Further Reassurance

Children switch between different emotional states much more than adults. For example, you might tell them something difficult and then they might skip off to play. This doesn't mean children haven't heard or understood. Similarly, children might get really upset and be inconsolable for a while, and this doesn't mean they will never be happy again.

Remember to look after yourself. It can be so hard to absorb our children's emotions, when we are struggling too and when there might not be anyone to look out for you.

Helpful Resources

The [Young Minds website](#) has pages with specific guidance about topics such as:

- [Parental separation/divorce](#)
- [Gaming](#) and mental health
- [Parental mental illness](#)
- [Racism and mental health](#)
- [Gender identity](#)

This list is not exhaustive. Each point above is a link to the Young Minds website.