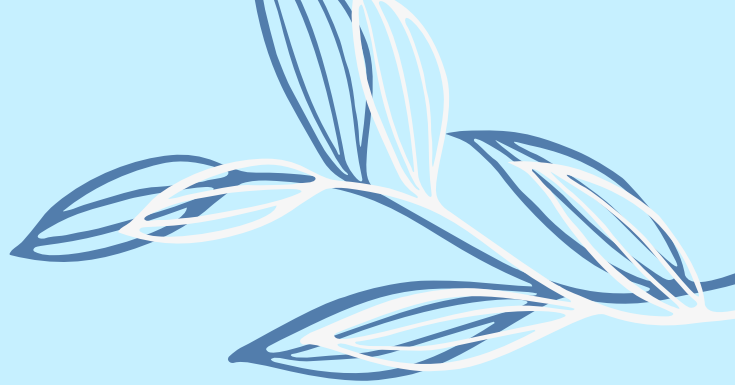


**Relate**

Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland



# Supporting your child with Mental Health

**A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & CARERS**





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# Using this book

**This book is full of information, activities and advice for parents and carers in supporting children and young people with their mental health. These ideas can be tried at home but keep in mind that these strategies will need to be used regularly and repeatedly to become habits for children. The term parent is used throughout the book to include anyone who has parental responsibility or a duty of care to a child.**

## Aims:

- Provide strategies to help children manage big emotions
- Help parents to manage their children's emotions
- Give parents a chance to reflect on their children's needs





# Key points

- **Children cannot manage difficult emotions alone and need the continued help of trusted adults**
- **Children learn largely from what is modelled by adults around them, this includes ways to manage emotions and deal with difficult situations**
- **Children can cope with most difficult situations if they have trusted adults around them who will listen, be empathic and support them**
- **Children open up when they feel safe to do so. Children are less likely to open up when they think they might upset a parent**
- **Children often feel high levels of shame when they are not coping, which damages self-esteem and means they may struggle to maintain eye contact when talking about difficulties.**

# PACE

PACE stands for  
**Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity & Empathy.**

**Playfulness:** creates openness, calmness and engagement. Children become less defensive and tense when playing or laughing. It can help them to open up without being asked or probed.

**Acceptance:** ensures children continue to feel loved and safe, regardless of what they are sharing. A child's inner world is simply their inner world, it is not right or wrong.

**Curiosity:** removes judgment and demonstrates that a parent's purpose is only to understand what is going on.  
e.g. what do you think was going on? what was that like?

**Empathy:** communicates love, understanding and support. It validates feelings and demonstrates compassion.  
e.g. that sounds really upsetting, that must have been really difficult

(Dan Hughes, 2011).

# Maintaining a balance

**Add the five biggest issues your child is struggling with into the blue clouds below, add five positives about your child into the white clouds.**



**Maintaining a balance between difficulties and strengths is important. If children only hear parents talking about the difficulties, it will lower their self-esteem and change their self-image.**

# Reducing anxiety

## KEY POINTS

- Anxiety is a normal human emotion that most people experience regularly. It is not something we should or could ever stop feeling, but instead, we may try to manage our response and reaction.
- Regardless of the cause of the worry or anxiety, try not to belittle or dismiss what children are feeling. If it feels significant to them, it is important.
- Children want to be listened to and understood.
- It is ok for you not to have the right answers, it is most helpful to listen, empathise, and try to understand.

## Possible traits of anxiety

- Low confidence in themselves and their abilities
- Feel panicked, worried or fearful in new situations
- More likely to have a low opinion of themselves
- Likely to not speak up in front of others, will often choose not to share opinions or thoughts with others
- May have trouble sleeping or staying asleep
- Might be likely to not try things for fear of failing



# What children say:

## ANXIETY

Being told you'll be fine or don't worry doesn't help

My parents take time to talk to me and ask me how I am

I get called silly for sharing my worries

I get asked loads of questions and I don't like it

Dad says "it could be worse", but how does that help?

I feel loads better if my Mum listens to me and gives me a big hug

Nobody wants to be bothered by my worries

My Mum just tells me about her problems instead of listening to mine

My worries are worse at night, but it helps when Dad reads with me before bed

It's hard to ask for help because my parents are always too busy

Sometimes I like to have time on my own and then I will talk when I feel ready

# Early Warning Signs

A multitude of physical feelings often accompanies anxiety and worry.

Helping a child to recognise these early warning signs may help them to become more aware of what they are experiencing.

Sometimes children can feel overwhelmed by big feelings, which can result in displays of uncontrollable behaviour. If we can become aware of what we are feeling before this point, we can take the necessary steps to manage and calm ourselves.

SURROUNDINGS  
SEEM DISTANT/  
UNREAL

DIFFICULTY  
CONCENTRATING

HEADACHES/  
DIZZINESS

NECK TENSION

DRY MOUTH

'BUTTERFLIES'  
IN STOMACH

HEART RATE  
INCREASES

SHAKY HANDS

SWEATY  
PALMS

LEGS  
TREMBLING

FREQUENT  
URINATION

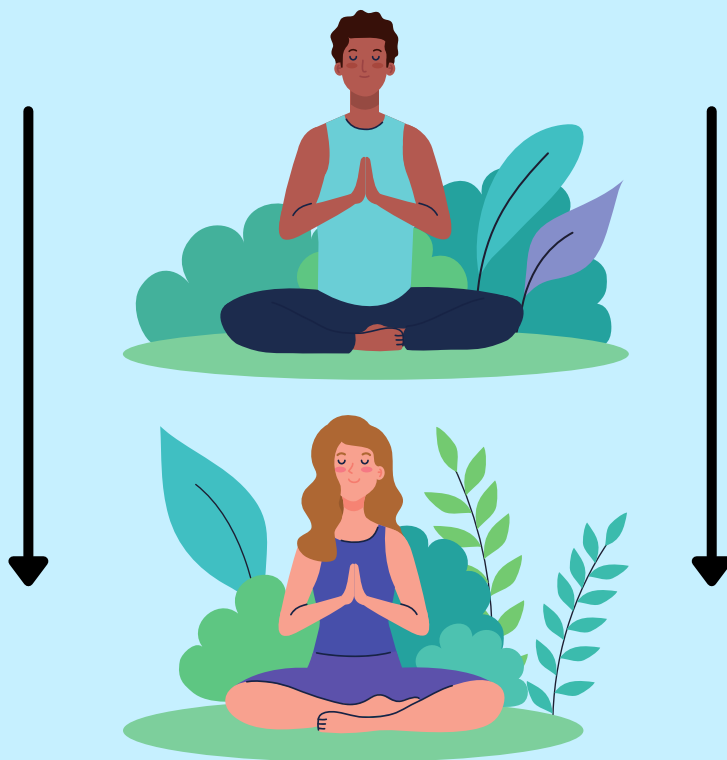
TINGLING IN  
EXTREMITIES

FEELING HOT

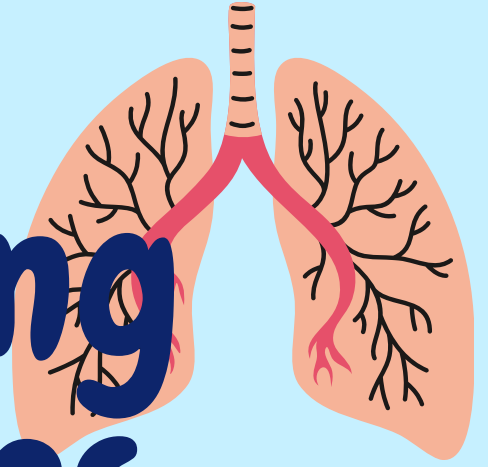
# Body scanning

Quite often when we are anxious, we tense our body up without noticing. Help your child to notice when their body is tense and remind them to let go of their tension. Help them to take deep breaths and as they do that to relax each body part in turn.

Start from the top of your body and work downwards, tensing each set of muscles as you go: jaw, shoulders, arms, stomach etc. Hold each time for 5 seconds and then release. Notice how it feels when you release your muscles- most people express feeling relief.

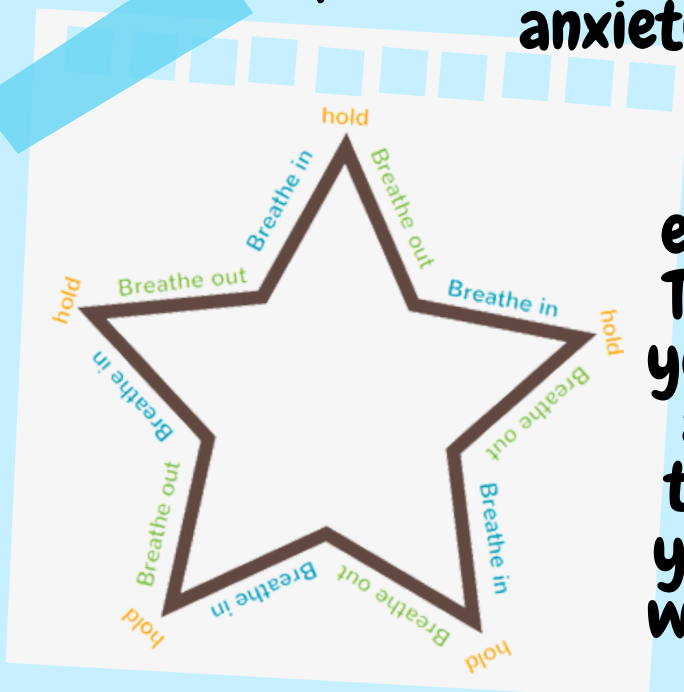


# Breathing exercises



Often, when we feel anxious, we breathe fast, short and sharp breaths. Breathing in this way decreases the flow of oxygen around our body and can leave us feeling light headed, dizzy or sick.

This is why slowing our breathing, and taking deep, full breaths can help to reduce our anxiety symptoms.



There are many breathing exercises that you could try. Try this star breathing with your child- trace your finger around the star and follow the instructions, discuss how you could use it in the future when anxiety levels build up.

It is helpful to use breathing exercises regularly, not just when anxiety levels get too high, as it can help us to regulate our emotions and check in with our feelings.

# Grounding techniques

Often anxiety can escalate due to worrying or experiencing negative thoughts about the past or future. Grounding techniques help us to stay in the present and as a result, stop the anxiety spiralling. Noticing our surroundings and our senses grounds us to our reality, instead of letting our minds wander away.



5



4



3



2



1

## 5,4,3,2,1 Grounding Technique

This exercise is completed by looking at your surroundings and naming:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste



# Self-esteem

## Key points:

- Self-esteem is defined as 'the confidence in one's own worth or abilities'
- Studies have shown that children who hear parents speaking negatively about themselves are more likely to do the same
- If the messages children hear about themselves are mostly negative, they are likely to internalise those messages and feel bad about themselves as a result.

## High self-esteem

High confidence

Ok with trying new things and meeting new people

Shares opinions and will speak up more frequently

Tends to cope better with not achieving things the first time they try them

Focuses on positives, recognises own strengths and achievements

## Low self-esteem

Low confidence

Resists trying new things and meeting new people

More likely to feel anxious, low and worry

Tends to be more reserved for the fear of getting things wrong

Focuses on negatives and past failures

# What children say:

## SELF-ESTEEM

I always focus on the bad things- so does my Mum

When I say bad things about myself, Dad gives me a hug and talks to me about it

My parents say they're proud of me even if I don't win

I know when my Mum is proud of me because she rings my Grandma to tell her

Sometimes it helps for someone else to say the positives

I get compared to my sister all the time. It makes me feel rubbish

My parents only remember things I do wrong

My parents say a lot more bad things about me than good

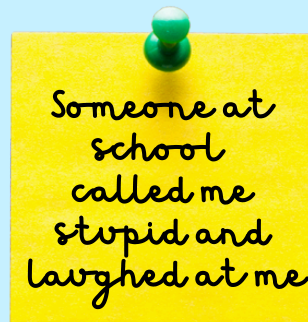
Mum tells people what I did wrong in front of me and it's embarrassing

I know it's ok to be good at something and not good at others

It helps to talk about how I am feeling

# Negative thoughts

Children may experience negative thoughts that leave them feeling upset, worried and bad about themselves. These thoughts are powerful and can change their entire mood, leaving them feeling down for the entire day.



One exercise that can help children to **remove their negative thoughts** is to write them down onto paper or post-it notes, then scribble over them, rip them up and throw them in the bin.

Writing down our thoughts helps to slow our thought process down and stop them from spiralling. Scribbling on it or ripping it up allows children to let their thoughts go, children often describe feeling a sense of relief after completing this activity.

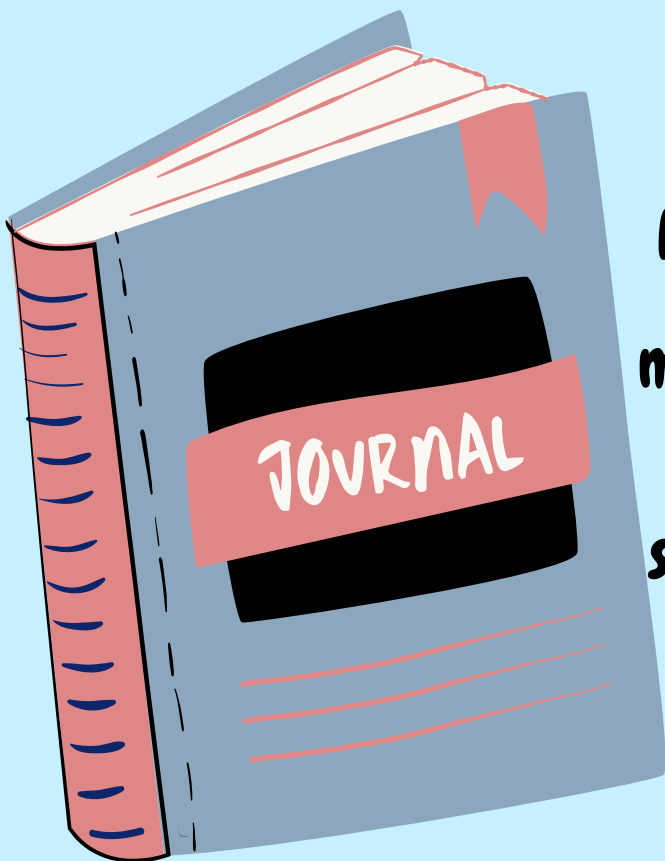
This activity can be really powerful before bed as it empties the mind, making it easier to settle down to sleep.

# Noticing positives



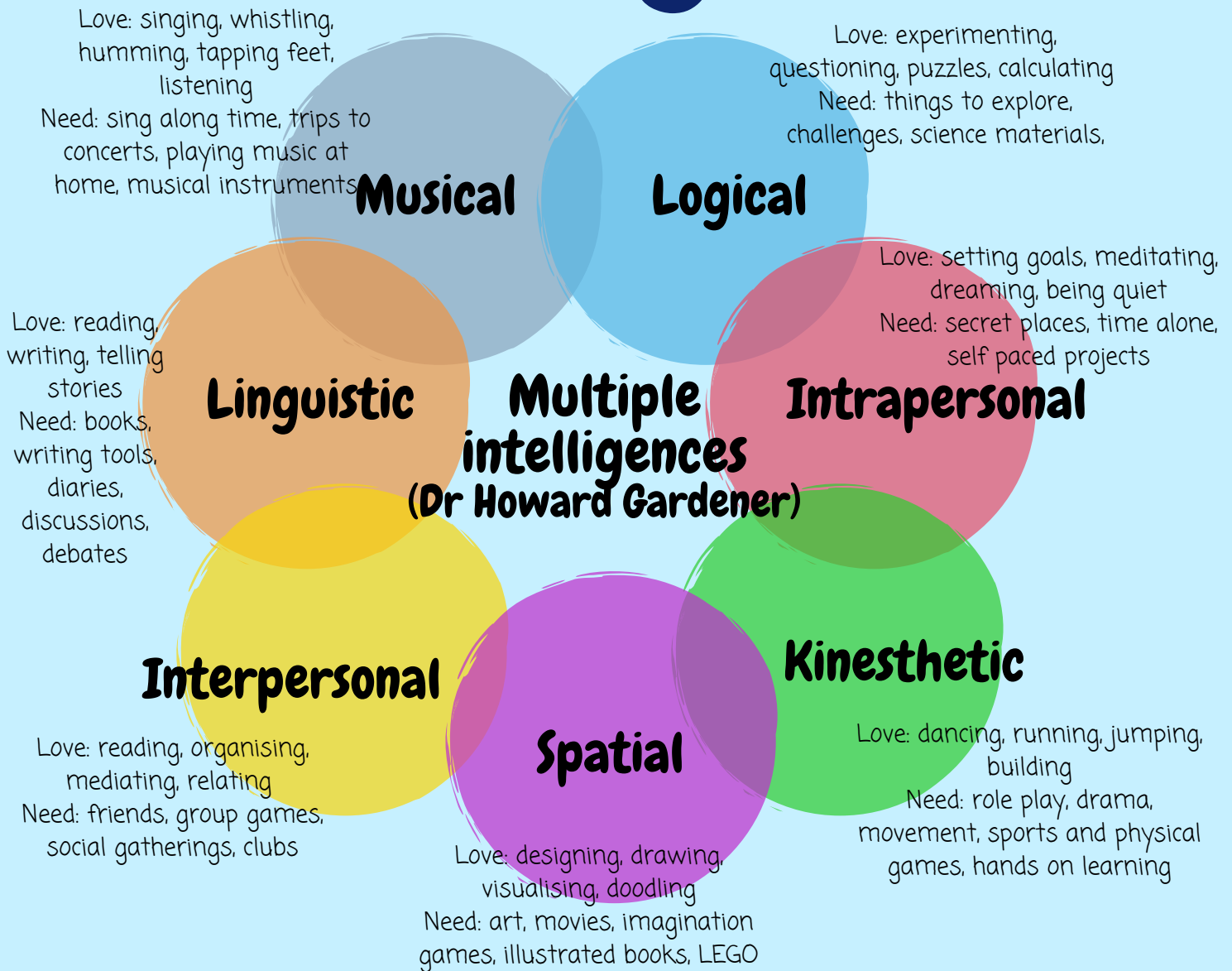
Using a positive or gratitude journal is a good method to encourage your child to notice more positive things about themselves, their strengths and their achievements.

Each day, children can write at least three positive things about themselves or their day. Alternatively, they could write three things they are thankful for. Before bed might be a good time to complete this journal.



It is important to remember that children learn from example, and children who hear positive messages about themselves and others, are more likely to think positively. Self-esteem is impacted largely by others. children's self-esteem will be built up if they have access to people who celebrate their achievements and support them through failure.

# Increasing strengths



**We all have different interests and strengths. Use the image above to identify which bracket your child fits into (they may fit into more than one). The diagram then identifies ways to develop their strengths. Giving children more opportunity to develop their skills helps them to build their confidence.**

**We all experience sad feelings but many of us find them hard to express, it is important to reassure all children it is ok to be sad and to cry.**

**Children often feel they can't talk about sad feelings because they don't want to worry or burden others. It is worth showing children that adults can manage big feelings and it is ok to talk to adults about them, even if they feel small.**

**When bad or upsetting things happen, it can take time to feel better about them.**

# Low mood

**Possible traits of low mood:**

**Wanting to spend time alone**

**Seeming quiet, disengaged or tearful**

**Speaking negatively about self**

**Finding less enjoyment in activities that used to be enjoyable**

**Questioning the point in life and their worth**

**Difficulty being away from those they feel secure with**

**Changes in sleep or appetite**



# What children say:

## LOW MOOD

My parents are always there to listen and cheer me up

Dad understands that I want some space when I feel sad

Mum helps me to think of solutions and helps me to do them

I get called a wimp or pathetic, so I just try to hide away when I feel upset

My parents said I can talk to them whenever I want to- it helps to know that

I get told to stop crying which makes me feel stupid

Sometimes I think what is the point if no one cares about me

Doing something fun with my family helps to cheer me up

Dad says it's ok to cry and feel sad, he said even he feels sad sometimes

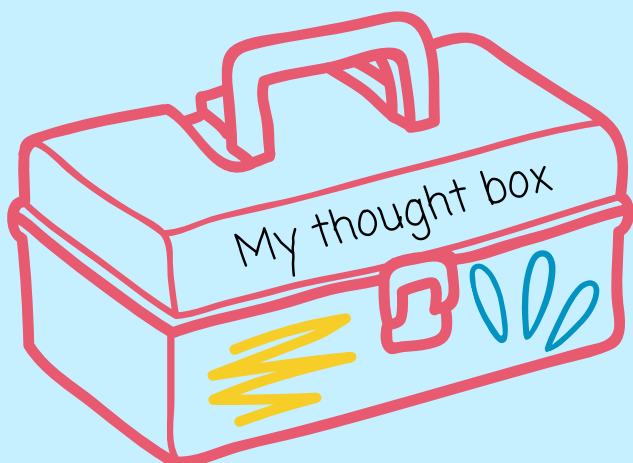
If I hold my sadness in, it usually explodes out when I don't expect it

I feel lonely at school, then I come home, and I am still lonely

# Managing low mood

Writing thoughts down and allowing a parent to read them helps children to share how they are feeling. If they are worried about the reaction of a parent, or they feel shame or embarrassment about it, they may find it difficult to share the thought verbally.

Creating a thought box is a creative way for children to share their feelings. Children can decorate their box however they like, and use it as a storage for their bad thoughts or problems. Putting their feelings in the box like this can be helpful in relieving them and letting things go. This also gives you an opportunity to discuss your child's thoughts and feelings at a time when they are calm.



# Talking about feelings

It is good to talk about big feelings, but the timing is important. The cycle below shows what a child may experience:



# Event

When the event happens, it may be possible to start a conversation with your child about how they are feeling depending on what has happened. If children feel dismissed, unheard or unsupported at this point, they are likely to stop talking and move into the reaction stage.

## Trying to ignore feelings

This may be more likely when something occurs at school. Many children keep their feelings in at school and release them when they get home. This is very normal; many of us do this when we have a difficult time at work.

Children may not communicate when they have had a difficult time, they may only let you know through their reaction.

Phrases like "how was school" often result in one-worded answers like "fine". Try asking questions like, "what was one good/ bad thing that happened at school today?" or "what would you have liked to change about school today?" Being more specific with our questions can help children to open up.

# Reaction to the event

In this cycle, the reaction refers to uncontrolled emotions. Usually, children find it very difficult to talk about what they are feeling or think rationally at this point. Again, this is a normal stage that all of us reach sometimes. We will reach this stage more often if we don't know how to regulate our emotions. Children can only learn to successfully manage emotions when they have consistent support from trusted adults.

At this point, it is most important to help children to calm down rather than asking them to explain why they are feeling that way. Instead, we can use many of the strategies in this guide such as grounding and breathing exercises.

In this case, explore what happened and how they are feeling once they have calmed down. Talking it through once they feel better aids emotional regulation and demonstrates that it is ok to talk about feelings. If they are still struggling to open up, take a guess. For example, you could say "I am going to have a guess, maybe this is what happened, can you let me know if I got it right?... I think you maybe fell out with a friend at school." They will then usually be able to help you to work it out.

Once they begin to talk about what has happened, using phrases like "I'm sure they didn't mean it" can be unhelpful as it invalidates how they feel.

# Emotional Literacy & Resilience

**Resilience** is the ability to cope in difficult situations. Having high resilience helps you to get through tough times, this doesn't mean you won't feel upset or struggle, it means those feelings are easier to manage and will be less overwhelming. We improve our resilience when we are surrounded by supportive people; when we overcome problems; take responsibility; feel good about ourselves and feel like we belong.

**Emotional literacy** is the ability to recognise, understand and appropriately express emotions.

Neither resilience or emotional literacy mean unrelenting independence. They both require help and support from other people, neither can be built alone.

## High emotional literacy

Likely to provide a name for their emotions rather than a physical feeling e.g. "I feel scared" rather than "I feel sick"

Able to communicate feelings to others through words, pictures or writing

More likely to understand that we have mixed emotions and can feel many things at once

More likely to notice and understand the emotions and feelings of those around them

More likely to trust those around them and believe others can help them

Increased ability to understand that bad feelings pass eventually

## High resilience

Usually able to move forward from upsetting or difficult events within a reasonable amount of time

Higher ability to contain feelings when necessary e.g. at school

Less likely to have uncontrollable reactions, such as lashing out and saying things they don't mean

More likely to regulate their emotions effectively

Likely to feel ok asking for help when it is needed

More likely to be optimistic and stay positive in difficult situations

# What children say:

## EMOTIONAL LITERACY & RESILIENCE

If I get something wrong, I get really upset and can't stop thinking about it

I don't realise I'm feeling bad until I end up getting really upset or angry

Nobody helps me with my problems even when I talk about them

Mum knows what I am feeling better than I do

Sometimes I feel more than sad I don't know what the word is for that

I know I can't make the decisions, but it would be nice to have a choice sometimes

Dad helps me to solve my problems for myself

If I have a problem with a friend, Mum will help me think of a similar time but when things got better

I don't like when things change and nobody tells me

I want to talk when it feels ok to, not when I'm being asked loads of questions

To be trustworthy you have to not tell other people, be kind and not bring it up in an argument

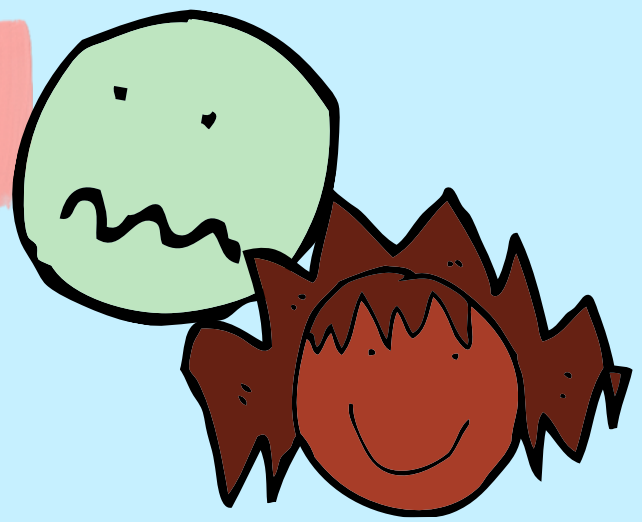
# Increasing Emotional vocabulary

Children often answer "I don't know" when asked what they are feeling, and parent/carers can find this frustrating. It can be hard to understand this answer, however children don't always know how they feel. Helping children to have words for big feelings can make it much easier to express them.

## Helping children to increase their emotional vocabulary:

- 1) **Set an emotion of the week:** choose a different emotion each week. Ask your child to notice if they experience those emotions over the week or if they have noticed anyone around experiencing them – help children to put the emotions into a sentence.
- 2) **Keep a diary:** encourage children to keep a diary where they can track their thoughts, feelings and emotions. They can write here any physical feelings they are having and parents / carers can then help to provide the emotions for these feelings: "you felt sick and dizzy today? Perhaps you were feeling anxious or nervous about something?"
- 3) **Draw a picture:** if your child is struggling to name their emotions, ask them to draw what they were feeling as a picture. Parents can then help children to understand the feelings in the picture and give them a name.

There is an emotion glossary near the end of this book to aid this.

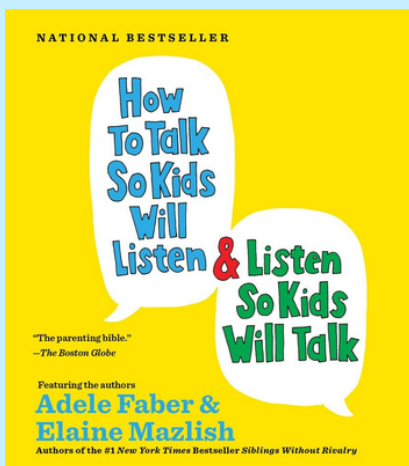


Look at the picture above titled 'My day as a picture'. Some children may draw scenes like this, others may draw a face showing an emotion. Take a moment to look at the drawing and try to imagine what they are feeling. Perhaps we might guess that the young person feels small and alone in a big and busy world. Perhaps they feel everyone is driving past them without stopping to see if they need help or to pick them up. Perhaps they are feeling lost and confused. It is ok to guess wrong as this is still helping children to recognise and name their feelings. We can get a lot of information from an image, sometimes much more than we might from asking "how was your day?"

- Amused** - funny/entertaining
- Ashamed** - embarrassed/guilty of actions
- Content** - peaceful/happy
- Delighted** - great pleasure
- Disappointed** - sad that something didn't meet expectations
- Envious** - to wish you had something another person has
- Frustrated** - distressed and annoyed
- Furious** - extremely angry
- Gleeful** - extremely joyful
- Impatient** - feeling quickly irritated
- Indifferent** - having no particular feeling about something
- Jovial** - cheerful/friendly
- Nervous** - easily agitated or alarmed
- Overjoyed** - extremely happy
- Pleased** - glad/satisfied (particularly at an event)
- Proud** - glad/satisfied (particularly at own achievement)
- Shocked** - surprised and potentially upset
- Thrilled** - excitement/pleasure

# Further Reading and support

See below for some additional reading:



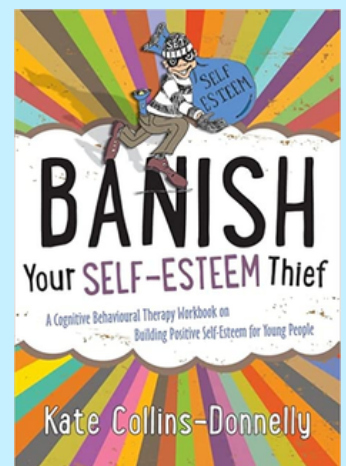
**How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk– Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish**



**Helping Your Child with Fears and Worries 2nd Edition: A Self-help Guide for Parents– Cathy cresswell**



**Attachment-focused parenting: Effective strategies to care for children – Dan Hughes**



**Banish your Self-Esteem Thief– A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Building positive self-esteem for young people – Kate Collins-Donnelly.**

See below for some additional support services:

## CENTRAL ACCESS POINT (CAP)

0808 800 3302

For acute mental health needs 24/7

## YoungMinds

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/nds>

Offers parents mental health support and advice



**Published by Relate Leicester  
Leicestershire & Rutland 2022**

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