

Supporting our children with managing their difficult feelings

This short vlog is an opportunity to think about how as a parent or carer we can best support the children or young people around us with managing some of the difficult feelings they might be having during these complicated times.

If you can, have a look at our vlog entitled “Putting our own oxygen mask on first” for ideas on how to support yourself with your own difficult feelings as it will be very hard to support others easily if we are feeling overwhelmed ourselves.

Let’s think about some of the things which might be feeling very difficult for our children right now, during this new and challenging time. Everything changed so suddenly so many of our usual routines disappeared overnight. Many of the other adults our children will have felt deeply connected to are suddenly out of reach. Our older children and young people, whose task it is to become gradually more independent and to make more of their own choices, are suddenly taken back to an earlier experience of being a child, where decisions are made for them and freedoms are restricted. We don’t know how long this patch of time will last, there are no answers and plenty of new things to feel worried about. We have to learn to live with each other in a very intense way, with no balance offered by connection with others. Suddenly parents are much more directly involved in and responsible for the detail of school life – something which may well not be sitting comfortably for either the adults or the children in the household. Finding a space to be on your own or to feel a sense of privacy may be more challenging, and children are very attuned to picking up the worries of the adults around them, whether they fully understand them or not.

It will be difficult for your child or young person to adjust their behavior if the feeling which is driving it remains overwhelming. What they need from the adults around them is empathy for the uncomfortable or overwhelming feeling so that they can begin to settle themselves with your support, and later, when settled, they might also be reassured by a boundary about any behavior which resulted from the way they originally responded to the feeling. For example, if they said unkind or hurtful things, slammed doors, broke something, this can be dealt with later when calm, so that clear messages about what is acceptable and not acceptable in terms of behavior can be maintained. We might say “I can see that it was really hard for you earlier and that you were completely overwhelmed by such a huge feeling. I am here to help you with finding ways to manage such huge and difficult feelings, as we can’t manage them in ways which hurt ourselves or other people or damage things. Let’s have a think together about what might help you in the moment to manage such a huge and horrid feeling”

Beginning with empathy might feel like an unusual way to address some challenging behavior, however it will address the behavior at source – the feeling – and be much more likely to lower the heat of the situation in the short term, as well as helping your child or young person to learn to self-regulate healthily in the future. Here are some of the ways we can respond empathically when faced with challenging or worrying behavior. You might say “you sound really quite upset about that...” or “I’m wondering what might help you right now?” It can be helpful to go gently and tentatively with our starting point, so that we are recognizing a big feeling, and waiting to hear more about it...

“Co-regulating” is going to look a bit different at the different stages our children are at – whether cuddling a distressed baby, speaking gently to them as we try to soothe them, being there for an overwhelmed toddler who might be feeling frightened by the strength of the feelings they are experiencing, or sitting alongside a teenager who needs to be listened to and accepted for the way they are feeling at that moment. It can be really helpful to be aware of how we are doing at “co-regulating” i.e. supporting our child to manage healthily a really difficult feeling. Are we in fact co-regulating, or are we “co-escalating”?

You could try making a Mood thermometer for the wall at home, and clothes pegs with each family member’s name on it. As you walk past it, you can check in with how you are feeling and move your peg up or down to show how you are at that moment. (Alongside the red – it might read stressed, overloaded, furious, overwhelmed, by the orange – a bit worried, uncomfortable, irritated, sad, and next to the green – calm, relaxed, content, peaceful. Do involve the whole family in coming up with the words which might go alongside your thermometer. Or you could use a jam jar with colored buttons so that each day, everyone can put in a button which represents how they are feeling that morning. Adults and children in the house can notice and check in with themselves and each other, and notice when as a whole, the family is feeling in need of some calming, relaxing activities, or individual check-ins with how everyone is doing. Anything which helps us to communicate regularly about our feelings can be really helpful.

Take some time together to think about the things in your life which might have a settling effect on you. Pick 5 of these, ideally 5 things which are quite different from each other (e.g. one energetic, one relaxing etc.). Try to remember these by listing them whilst pointing to each finger on one hand. Encourage everyone to experiment with these, and try to notice whether certain activities work well for particular types of feeling.. These lists will be different for each person, and sharing them might bring new possibilities for everyone to try out.

There might be times when our feeling is so overwhelming that we have tried all 5 of our settling activities and we are aware of still feeling overwhelmed. That’s when we might need to turn to our friends/family/a professional for support or help. Using the fingers of your other hand, make a list of people you might turn to for support when it has not felt possible to settle yourself.

To finish, here are our Top Tips:

- Keep noticing how you are feeling and remember to take time to settle your own difficult feelings
- Check-in with each other regularly and be curious about each other’s feelings
- Share your 5 things/5 people with your family and encourage them to think about their 5 things/5 people
- Show empathy towards yourself and those around you
- Have appropriate expectations at this tricky time
- Look for opportunities to listen to feelings rather than just reacting to behaviors – remembering that feelings drive behavior and need to be acknowledged

We wish you and your family well.