

# Five ways to support child mental health

Emerging Minds  
Families



## **Families come in all shapes and sizes**

Welcome to this Emerging Minds resource.

We acknowledge that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, we use the term 'parent' to encompass the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

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Emerging Minds leads the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC). The NWC is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

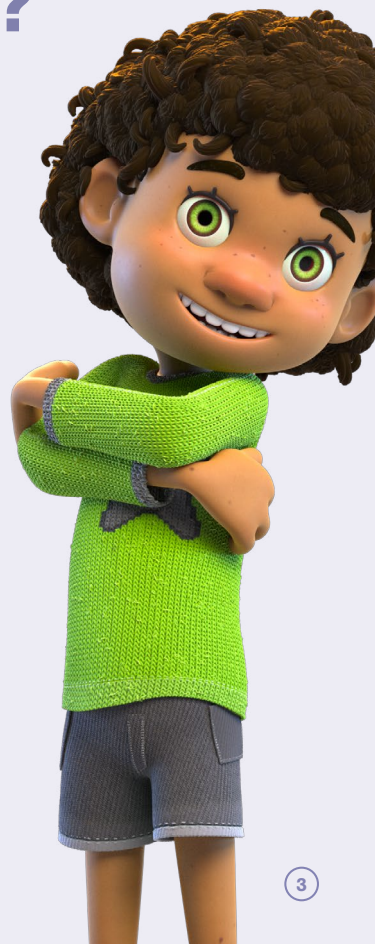
# Where do I start?

There are hundreds of books, websites, courses, social media pages and more that offer parents advice about raising children.

All this information can be helpful, but it can also be hard to know where to begin!

Based on research and by working together with families and health professionals, we've identified **five key things parents can do to support their children's mental health.**

Every family is unique and will have different ups and downs. Whether your child or family are going well or having a tough time right now, focusing on these five areas will help nurture and protect your child's mental health and overall wellbeing – now and into the future.



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## MEET EMM

In our Families resources, Emm helps us understand children's mental health and practical ways to support it.



In this video (2 minutes, 5 seconds), Emm introduces us to child mental health.



# Parent-child relationship

## How positive connections support children's wellbeing

Children thrive on positive connection and quality time with you and other important adults in their life. Making time to play, chat or just hang out together reminds your child that they're loved and that you enjoy being with them. It also creates opportunities to talk about what's going on in their life.



All these moments build your child's sense of self-worth and let's them know they're likeable. This gives them the confidence to build their own relationships and friendships, and explore the world around them.



VIDEO

## Parent-child relationship

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In this video (2 minutes, 38 seconds), parents and practitioners talk about the importance of building a strong **parent-child relationship** and ideas for connecting with your child.





## Thinking about your parent-child relationship

You might like to take a few minutes to think about your relationship with your child (or each of your children if you have more than one) and any ways you can strengthen your bond with them.

- 1 How would you describe your relationship with your child?
- 2 How do you think they would describe their relationship with you? What do you think they'd say is the best part?
- 3 When do you feel most connected with them?
- 4 When do you think they feel most connected with you?





## RESOURCES

### **More resources to support your parent-child connection**

The Emerging Minds Families podcast offers more practical advice about the importance and ways of building a strong and positive relationship with your [child](#).

The Raising Children Network website has information for parents on [building positive relationships](#) with children as well as [connecting with children of different ages](#).

Check out these ideas for [fun \(and free or low cost\) activities](#) you can do with your child (from birth to around five years old) from South Australia's Department for Education.



# Emotions and behaviours

## Understanding and supporting children's feelings and responses

Did you know that children feel so many different emotions and that all of them are important? Good mental health doesn't mean that they will be happy all the time. It's feeling all the emotions — like happiness, sadness, excitement, anger and more — and learning to manage them in healthy ways.



Children may not yet fully understand or have the language to express their emotions. Their behaviour is often a way of exploring and communicating their feelings and needs. This can sometimes come out as ‘big’ behaviours and can result in some of our more challenging parenting moments.

Understanding your child's emotions and behaviours and knowing how to support them can help their development, learning, relationships and mental health.

If your child's behaviour is challenging, it's normal to feel concerned or want to ‘fix it’ as fast as possible. But this is not always the best option. Instead of only focusing on the behaviour itself, try to be curious about what's behind it.



## Create opportunities and space for your child to talk about what's going on for them and how they're feeling

When children experience big emotions like anger or frustration, connecting with you (or another trusted adult) can help them to feel safe and calm down.

Trying to understand what your child might be experiencing, feeling and trying to express can help you to understand their emotions – and help your child to understand them, too. Helping your child recognise and name their emotions can also strengthen your connection and parent-child relationship.



QUOTE

**'A lot of the times I feel because I am a parent, I have to have a solution.**

**But 99% of the time it's not about me doing anything.**

**It's me just walking alongside [my kids] and letting them know that they're loved.'**

**Flick, parent of four,  
NSW**

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It's not always obvious or easy for you or your child to pinpoint what's behind their behaviour. As adults, we don't always understand our emotions or reactions either! By taking the time to be curious and show empathy, you're letting your child know that their feelings and thoughts matter.



VIDEO



In this video (2 minutes, 53 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about ways children express emotions and the importance of being curious about what might be beneath a [child's behaviours](#).

## Thinking about your child's emotions and behaviours

What have you noticed about your child's emotions and behaviours?

- 1 What is your child like?
- 2 What do they enjoy?  
What are they good at?
- 3 What happens for them  
when they're upset?
- 4 If your child often gets upset,  
angry or worried, what have  
you found helps them to cope  
with those big feelings?
- 5 What do you think your child  
would say helps them?
- 6 When you're finding it hard to  
deal with your child's emotions  
or behaviours, what have you  
found helps?





## RESOURCES

### **Learn more about children's emotions and mental health**

To explore more about children's emotions and mental health and ways parents can support them, we recommend the following resources:

- [In focus: Understanding children's emotions and behaviour](#)
- [In focus: Understanding children's mental health](#)
- [In focus: What shapes children's mental health](#)





# Routines

## Creating family routines to support children's mental health

Routines are the way we generally do things in a day or a week – like leaving for school at the same time each weekday, going to swimming lessons on Thursday afternoons, or reading a story together before bed. Some families call them rituals or rhythms.



Family routines support children's mental health but they're also good for everyone's wellbeing. They help us get things done, reduce stress levels, and find time to connect and have fun together.

Young children especially cope best when they know the order and way in which you do daily activities such as dinner, bath time, stories and bedtime.

When children are older, including them in planning daily or weekly routines and creating family rituals increases their 'buy in' and builds family connections.

If you're introducing new routines with older children, you might get some resistance. This is normal and doesn't mean you should give up. Keep trying and remind your child why having routines helps everyone in the family.

## Routines

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VIDEO

In this video (2 minutes, 41 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about the importance and benefits of family **routines and rituals**.



## **Stick to routines as much as possible – but be flexible**

There might be times when you need to change or simplify a routine, particularly if your family is dealing with something unexpected. As much as you can, try to keep the order or ‘rhythm’ of your child’s days as predictable as possible. Children cope better with changes to routines if you can tell them in advance (which we know is not always possible) and explain what will be different.

Also remember that it’s normal to skip, forget or have to change routines sometimes – and don’t feel bad or give up on them when you do. Routines don’t have to be perfect or set in stone. Keep them flexible and do what works for your family.





## What if creating or maintaining family routines feels impossible?

Keeping routines as consistent as possible, especially when things are tough, is one way parents and other adults can help a child feel a sense of safety and predictability, which supports them to cope.

But it's also important not to feel guilty if it feels impossible to set up or stick to family routines right now.

When you're under stress, unwell or dealing with unavoidable changes like moving house, it can be more difficult to create or stick to routines.

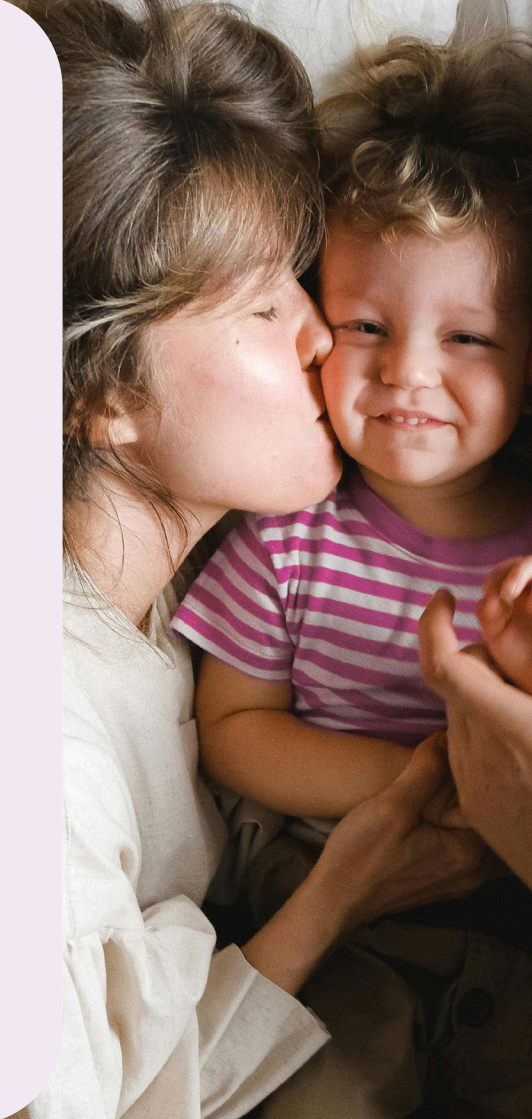
Sudden or external events like a disaster or the death of a family member can also upset family relationships, routines and dynamics and take a toll on your own mental health and wellbeing.

**It's also important to know that children can cope with different routines in different places.**

For example, when parents separate it's common for there to be different rules and routines in different houses.

Parents have let us know that it's useful to focus on keeping routines predictable in your own home and supporting your child to know what those routines are.

Children learn to manage different routines at their childcare/school, and other caregivers' (e.g. grandparents') houses, so with time they will adjust to the changes between your households.





## Routines can be fun

Routines help children feel secure because they know what to expect and when. But routines aren't just about scheduling your days or weeks.

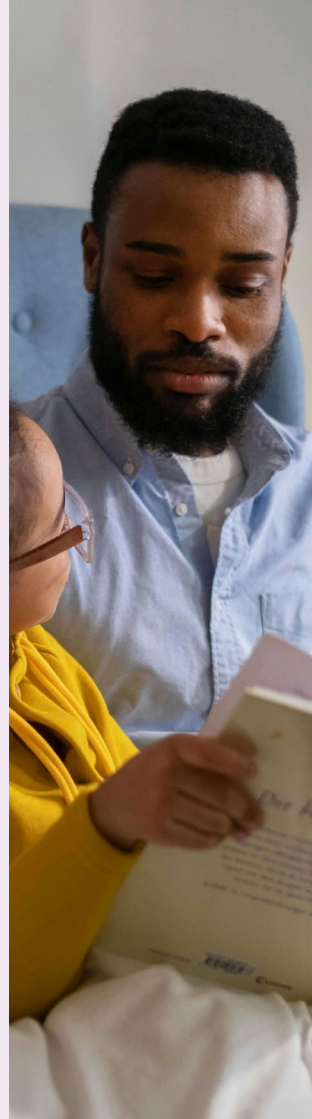
Family traditions or rituals – like movie night on Fridays, or always having ice cream cake when it's someone's birthday – are fun and important ways to build connections within your family.



## Thinking about family routines

Take a moment to think about routines and rituals that your family currently has or might like to start.

- 1 What activities do you and your child like doing together?
- 2 What do you find is the best day/ time to do things with them?
- 3 What routines or family rituals do you already have?
- 4 If something has upset your child's routines or meant they've had to stop an activity they enjoy, how has that affected them?
- 5 Is there someone or something that could help keep up or re-establish your child's routines and activities?
- 6 Are there any new routines or family traditions that you would like to try to introduce?







## RESOURCES

### More information on family routines

It can be helpful to think about routines and rituals that your family currently has or might like to start.

- If your family has experienced a disaster or traumatic event, watch our video about [reestablishing routines and rules](#) to support children's mental health, wellbeing and recovery.
- Read more about [how and why family routines work](#) on the Raising Children Network website.
- The Raising Children Network also has information about [routines and children with disability, autism or other additional needs](#).



# Communication and meaning-making

## Why good communication is key to children's mental health

Communicating clearly with children ensures they have the information they need to understand or 'make meaning' about what's going on in their world. Being open and talking regularly with your child about all sorts of things also helps to build trust and strengthen your connection.



Good communication in families doesn't mean talking a lot or telling children everything. Clear communication is about:

- sharing information with your child honestly and in age-appropriate ways
- being clear and consistent with your words and actions
- allowing space for questions and checking what your child is thinking and feeling, so you can uncover any misunderstandings or worries
- communicating in ways that work for your family – for example, considering the best ways to communicate if your child is nonverbal or prefers to get information in bite-size chunks.

It's common for family members to have different understandings of an event or issue. Children often see and hear more than we realise, so their understanding might be based on bits of information they've overheard and their own thoughts and feelings about what's going on.



## Open, honest and age-appropriate communication is important

Often parents think it's better to protect their children from difficulties by not telling them what's happening or by pretending everything is 'normal'. But children pick up on tension and stress within the family.

If they aren't told about the cause – such as money struggles or a parent being unwell – children can make guesses based on their own ideas and often will blame themselves for what's happening.

## Talking to children honestly can help them:

- ask questions and get the correct information
- make sense of what's going on (in or around your family)
- know it's OK to talk about difficulties and any worries they have
- be reassured that what's happening is not their fault
- feel connected to you and part of the decisions that affect them
- learn problem-solving skills
- be hopeful that things will improve (if you explain actions you're taking, for example)
- build skills and resilience to deal with challenges they might face in the future.



VIDEO

## Communication and meaning- making

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In this video (2 minutes, 34 seconds) parents and practitioners talk about what good communication within families looks like and some of the challenges of talking with children and helping them make meaning of their experiences.

## Tips for talking with children

- Find a time that is good for both of you – when you have space, won't be interrupted and are as calm as you can be.
- It can be good to talk with younger children while having a snack, drawing or doing a puzzle together.
- Often children, especially teens, are more likely to open up if there's no eye contact. Think about timing your talk for when you're in the car or walking the dog together.
- Be as honest as is appropriate – depending on the situation and your child's age.
- Use simple, straightforward language to explain what's going on, and address any fears, worries or feelings of self-blame your child might have. For example, you might say, 'Mum and I are arguing a lot at the moment. We know that it's not ideal and we are trying to work it out. We want you to know that it's not because of anything you did, and that we both love you.'
- If you are concerned about getting emotional, take a few minutes to plan and practice what you want to tell your children.

- Allow space for children to ask questions and express their feelings. It's understandable they might cry and need a cuddle, or be angry and need reassurance. Make sure your child knows their reaction doesn't affect your love for them.
- If your child asks a question that you can't answer now, tell them you will come back to them with an answer as soon as you can.
- Open the door to ongoing conversations – tell your child they can ask questions, or talk about it more, anytime they need to. Talk about other trusted adults they can talk to and make sure they know how to contact those people.

## Helping children make meaning of their experiences

Children often understand much more than they can express. To help your child make sense of a situation – especially a stressful or distressing one – take the time to talk and really listen to them.

Be curious about what they already know and what they are thinking and feeling, and be ready to answer their questions truthfully. Helping a child to make meaning – to understand how an event or experience relates to them – often takes time and more than one conversation.





## QUOTE

**‘It is all confusing as a kid, nothing anyone says makes it really OK. Just being with my family was helpful, and Mum telling me it would not be forever, and that lots of other people are going through the same thing, was the only thing that was OK. And that I was loved.’**

Liam, 11 years, reflecting on being homeless at age nine

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## Keep the communication going

It’s important that communication in your family is open and ongoing.

If you have more than one child, making time for one-to-one chats with each of your children gives them space to share their thoughts and feelings. It also gives you the opportunity to tune in to any individual concerns or challenges they may be experiencing. Listening and answering their questions helps children understand and make meaning of what’s happening in their world.

Whole family conversations can also be important. Often siblings react to challenges in different ways, which can create tension within the family. Help your children understand that no one’s feelings are wrong and it’s normal for people to have different perspectives.



## RESOURCES

### **More resources for talking with your child and helping them make meaning**

The following Emerging Minds Families resources offer tips for planning and having conversations with children of different ages when your family is having a difficult time:

- [Communicating with your baby during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your toddler during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your primary school-age child during tough times](#)
- [Communicating with your teenager during tough times](#)



# Support networks

## Building support networks for you and your child

At all ages and stages of life, it's important to be able to get the support we need, when we need it. Feeling connected to family, friends, neighbours or your community and having a support network you can rely on can protect and boost both your children's mental health and wellbeing, and your own.



As well as finding support from family and friends, you might decide to look online for reliable information about a challenge your child or family is experiencing. This may help you find strategies or practical ideas that you can try at home.



VIDEO

## Support networks

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In this video (2 minutes, 57 seconds) parents and practitioners discuss the importance of building a [support network](#) and helping children identify who's in theirs.



## **We know it can be challenging to reach out to others and uncomfortable to ask for help.**

But staying connected with the people who support you is especially important when times are tough.

It's common as adults to feel an urge to withdraw when things get challenging, or to think we should be able to cope alone. But the people around us often want to help and are just waiting to be asked – so think about how the people in your 'village' could support your family.

## **For example:**

- Is there a family member who could take your toddler to the park for an hour?
- Who would be happy to pick up some groceries for you?
- Which friend or health professional can you talk to about the stresses you or your family are facing and how you are feeling?



## QUOTE

'I never understood the idea and importance of "your village" until I had my children. It really does take a village in the hard times, and it can take many forms. I had to learn to ask for help from family and friends and outsource anything I could ... I had to realise I couldn't do it all and give myself permission to ask for help.'

Melissa, parent of two, Vic

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## **Building support networks**

Building a support network beyond your family can take time. If you feel like you don't have people who will support you when you need some help, it is important to look for opportunities to make these connections. You might try:

- a free parents' group, play group or toddler music group at your library
- your child's school – go to events where you might meet other parents, volunteer at the school canteen if you have time, and get to know your child's teacher/s
- your local council or community centre – find out about groups or activities in your area.

## **Helping children to build their own support network**

There's lots of evidence that feeling supported can help protect children from harmful impacts. It also protects their mental health when they experience things like bullying, parental separation or disasters in their community.

Help your child to build a team around them that includes their peers (friends, siblings and cousins around their age), extended family members (e.g. an aunt or grandparent) and other supportive adults (e.g. a sports coach or favourite teacher).



There is no perfect size for your child's support network; it might be made up of several people, or just one or two key individuals you and your child trust and can rely on.

Children often know best which people (or places or things) in their lives they feel most connected to and who give them a sense of belonging or support when they need it.

If your child has trouble identifying or choosing people to be in their support network, brainstorm together.

## Try asking them:

- 'Outside of our family, who do you like to have fun with?'
- 'Who do you feel safe with? If you were sad or worried about something, who could you talk to?'

Talk to your child about who's in their support team and the different roles they have. For example, Grandma might be the person they go to when they don't want to talk about problems, they just want a hug and to watch TV together. Their older sister might be the person they talk to when they want advice about how to deal with stuff at school.

## Thinking about your family's support networks

Think about your own support network and who's in your child's support team.

- 1 Who are the people you can rely on and call on for support (practical and/or emotional) when you need it?
- 2 Who supports you as a family? Would they talk with you if they were worried about how you were coping, or noticed your child might be struggling to deal with something?
- 3 Have you met your child's teacher or early childhood educator? How would you go about talking to them if you felt they could help support your child?
- 4 Who does your child like spending time with, outside of their immediate family? Who are their close friends?
- 5 How do you support your child to stay connected with their friends and with other important people in their life?



## RESOURCES

### More resources for building support networks

We know it can be hard to ask for help, find the right health professional or service, and navigate the sometimes-complicated systems they work within.

Emerging Minds Families has several resources to help you identify or access the right support when you might need it:

- Our ['Practitioners speak'](#) series includes videos with many different health professionals. They explain what they can do to support you and your family, what you and your child can expect, and how to make the most out of your visit.
- This resource can help you find out about [getting professional support](#) if your child is experiencing anxiety.
- Developed for parents living with mental illness, these resources have helpful information for all parents about the [importance of your 'village'](#) and ways to build your support network. They also have advice around [helping your child build their support network](#) (including a guide you can use with your child).

Whenever you  
can, remember  
these five ways to  
help children feel  
safe, connected  
and good about  
themselves – so  
they can get the  
most out of life!

**Emerging Minds**  
**Families**

