

Helping children with their worries



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)**

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Introduction

Like adults, children often have worries. These may be small worries, or perhaps much bigger ones, such as losing a parent through separation or even death.

There are various ways that adults can help children to deal with these worries, and this booklet is designed to tell you about some of them.

Recognising feelings

Lots of things that children tell adults are, of course, nothing to do with feelings. Some examples are:

- 'I'm going round to Gary's now.'
- 'What's for tea?'
- 'I think I'll have a biscuit.'
- 'Where's my jacket?'

Other times children tell us how they feel:

- 'I'm hot.'
- 'I hate Gary.'
- 'School stinks.'
- 'I came top in maths - I'm the greatest!'

Sometimes a child may not actually say anything, but you can tell he's having a good or a bad feeling from how he looks:

- Child comes in dragging feet, looking down and throws bag (upset?)
- Child slams door with red face (angry?)
- Child is very quiet, withdrawn and looks sad (sad?)
- Child bounces in from school with a grin (happy?).

Try to be on the lookout for times when a child seems to be expressing feelings- by what he **says** or **does**.

What many adults do when children express feelings

If the feeling is a good one (happy, excited, proud, etc.) then there's usually no problem. Most parents react naturally by saying:

- 'You got 95 in maths! That's great!'
- 'You rode that far? Well done!'
- 'So you've been asked to Gary's party? How exciting!'

The problem comes when children express bad feelings to us (sad, angry, frightened, lonely, embarrassed, etc). Adults are uncomfortable about this and usually do two things:

1: They try to tell the child he's **not** feeling that way really:

- 'You can't be tired, you just had a nap.'
- 'It can't be that bad.'
- 'You're not really upset, you're just a bit tired.'
- 'No you're not frightened, don't be silly now.'

2: They try to make everything better right away:

- 'Never mind, have a biscuit.'
- 'Don't worry, it'll be OK tomorrow.'
- 'Don't cry now, try to dry your eyes.'
- 'Cheer up, let's watch TV.'

The funny thing is, the more adults try to push away a child's bad feelings, the worse things seem to get. Instead of cheering up, the child gets even more upset. Often, an attempt to 'squash' a bad feeling ends up in an argument:

Child: 'I'm hungry.'

Adult: 'You can't be'

Child: 'But I **am**.'

Adult: 'Don't be silly, you just had a biscuit.'

Child(stamping foot): 'Yes I **am**!'

Adult: 'Now you're being ridiculous.'

Child: 'I hate Gary.'

Adult: 'No you don't, he's your best friend.'

Child: 'I **hate** him!'

Adult: 'Don't let me hear you say that.'

Child: 'He's always telling on me.'

Adult: 'Now stop it.'

Child: 'I hate you too!'

Adults think that children shouldn't really have any bad feelings because:

- It makes adults uncomfortable to think their children are unhappy
- They think children will turn into moaners
- They think that if they allow a child to dwell on a bad feeling, the child will get more and more upset, so adults try to jolly the child out of it.

How to deal with bad feelings

Now that we have discussed what most parents do, we can turn to what **should** be done instead!

There are several things you can do to help:

1. Listen **properly**
2. Acknowledge what you hear
3. Don't try to make it better right away
4. Give the feeling a name
5. Keep listening

Here is more information about each of these:

1. Listen: When a child is trying to talk to you, and you sense that a bad feeling is there, stop what you're doing if at all possible and listen properly. So often, adults only half listen while they go on peeling the potatoes or watching TV. It can be very discouraging for a child to feel that you haven't got time to listen. If you really can't stop, then tell your child that you'll be able to come and talk once you've finished.

2. Acknowledge: All you need to do is listen then let your child know that you heard. You can say:

- 'Oh?'
- 'I see.'
- 'Really?'
- 'Mmmm'
- (Silence - but continuing to look interested).

You could sometimes repeat the child's words in a slightly different form:

Child: 'I hate school.' **Adult:** 'So you really hate school?'

Child: 'Gary took my pencil today.' **Adult:** 'He took your pencil!'

Child: 'I've got so much homework!' **Adult:** 'You feel you've got so much!'

It can be very satisfying for a child to know you have heard him properly, and have understood just what he's feeling (even if you haven't done anything about it).

3. Don't try to make it better - Resist the urge to:

- Ask questions
- Give advice
- Soothe it away
- Lecture.

Doing any of these things will:

- Stop the child telling you more about how he's feeling
- Deprive him of the chance to work out what to do for himself.

Just stick to saying 'Oh', or 'I see', 'Mmm' (and so on).

Think of it from an adult point of view. Imagine that you've had a terrible day at work because you forgot to do an important piece of work and your boss was furious. Pretend that you are telling a friend about it later that night. She might respond in various ways. Would these be helpful?

- **Pity:** - 'Oh you poor, poor thing, how terrible!'
- **Lecturing:** - 'Well you really should have remembered. It's no good crying over it now. Just do better in future.'
- **Philosophical:** - 'Well, these things happen. You'll just have to accept that.'
- **Advice:** 'Well, if you ask me, I think you should go right in there tomorrow, very early, and get it done.'
- **Taking the other side:** - 'He had every right to be annoyed. You should have done it on time.'
- **Questions:** - 'What stopped you getting it done on time?'
- **Acknowledging:** - 'I can see that was really upsetting for you!'

Which of these would you like to hear? Which would be helpful? The first six of these would probably make you furious with your friend. Only the last would be the sort of response you wanted.

Even adults, like children, just need someone to understand what they are feeling. They can do without the lectures, advice, moralising and questions. Of course, there are times when your child will want or need a lecture or advice - but not when he's telling you how upset he is.

4. Give the feeling a name: Try to work out what feeling your child is having then give it a name. You might say:

- 'Seems like you were really angry about that.'
- 'Looks as if that was pretty embarrassing for you.'
- 'You seem to be feeling kind of sad about that.'
- 'That's made you really frightened, huh?'

It can be very satisfying for a child to hear this sort of response because it means that the adult has:

1. Really listened
2. Understood what he meant
3. Given him a word that describes (and makes sense of) his feelings.

Don't worry about using big words - the child needs to learn the right words for his experiences and hearing them used in the right way will help him to learn. Don't worry if you guess his feeling wrongly - he will put you right in that case, but will still appreciate your interest and concern.

How children react to this sort of response

So if you try to follow the guidelines in the previous section, how will the child react? Consider these two conversations. In the first the adult reacts in the 'old' way.

Child: 'Gary pushed me.'

Mum: 'Well, you probably did something to him first.'

Child: 'I didn't!'

Mum: 'You must have done something to start it.'

Child: 'No I didn't. He just pushed me!'

Mum: 'Well, if I were you, I'd ring him up and say you're sorry.'

Child: 'I hate you.'

Notice how they have an argument, and the child ends up being annoyed at mum too. He feels doubly bad now - annoyed at Gary **and** Mum.

Here, the mother tries the 'new' recommended techniques:

Child: 'Gary pushed me.'

Mum: 'Oh?'

Child: 'Yes, and he said I was a wimp.'

Mum: 'A wimp?'

Child: 'Just because I missed the passing shot.'

Mum: 'Mmmm.'

Child: 'He's always pushing me.'

Mum: 'Sounds like you're pretty angry with him.'

Child: 'Yeah ... I know, I'll go round and see if John's in.'

This time, he told his mum more about what had happened, enjoyed her attention and concern, and thought of a solution to his problem. He felt better after talking to her, even though she hadn't done anything.

Some final words

- When you listen, acknowledge and name feelings, children feel understood. Sometimes this is enough by itself to make them feel better.
- Practise responding in this way to your children.
- It may take time to get the hang of it, because most adults are used to reacting in the 'old' way.
- Children will always have worries, sometimes small and sometimes big.

Being able to talk about them with a caring adult is very important, and you will be doing them a great service if you listen properly. The damage is done when children keep their worries inside and let them fester. Being able to talk about them allows children to work out ways of coping for themselves and move on to pastures new.

Ask for help from a professional if you are concerned about your child's worries.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from:

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