

Family Life Centre

Source: Grace Kuipers, MDiv, RP, CCFT, RMFT

All too often as a therapist, I often see families come to therapy because they didn't practice talking about feelings and they now are stuck because they don't know what to do with some behaviours that seem out of control. During this time of COVID-19 every family's situation is unique, but as we now move into months, not weeks, of physical distancing with no clear end in sight, this is a great time to learn and practice a skill that will not only help you bond closer with your loved ones, but has lifelong benefits!

One of the best tools you can give your child is to help them learn how to recognize their feelings in the moment and to express them in healthy ways.

However, before you expect your kids to manage their emotions, take a good look at yourself. What do you do when you're mad, worried or bored? How do you cope? The airline safety tip to "put on your own oxygen mask before attending to another" is the principle you want to follow. This is important because whatever you're feeling, your kids can pick up on even the slightest nuances in the home. If you're feeling anxious and overwhelmed, chances are your kids see that and may be feeling the same way. Take some time to learn and practice deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation for example. Google these terms; there are lots of good resources out there. At the same time, don't forget to be kind to yourself. We are in unprecedented times, and it makes sense that our feelings are more elevated during this time. Uncertainty is the main ingredient of anxiety.

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Helping Kids Talk about Feelings: What to Say

Identify

I can see that you are feeling... (sad, frustrated, angry, worried, etc....).

Looks like the “worry monster”, “big mad”, “tense tummy” is coming.

I noticed you are (behavior), I wonder if you’re feeling... (sad, frustrated, angry, worried, etc.).

Sometimes when kids are (feeling), they... (behavior). Is that happening for you?

Validate

It’s OK to be sad, worried.

That was really scary, sad, frustrating, etc.

I’m listening.

This is really hard for you.

I’m here with you.

It doesn’t seem fair.

Express

Tell me more about it.

Let’s try an art activity (feelings expression activity e.g. colour my heart, paint your worry monster).

Cope

I will help you work it out. (Plan together what to do.)

Let’s breathe together (e.g. bubble breathing, rainbow breathing, yoga poses, etc.)

I hear that you need space. I am close (name place) so you can find me when you’re ready. I will check back in (time frame)?

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Helping Kids Talk about Feelings: Quick Tips

Do

- Stay calm, breathe
- Focus on the child
- Get at child's level
- Use soft voice
- Speak slowly
- Take the lead & model
- Hug, hug, hug
- Tell the plan
- Create a regular talk time

Don't

- React out of your own feelings
- Focus on yourself
- Minimize the feeling
- Use only distraction
- Avoid the conversation
- Reassure or promise that something won't happen that is out of your control
- Lie or avoid the truth
- Give too much information