

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL, MENTAL, BEHAVIOURAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING IN CHILDHOOD

KIRRILIE SMOUT - CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, DEVELOPING MINDS

- 1 in 7 children and adolescents meet the criteria for being diagnosed with a mental health disorder in childhood/adolescence (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, conduct problems and eating disorders). Mental health diagnoses are more common (approx. 1 in 5) in adolescence (14 to 17 year olds) than in childhood, and more common again in young adulthood (18-24 year olds).
- Common mental health diagnoses and in approximately order of prevalence include ADHD, ODD/conduct problems, anxiety disorders, ASD, depressive disorders, attachment disorders and eating disorders.
- In terms of anxiety disorders, separation anxiety is the most common anxiety disorder in childhood, followed by generalized anxiety disorder and social phobia.

Outside diagnosis:

- 37% of children and adolescents report significant life worries – “coping with stress”, “school”, “social issues” and “body image”
- 25% of parents/carers report perceived need for emotional/mental health services for children in last 12 months
- Teachers report providing emotional/mental health support to 20% of students

WHY DO CHILDREN STRUGGLE?

1. They have human brains!

Humans experience negative emotion, and children/adolescents *begin to experience increasing and more complex negative emotions as they become cognitively more mature*. Are some of the reported “mental health” struggles in childhood and adolescence pathologizing normal experiences of sadness, worry and frustration???

2. Environmental factors/causes

Many children experience life events and situations which lead to mental, behavioural and social health problems. For example:

- 18% of children in Australia live in poverty
- 15% of children are perceived by teachers as having complex or additional learning support needs
- 10% of children have a diagnosed disability
- 13% of children have experienced some form of abuse
- 5% of children experience the death of a parent

3. Biology: Some children are born with high emotional sensitivity

- Genetic Influence
- Brain differences
- Temperament

About 30% of children and adolescents can be considered to have higher levels of sensitivity. These children are more likely to experience “big feelings”. Temperament influences environment, which influences well being.



Shop 14, 130-150 Hub Dr. Aberfoyle Park and 3/16 Bartley Crs Wayville 5034
Phone 08 8357 1711 Fax 08 8125 3875 Email admin@developingminds.net.au

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT CHILDREN TO COPE WITH EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES?

QUESTIONS AS A POWERFUL TOOL TO SUPPORT WELLBEING

Questions:

- Powerfully express care
- Help the child identify specific problems and areas for development and identify strengths and improvement
- Help the child learn to communicate (associated with better well being)
-and provide information

Research suggests numbers of questions in therapy and education settings positively predicts outcome. Ask about:

Specifics of the experience and behaviour (exactly what, thoughts, experiences, examples)

With children:

- What is the worst thing about
- What do you think about when that happens?
- What else do you think about in this situation?
- Who exactly is involved?
- What do you worry will happen next?
- Do you feel X, Y or Z about this?

With parents/caregivers

- Could you give me an example? And another?
- What do you think they are most worried about?
- What have they said happens exactly?
- What kinds of things have been said?

Triggers and Causes (what and when)

With children:

- When do you most often think about....
- What is coming up that you are worried about in particular...
- What happens that makes this worse?
- Let's write down /draw when and how this happens?

With parents/caregivers

- When do you notice this happening?
- What happens immediately after that? Before hand?
- What is your theory about what is going on?
- What are a couple of the hardest time frames of the day?

How can we support? (our role, what's working, what isn't)

With Children:

- Is there anything I could do which might help?
- Is there any particular situations we could change which would make it easier?
- Is there something I don't understand that you'd like to tell me about?
- Is there something you'd like me to say/help you say to another person
- In your journal, please write anything that could happen at school which would help you do/feel....

Parents/Caregivers

- What would be useful for me to do? How can I help?
- What ideally would you like to see happen?
- Is there something other counsellors/teachers/support people have done which have helped?
- Is there something in particular we should talk about today?
- Would you mind emailing me a summary of what would be helpful?
- Term by term check in: what is working well/what would be helpful for your child

Two tips about asking questions

1. Be fearless, persistent and 'dig' for details
2. Make it as easy as possible to answer

Closed questions

- Was it this situation or this situation which made it tough for you?
- Did you feel worried or cross when this happened?
- What helped most when you felt that way – A or B?
- If you could choose one person to change something – would it be this or this?
- On a scale from 1-10, when 1 = x and 10 = x, what number do you feel when....and now when...

Using visual cues

- Let's draw a cartoon to show what happened first in box A, and then in box B, and then in box C
- Look at the picture in this book/on this card (resources) and tell me about when.. how....who...
- If I draw three buckets on the board/paper with these faces (worried, sad, happy) – let's put all the times/things that make you/others feel....
- Here's a "feeling" letter for you to complete.. I feel...when....
- Here's a "tough situations" drawing sheet for you to complete
- Let's look at these cards and you tell me which/when this happens to you...
- Using kimochis (feeling toys) put them in order from how often/when you feel/who feels...

EFFECTIVE RESPONDING TO EMOTIONAL PAIN IN CHILDREN

Sometimes our instinct when we hear negative emotion/difficult life experiences in children is to quickly reassure and "jump into" problem solving. These are important actions to take, however doing them too quickly and too often means children sometimes feel we don't understand and/or get the message that negative emotion is "bad". Adding in expressions of empathy before problem solving can be useful.

Empathy is responding to emotional pain or struggle in a way which recognises it with concern and compassion.

Empathy might sound/look like...

- I'm so sorry you're going through this
- I wish that hadn't happened for you.
- Oh no.....dam it. Such a bummer.
- This really sucks doesn't it
- I guess that must feel sad/scary/worrying
- If I was in your situation I would probably feel really upset about this
- Poor you. I'm so sorry.
- That sounds so tough. I guess that must feel sad/scary/worrying
- If I was in your situation I would probably feel really upset about this
- *That sounds so tough.*
- Being gently interested, asking questions, not interrupting where possible and being prepared to listen

Studies suggest higher levels of perceived empathy in both education and therapy settings leads to more positive outcomes.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN DISTRESS: HELPING CHILDREN RECOGNIZE EMOTIONS AND THEIR TRIGGERS, AND EXPRESS THEM TO OTHERS

Children who manage emotion better are those who have the skills to talk about it. We can help them do this in every day teaching and conversations.

1. Helping children label difficult emotions

- That sounds like you are *disappointed* – *is that true?*
- It sounds like you feel a little bit *embarrassed* and a bit *worried* – *what do you think?*
- If that was me, I might feel *hurt* because I trusted my friend to be kind and they weren't. Does that sound right to you?
- Would you say you feel more *frustrated*, or more *scared*?
- Lots of people would feel a little *lonely* if they were in that situation. Would that be true for you?

2. Helping children recognise triggers and warning signs for strong negative emotions

- What are the times you most feel...
- What are the tough instructions you get which make you feel...
- How can you tell that you are feeling...
- What happens to your body when you are feeling...

3. Helping children constructively express negative emotions

- How can you tell me about
- What could you say when you are feeling..
- Next time would you please say: "I'm cross because..."
- Let's practice you telling me/them/someone about feeling worried....

HELP TO LOWER THEIR FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSES

Children cope better with difficult emotions and experiences when they are more relaxed and physically calmer. When children are distressed they are more likely to be in a state of "fight or flight" which makes it hard for them to learn ideas, communicate or remember information. We can help them to lower their physiological arousal by using:

- Calm voices/face
- Noticing/Distraction
- Empathy
- Physical movement/food/drink

We can also help children to get better at doing this themselves by:

- Teaching children to slow their breathing (balloon breathing)
- Teaching children to make their muscles "floppy" or "loose"
- Daily practice (30 seconds) in class makes a difference

PROVIDE LANGUAGE TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH NEGATIVE EMOTION

Adults use cognitive strategies to help moderate difficult emotions. Cognitive strategies are a key component of evidence based treatment for all mental health conditions. Children need assistance in building cognitive strategies to cope with distress.

1. **Explain rational:** "Calm sentences are some things we can think about that make us feel a bit better".
2. **Help generate:** "Let's see if we can think of some calm sentences that might help when you get worried."
 - What might be one thing about this situation that helps you feel calmer?
 - What is something positive OR helpful OR safe about this that it helps to remember?
 - Let's think of what you are worried about: How likely or unlikely is that to happen do you think?
 - If this did happen, what could you do?
 - If your friend/younger brother/sister was in this situation, what might you say to make them feel a bit better?
 - On a scale of 1-10, how terrible is this? Compared to this? Or that?
3. **Helping children use calm sentences**
 - Short
 - Can be drawings
 - On "coping cards" for the pencil case
 - On their phone/tablets
 - On a list on the fridge

HELP CHILDREN ACT IN BRAVE WAYS

Children (and adults) are naturally motivated to avoid situations which are scary and to withdraw from people/situations when feeling sad. This is particularly true for children who have experienced difficult or traumatic life events. Unfortunately an ongoing cycle of avoidance and withdrawal leads to increased social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We need to be empathic towards children's avoidance/withdrawal instincts but to gently help them to act in brave and engaged ways.

1. Explain importance of brave behaviour

Exposure is hard – we need to (sometimes repeatedly) provide logical and evidence based rationale to children and parents/caregivers

2. Teach ways of coping with anxiety and stress in scary situations

- Distraction
- Calm sentences
- Slow breathing
- Comfort items/toys
- Noticing safe objects/sensations

3. Small but consistent/steady brave behaviour

Small

- Imaginary exposure
- Very Short time periods
- With identified “safe others”
- In limited situations

Consistent

- Visual chart
- Daily then a break
- Accountability (email, check back in)

4. Helping children experience and know the benefits of brave behaviour

- Thank, praise and affirm small steps
- Help children notice what goes well (and the absence of tragedy)
- Using external rewards/incentives (phase out)

Exposure (brave behaviour) may be the most important component of all treatment/support for children with anxiety disorders.

ENCOURAGE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND SKILLS

One of the mainstays of good emotional and mental health is positive social skills and relationships.

1. Coach skills:

- Focus on one specific skill at a time:
- Discuss why and benefits of the social skill for the child
- Explicitly teach words and actions
- Rehearse and practice

2. Facilitate opportunities for positive connection

- Come and try that discussion again in front of me
- What questions can you ask your friends today at school?
- Could you try saying that again in a way which sounds more confident?
- What situations might make you mad with your classmates today? What's some ideas you are going to try to calm yourself down when that happens today?
- Please say that again in a calm and slower voice

3. Conflict Resolution

- Practice in conflict resolution
- Restorative justice/Shared concern processes

USING COACHING

“Kids do well when they can” – Ross Greene

The positive opposite

- What exactly would the child be **doing or saying** if they were doing well in that situation

Rehearsal

- Using graded rehearsal, practice and role play – before and after distress/difficult times

STRENGTH BASED WORK

Identifying character strengths, supports, areas of interest, “exceptions” and coping skills.

Increasing time spent in activity they perceive they do well in and is meaningful to them.

For Children

- Would you like to be involved in leading this group activity?
- Would you be interested in joining this extra-curricular activity?
- Would you like to work on this project?
- Increasing choice (where appropriate and monitored by adults) for where, how and what they would like to work on

For Parents/Caregivers

- Would they be interested in doing...
- I imagine they might enjoy/be good at....
- I'd like to use their skills in....
- I'd like them to choose...

Helping children notice and talk about what is going well

For Children

- Who made you feel better?
- When did you feel proud this week?
- When was a time you didn't feel like/act in that way recently?
- What did you enjoy today?
- What are you looking forward to?
- Who was nice/kind to you?
- When did you feel safe and happy?
- What made you feel more relaxed about that?
- What are your strengths?

For Parents/Caregivers

- What helps?
- What do they enjoy?
- When do they have easier days?
- What coping strategies do they use?
- What are they looking forward to?
- Who is kind to/supports them?
- What makes it better/easier?
- Is there anything we've done which has been helpful?
- What has improved?
- What do you think is going well?
- What are their strengths?
- What do they do well?

Using Praise to help children repeat positive behavior

Specific, outcome based, with information about benefits. For example:

- You said X rather than Y then – this meant....
- I noticed you did.....this makes others/me feel.....
- I see that you did X then.....
- When you did X then I.....

Using affirmation to help them notice their strengths and feel valued

For Children

- I love the way you....
- It seems you can cope with this because....
- I wonder whether you have a strength in.....
- I really like reading your.....
- It's such fun to see you.....

For Parents/Caregivers

- I love the way he/she does....
- It seems that he/she has a strength in....
- I noticed that...
- The way he/she copes with is....
- I appreciate the way you....
- It has really helped because you.....

GETTING SUPPORT, HELP AND ASSISTANCE IN WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

For Families

Your local GP

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):

Elizabeth (Northern Team) – 8252 0133

Port Adelaide (Western Team) – 8341 1222

Paradise (Eastern Team) – 7321 4500

Marion – 7425 8600

Morphett Vale (Onkaparinga Team) – 8326 1234

Parent Help Line – call 1300 364 100

Websites:

Raising Children Network (www.raisingchildren.net.au)

Child and Youth Health (www.cyh.com)

Kids Helpline (kidshelpline.com.au)

Youth Beyond Blue (www.youthbeyondblue.com)

Parenting SA (www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/parenting/parenting-sa)

Australian Psychological Society (www.psychology.org.au)

For Professionals

Kids Matter <https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/> (for programs and ideas in primary)

Innovative Resources <https://innovativeresources.org/schools/> (For resources and materials)

Centre for Clinical Interventions <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/mhp.cfm> (for handouts and resources to provide to families and for ideas to use as professionals)

Australian Childhood Foundation <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/smart-online-training> (Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma)
www.calmkidcentral.com - Free for 12 months for Adelaide metro families with a health care card – calmkidcentral.com.

Free 2 day trial for professionals - go to calmkidcentral.com/free-trial-pro



DEVELOPING MINDS
PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION
Helping kids & teens learn life skills & manage tough times
www.developingminds.net.au

Shop 14, 130-150 Hub Dr. Aberfoyle Park and 3/16 Bartley Crs Wayville 5034
Phone 08 8357 1711 Fax 08 8125 3875 Email admin@developingminds.net.au