



# Parents' guide to kids' emotional wellbeing

◆ [www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing](http://www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing) ◆





## Introduction

As we face a global pandemic and a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty, children are at risk of suffering emotional and mental health challenges. Their routines are disrupted; they're not able to see their friends, or play their usual sports and may even be missing their schools and teachers. They may also be picking up on their parents' worries and concerns about the extent of the virus, and its long-term effect on jobs, finance and the future.

When we speak of mental health, we want to think about being mentally healthy, not just being free from mental illness. Mental health refers to the health of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It is important to recognise this with our children, and that they can recognise this themselves.

This guide helps you and your children to:

- ◆ **Develop awareness**
- ◆ **Have conversations**
- ◆ **Learn to listen**
- ◆ **Utilise practical tips**
- ◆ **Try new activities**

all to help improve emotional wellbeing.

## The 4 Corners model

### Thoughts



This model can be used to help children make sense of things that are happening currently, by breaking any situation down into more easily recognizable areas. By building their self-awareness, children can work towards changing small things in each 'corner' that are unhelpful, to feel better.

Building awareness early on of:

- ◆ why we feel the way we do (**emotions**)
- ◆ the impact on the way we talk to ourselves (**thoughts**)
- ◆ how we respond to others around us (**behaviours**)
- ◆ how our emotions, thoughts and behaviours can affect our bodies (**physical body**) is key across our life journey.

### Emotions



These are all areas we can control and, when we have awareness of this, we see situations more rationally, understand the benefits and remain calmer.

### How to use the 4 Corners model

# 1

Start a conversation about how a situation makes them 'feel'... for instance, not seeing friends.

Then ask:

- ◆ What sort of things have you been 'doing'...?
- ◆ What do you think about this...?
- ◆ Have you noticed any physical changes...?

# 2

Support them in changing small things in each corner to help them feel better.

# 3

Focus on one change at a time. Some suggestions to help get you started with making small changes can be found in the SWAP Wellbeing Journal and activity sheets at [www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing](http://www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing)

### Behaviours



### Physical body



## A '4 Corners' example

The 'the 4 corners of me' model illustrates a scenario and four quadrants – demonstrating the areas within us where we do have control: emotions, thoughts, behaviours and physical body.

Fig.1 – Example of The 4 Corners



### Example – Being stuck at home

This could show up in the 4 corners as displayed above. By focusing on changing one thing, could we influence the other corners to feel better?

### Example changes to make:

A different behaviour:

**Talking to someone about how I am feeling.**

A different thought:

**Looking at things differently by saying: 'We're all in the same boat and this won't last forever'.**

Fig.2 – How one change can affect The 4 Corners



This could show up differently in the 4 corners as displayed above.

## Having conversations with your children



**Allow your children to contribute to discussions, so they feel part of a team. This will make them feel and cope better.**

- ◆ Open and honest conversations, and having the chance to speak, helps them build emotional and wellbeing life skills that will enable them to develop resilience as and when difficulties arise in the future.

**Simply listening can make a huge difference.**

- ◆ Create a space and a time when you're not distracted.
- ◆ Listen first, and be understanding and non-judgemental.
- ◆ Don't over-react or tell them that they are over-reacting.
- ◆ Speak calmly and quietly.
- ◆ Show that you've heard them, by using the words they used to describe their feelings. This helps build trust and confidence, as they feel listened to.
- ◆ The time doesn't need to be lengthy – often revisiting things more frequently can be a good way to get them used to talking.

**Recognise that your child's behaviour and emotions are related to their thoughts, so it's important to understand what they're thinking, rather than simply challenging them.**

- ◆ What are they saying to themselves to make them feel or behave in a certain way?
- ◆ Are you able to challenge their thinking and encourage an alternative way of looking at things, or a different perspective?

**Put things into perspective.**

Children are very good at catastrophizing (thinking the worst-case scenario). Encourage them to gain perspective:

- ◆ Allow them to state their worst case fears. (catastrophise)
- ◆ Ask them to come up with the best possible case scenario and allow them to exaggerate.
- ◆ Then ask them to find some middle ground and think of what the most likely outcome actually is.

**Emphasise that 'negative' emotions are actually normal, and it's not possible to be happy all the time. But don't allow the emotions to get unnecessarily out of control.**



## Reflective listening

Reflective Listening is a useful method to listen effectively to your child so they feel heard and understood. It will help them to develop confidence in talking about their feelings.

Typical responses by an adult to a young person experiencing strong emotions can be:

- ◆ What's the matter?
- ◆ Why did you do that?
- ◆ Don't be silly!
- ◆ You don't need to be sad.

We all have a basic need to be listened to and understood. Instead try the following techniques:

### Labelling:

**Adult:** "You look / sound / seem sad..."

They may open up in their own time. Don't force the issue but let them know you're available to listen when they're ready.

### Reflective Listening:

**Child:** "No-one is talking to me or telling me what's going on."

**Adult:** "You're sad because no-one talked to you?"

**Reflecting:** sometimes this is enough to help the young person feel their needs are understood and helps you respond in a way that allows them to feel safe to talk and express their feelings.

**Normalising:** If you can normalise these feelings, it will help the child accept them and, hopefully, encourage them to expand on how they feel.

"You're feeling... because... I guess... would feel ... too"

### What about ANGER?

If the young person is angry, it's advisable to wait until they're calm and use Labelling and Normalising in the past tense.

### SUMMARY:

Label ▶ Reflect ▶ Normalise

## Being HEARD is very powerful.





## Practical tips

### Connect

Maintain contact and interaction with those who help your child feel positive and energised. Use video calls and group chats with friends, grandparents and relatives – a smile can be much more reassuring than just a voice. Form friendship groups. Working together and sharing resources can help overcome a 'siege mentality', whereas networking, and looking after each other, can be a huge comfort.

### Routine

Create a routine or a timetable. Do you need to agree how the household will run with everyone at home all day?

### Humour

Find some light relief and sources of laughter for your children, wherever you can.

### Involve

Activities that bring you in to the present such as reading, cooking, DIY, or creative arts, can alleviate worries about an unknown future.

### Breathe

If you feel your children are getting worked up, pay attention to the length of their exhales and inhales. Encourage them to breathe less than 12 breaths a minute – slower respirations decrease the body's stress response.

### Accept

Practice acceptance of some uncertainty. Attention training exercises such as mindfulness can help children be more aware of their thoughts and how to direct attention away from worrying. If you find they're stuck in a 'worry cycle', try postponing their worry period to specific times, such as half an hour in the morning or evening.

### Environment

Try not to expose your children to parental disagreements or tension. Ensure their environment is safe and nurturing, free from worry. They need to know that the home is comforting and positive, and they need things to function as normally as possible.



## The whole person approach to emotional wellbeing

Physical and emotional wellbeing are important to help us cope with the ups and downs of life. Good physical health contributes to good emotional wellbeing and resilience, and vice versa. This is why it's important for our children to eat, move and sleep well in order to support their emotional wellbeing.

These elements of keeping healthy are vital to children's resilience – if their bodies are well charged and well-nourished, this will allow their brains to remain calmer and enable them to cope better.

Further ideas and activities can be found in the kids My Wellbeing Journal

[www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing](http://www.nuffieldhealth.com/kidswellbeing)



## Eat well

### Why it's important:

- ◆ What we eat affects our mood, and our emotional and mental health, as well as our physical health.
- ◆ Essential fats such as oily fish, nuts, seeds, eggs and avocados, as well as vegetables, help to boost brain power, stabilise mood, and balance hormones. They are, therefore, calming.
- ◆ Erratic patterns of eating lead to blood sugar imbalances which increase adrenaline, a stress hormone, which in turn impacts mood and concentration levels.
- ◆ A balanced diet boosts serotonin – a neurotransmitter found in the digestive system that helps to stabilise and regulate mood.
- ◆ Build their emotional immune system with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables

### Guidelines:

- ◆ Daily sugar intake for children 11+ and adults should not exceed 30g (approximately 6 teaspoons).
- ◆ For under 11s, daily intake should be no more than 25g (5 teaspoons).
- ◆ Young people should drink 6-8 glasses of water each day (approx. 2 litres).

- ◆ Caffeine consumption for children should stay below 50mg per day – as well as tea and coffee, some soft drinks also contain caffeine.
- ◆ All of us should eat at least five portions of fruits and vegetables per day, including a variety of types and colours.

### Ideas to encourage children to EAT well

- ◆ Have a daily menu and plan for healthy choices, including meals, snacks and drinks – preparing one evening meal for everyone.
- ◆ Let children serve themselves at mealtimes to encourage trying new foods.
- ◆ To make fruit and vegetables more appealing, try finger foods or dips and dressings.
- ◆ Involve children in selecting, growing, picking, preparing, cooking and serving. This encourages an interest in food.
- ◆ Avoid distractions such as TV at mealtimes. Focus instead on table manners, social and language skills.
- ◆ Act as a good role model through your own choices.
- ◆ Try to be neutral about what your kids are eating. Serve balanced meals and giving choices such as carrots OR broccoli. Telling them off for not eating certain things may cause further resistance.

## Sleep well

### Why it's important

- ◆ From the outside, it appears that not much is being accomplished during sleep but this is not true.
- ◆ Sleep is essential for survival.
- ◆ It's an active process where a lot of important body functions and brain activity occurs.
- ◆ Efficient sleep, and a consistent sleep/wake routine, promotes mood stability and hormonal balance, and supports energy levels and concentration.

### Guidelines

- ◆ Recommendations from The National Sleep Foundation are:
  - 9-11 hours consistent sleep for 6-13 year olds
  - 8-10 hours for 14-17 year olds.
- ◆ For young people, the value of a 'two-hour daily limit' for screen time has been consistently supported by The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.
- ◆ Avoiding screens for one hour before bedtime is beneficial for sleep quality.

### Ideas to encourage children to SLEEP well

- ◆ Get into a regular sleep and wake routine. Adjust gradually if needed – plan to go to bed half an hour earlier than usual and keep a consistent waking time.
- ◆ Before bed, get them to write down anything that's swirling around their mind. This will settle the mind for sleep and prevent broken sleep due to worry and concerns.
- ◆ Have an evening 'wind down' routine, such as:
  - planning time to have a bath
  - changing into nightwear
  - avoiding bright lights
  - setting a time-goal for lights out.
- ◆ Avoid exercise/sports close to bedtime as this can over stimulate children.
- ◆ Check the temperature of the bedroom and sleeping area, and aim to have it cool and comfortable.
- ◆ Switch mobile devices off or to 'sleep' mode, and set an alarm. This way the phone won't distract or interrupt sleep with notifications.

## Move well

### Why it's important

- ◆ Daily physical activity helps maintain a healthy body weight, promoting positive body image, self-esteem and sense of achievement.
- ◆ Physical activity supports a positive mind-set and resilience skills.
- ◆ Exercise releases anxiety-reducing chemicals, while acting as a healthy distraction.
- ◆ If your children can't get to their usual activity, be creative. There are many things you can do to be active, even if you're at home. Look online for inspiration and ideas on how to use your home as a safe and effective workout space.
- ◆ Physical activity also helps develop long-term social skills, which contribute to all-round happiness.

### Guidelines

- ◆ Young people, aged 5-18, should accumulate at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day as recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO).
- ◆ Three days a week, activities should involve exercises for strong muscles and bones, such as push-ups, running and jumping (WHO).

### Ideas to encourage your children to MOVE well and keep active

- ◆ Be a role model by doing something active every day.
- ◆ Do activities together and throughout the day
  - bouts of 10 minutes add up.
- ◆ Make activity fun:
  - include games
  - challenges such as completing a task in a certain time
  - music such as a family disco.
- ◆ For younger children, activities that develop motor skills are a good idea such as:
  - throwing and catching
  - hopping
  - riding a bike
  - tag games.
- ◆ Limit screen time to promote moving and being outdoors.
- ◆ Encourage children to help around the home
  - vacuuming, dusting and gardening keep us all active.



# Activities for children to try

## The ABC

We all have ABCs every day, but what is an ABC and how do you recognise it?

**A** is for **Adversity** which is usually a little problem we have or even just 'A' thing that happens.

**B** is for **Belief** which is like our internal radio of thoughts or what we are saying to ourselves in our mind. It's our interpretation of the 'A' and may not always be accurate.

**C** is for the **Consequence** that the A leads to. The consequence is usually an emotion (how we feel) or a behaviour (what we do).

The most important step in the ABC is the B (the belief). What belief did you have? What different thought could you have to improve your emotion (how you feel)? Write down your ABC before and after you changed your 'Belief'. How would you explain ABCs to an alien?

## Think like Epictetus!

Learn Mind Control (your own!) Epictetus was a Greek scholar. He said that you can only control two things. **YOUR thoughts**, and **YOUR actions**. Spend the day focusing on this concept. We all have lots of things going on, perhaps now more than ever, but put focus on reminding yourself of the positives, and make your actions a force for good. The world needs more EPIC-tetus types!

## Check your story

We tell ourselves a story of what is happening in our day and sometimes things can seem a little overwhelming. We can exaggerate our thoughts and imagine the worst case scenario. Take a moment to look outside your window. The world should seem quite calm as if everything is normal. Try to notice the simple, everyday things outside and sense one thing you could touch, one thing you could smell and one thing you could hear. Imagine things like the birds, flowers and trees. The world you can see is probably not quite as stressful as the story we often tell ourselves.

## Lift somebody's mood!

Make a card today in the shape of a hot air balloon and write some positive messages and thoughts in the balloon for a loved one to lift their mood and make them feel good. Do you have someone you know who is at home or an elderly relative you can't visit that you could send the card to?

## Be thankful



With the influx of information we get, we can sometimes forget the little things. Take a moment to remind yourself of things you have to be thankful for to give you a positive mindset. Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Do you have food in your belly?  
(If you ate in the last 24 hours, that'll be yes!)
- ◆ Do you have a place to sleep?  
A roof over your head at night?
- ◆ Do you have people that check in on you?  
Parents / family / guardians / teachers / friends
- ◆ Do you have a pair of shoes, and some clothes to keep you warm?
- ◆ Do you have some form of internet access / use of a computer or phone?

Some people do not have many or sometimes any of those things! If we can remind ourselves to be thankful for all the little things, we become stronger and more resilient, and can help make others stronger too! You can make a difference to how people feel.

## The 4 corners of me

Things that happen to us or the choices we make, show up in us in 4 areas – Thoughts, Emotions, Behaviours and Physical body.

Think about how a current situation is showing up in your own 4 corners. If you changed your thought, would this affect the other 3 corners?

### Thoughts (in our mind)

Before:

After:

### Emotions (how we feel)

Before:

After:

Thoughts

Behaviours

Emotions

Physical body

Starting with your thoughts, write in the boxes below how this would show up in your own 4 corners before and after.

My situation:

### Behaviours (what we do)

Before:

After:

### Physical body (in our body)

Before:

After:

## Begin to learn a new skill today!

Post a video online on how to learn a new skill e.g. basics for learning to juggle, how to sketch something.





## How I feel

How we feel has an effect on our mood, our thoughts, our bodies and our behaviours. It is important to recognise our emotions and when / why they are happening. There are things you can do to lift your emotions to more positive ones. Exercise and sleep make a big difference to how we feel.









What changed when you felt better compared to when you weren't feeling as good? Are there certain things you can do to lift your emotions to more positive ones? Do you notice a link to when you are exercising more and getting better sleep?

### Did you know...

Laughter can improve your memory because it reduces the stress hormone cortisol which reduces our brain power.



Take time this week to think about your emotional wellbeing. Draw a new emoji each day expressing how you are feeling and tell us your reasons for feeling that way.

			
Day	Day	Day	Day
Today I felt...	Today I felt...	Today I felt...	Today I felt...
			
Day	Day	Day	
Today I felt...	Today I felt...	Today I felt...	This week I mainly felt...