

Helping children learn to cope

The following examples are for parents and carers to use at home. They are most suitable for early primary aged children, but can be modified for use with older ages. The methods described can also be adapted by teaching staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

Parents and carers

are usually the first people children look to for support and reassurance when they are scared or worried. Providing reassurance such as hugs and encouragement helps to restore children's sense of safety and confidence. Giving children a sense of safety includes limiting their exposure to frightening situations, such as violence – whether real or on TV. Parents and carers can also play a leading role in helping children learn skills for managing their fears.

Things to take into account:

- It takes time and effort for children to learn new coping skills.
- Younger children usually learn best when you do it with them.
- Though older children may be able to use coping skills independently, they still need your support when scared.
- All children feel more secure and confident when they have regular quality time with parents and carers.
- Bedtime is often when children's fears surface. Try to ensure that children have calming time before bed to unwind. A regular bedtime routine or ritual helps children feel a sense of safety and security.

The following example shows some possible ways a parent or carer might help Jessica, the six year old child described in the accompanying information sheet, *Helping children cope with fears and worries*. Jessica is having difficulty going to sleep because of fears that something might happen to the house. She wants her mother to stay with her.

Child's difficulty	Some suggestions on how to support
Feels scared and worried	<i>Acknowledge feelings:</i> e.g., "You're having trouble going to sleep because you're worried something might happen."
Feels unsafe	<i>Reassure:</i> e.g., "That storm was only on TV. It's not going to happen here."
Can't think through logically	<i>Reality check:</i> e.g., "The wind would have to be really, really strong to blow the roof off. We don't get those kinds of winds here."
Feels overwhelmed by scary thoughts	<i>Label:</i> e.g., "That's just a scary thought. You don't have to keep it."
Lacks skills for coping	<i>Demonstrate coping skill:</i> e.g., "Let's blow the scary thoughts away. Take a deep breath and together we will blow them all away." <i>This example uses a simple idea and makes a game of blowing away all the scary thoughts. Using skills and images the child relates to, as well as making it fun, helps best.</i>
Has trouble relaxing	<i>Teach relaxation:</i> Younger children often respond well to relaxation techniques that help them to visualise calming images – e.g. a waterfall or clouds floating gently across the sky. <i>The accompanying list of resources includes books and CDs that focus on relaxation for children.</i>
Doesn't feel confident about managing fears	<i>Encourage helpful thinking:</i> e.g., "Tell those scary thoughts 'I know I am safe and I won't let you scare me!'"
May not believe in own ability	<i>Praise and encouragement:</i> e.g., "You did it. You're getting braver and braver!" or "You're trying really hard to be brave. Good on you!"

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au