

Using Play to Support Children During Times of Change and Uncertainty

We spoke with Play Therapist Emma Brummell who shares her advice on how parents and carers can use play to help their children to process their feelings.

The advice and associated activities are aimed at parents and carers with children aged 4–11.



The activities, exercises and suggestions below are shared by certified Play Therapist Emma Brummell, not of Pearson Education or Pearson Clinical. Some other great sources of information and support on children's mental health and well-being can be found here:

If you feel that your child or someone you know is at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek **immediate professional help**. Seek an emergency GP appointment, call **999**, or NSPCC **0808 800 5000** if you think you or your child is at immediate risk.

Read on to find out more about the advice and activities Emma Brummell shares for parents.

In a similar way to adults, our children may be experiencing strong emotions and reactions to the huge changes taking place in their lives right now. These emotions can show themselves in many ways, such as:

feeling sad and weepy

regularly tearful or becoming upset often

new or stronger feelings of anxiety or worry

an inability to focus or concentrate

angry outbursts

behaving aggressively

withdrawing, becoming lethargic, low mood

less patience/ greater frustrations

physical complaints, e.g. sore head/ tummy etc.

For more signs to look out for, and how you can support your child can be found on the NSPCC page [here](#).



Children, especially young children, can find talking about their feelings extremely difficult. They may be aware of a 'bad' or 'good' feeling but be unable to put words to it to specify what that feeling is or explain why they feel that way. It may also be quite overwhelming for them to talk about their difficult feelings or experiences in the first person (e.g. 'I feel angry', 'I feel sad'). However, children are wonderful at playing and given the right circumstances, will use play to effectively communicate and process how they are feeling and what they have experienced.

It is important to note that the objective of these play activities is not to try and figure everything out for your child, but rather an opportunity to listen and learn more about how your child is feeling. You may get some clear insight through play, but if not, there is still benefit in the time you and your child have played and spent time together.

'Play is the natural language of children'

Gary Landreth



Play

Free Play

Giving children lots of opportunities to play freely without a specific agenda or goal set by someone else, gives them space and time to explore what is important to them in that moment without feeling there are other expectations or outcomes that they need to meet.

Art and creativity

Painting, drawing or creating with clay/playdoh are wonderful tools to help children to visually represent and organise their feelings. These activities can be hugely calming and soothing, reducing feelings of stress and worry.

You might like to sit alongside your child while they explore with creating, and maybe creating something of your own simultaneously. This can be a lovely time of connection and shared experience.

Music

Children can make their own music using instruments or anything that makes a noise. Music can be a wonderful way for adults and children to express themselves. Again, you can use this time to enjoy being together with your child, maybe joining in, matching the energy of their music or simply moving your body to your child's music or listening quietly. These moments of togetherness and connection between a parent/carer and their child create the wonderful mutual feelings of safety, love and comfort that will benefit us all during this time of change and uncertainty.

Storytelling

Children tell stories throughout their play in many different ways, e.g. puppets, songs, role play, small world play. When we pay attention to our children's stories we might notice some themes coming up e.g. fear, sadness, loss, illness, etc.

It can be worrying to notice any of these appearing in your children's play, but rest assured they are doing some really healthy and important work.

It is helpful to let them engage in their storytelling play with minimal interruption or probing, allowing them to work through it in their own way.

Books

There are also many books available to support children with difficult emotions. Emma recommends the following books which may be useful for children at the minute:

The Huge Bag of Worries: Virginia Ironside
A lovely book for children feeling worried or anxious

Tough Guys Have Feelings too: Keith Negley
Good for children who are finding it hard to express their feelings and believe that being sad is a weakness.

In my heart, A Book of Feelings: Jo Witek
Beautiful book to introduce the range of feelings that we can all experience.

The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back:
Margot Sunderland
*A book for children dealing with a loss of any kind.
May be useful story for year 6 children who are mourning the loss of their primary school experience.*

Allowing children to hear about a struggle similar to their own through the metaphor of a story can be hugely helpful in supporting a child to begin to make sense of their own feelings and prevent them from feeling alone or overwhelmed.

How you
can support your
children during
times of change
and uncertainty

Connection

Connection is a very powerful tool which can help enormously to ease stress and anxiety and build strong loving bonds between parent/carer and child. The feelings of safety, security, unconditional love and acceptance created when there is a strong connection present helps to ease the stress and anxiety caused by difficult feelings and can help a child to manage their big feelings.

Loving connection with your child can be as simple as eye contact and a warm smile and can be peppered in throughout the day to help nurture a strong bond. All the little moments of shared laughter, being engaged together when you are working on something as a team, loving touch, are all examples of moments of true connection with long lasting benefits for the whole family.

1 to 1 play

An easy way to include some connection and play in our days is to dedicate a specific time for 1 to 1 play, (this can be for as long as you can fit in, anything from as little as 10 minutes can be enough time to have a meaningful connection time.) During this time, you can play with your child in whatever way they choose, allowing them to control and lead the play. You can make this feel really special by letting your child create a name for this time and telling them that it is a lovely time for you both to play together.

The aim is to create and enjoy a simple and gentle connection with your child. This type of connection helps to reduce any stress and anxiety and boost feelings of wellbeing, love and safety.

‘The parent-child relationship is the most powerful mental health intervention known to man.’

Bessel Van Der Kolk

Emotional literacy

It can be tricky to shelter our children from our own worries and anxieties. We can help by taking care of ourselves, showing ourselves the same compassion we are giving to our children and finding ways to acknowledge and express our own difficult feelings too. There are many ways we can do this, maybe with the help of an empathetic friend or relative or with a trained professional such as a therapist.

However, we do not need to hide all of our tricky feelings from our children. When handled in a healthy and appropriate way it can be very beneficial for our children to witness us having strong feelings too. When our children see us expressing our feelings in a healthy way, it gives them permission to do the same.

It helps to label our feelings as they come up and model how we can handle them positively, e.g. *"I can feel my angry feelings swirling in my chest, I'm going to go into the kitchen and take some deep breaths."*

There will inevitably be times when we will lose our tempers and react to our feelings in less productive ways. We can be kind to ourselves when this happens and remember that we are only human, and it is normal for this to happen at times. When this happens, we are also allowing our children to see that it is ok to make mistakes and that when we do, we can repair them by apologising and reconnecting with each other.

More
guidance
on general
self-care can
be found
here

