

# Parents' Guide to Helping Children Express Emotion Safely

Being in lockdown and transitioning from lockdown with our children at home can be tough to manage. New rituals, new boundaries and having to manage our own emotions and theirs at the same time.

If you're having difficulty **managing your own emotions as a parent**, Khulisa has created a **Guide for Emotional Wellbeing** that can help you to stay calm in the current crisis. You can access this at our [website](#).

This is a scary and confusing time for children and they of course pick up on our anxiety and fear, as a result, they may:

- *Act out of character*
- *Be more likely to appear challenging*
- *Push boundaries more than usual*
- *Appear to behave much younger than their years (in response to the restrictions in their space/freedom)*
- *React negatively to changes in ritual/routine*

As parents, it's good to remember that often these are natural and biological responses as opposed to being intentionally disruptive. Sometimes, these responses are because children don't know how to...

1. Manage the intensity of the emotions they're feeling or
2. Manage emotions they've not felt before - eg. loss, grief, anxiety

Being unable to hang out with their friends at school can be a child's **first real experience of loss or significant change in routine** - akin to us losing our job, or going through a divorce. It can be hard for us to imagine what this loss is like for them at their young age when little things can be amplified by a combination of biological changes and inexperience.

This is particularly true for teenagers and pre-teen children who can become more prone to emotional flare ups simply because of physiological processes in their bodies as they grow.

Safely expressing and managing emotions is a great life skill. This period gives us the opportunity to help our kids to learn how to do this safely and in a fun way which all the family can benefit from.

**Activities here are designed to help you to help your children express emotions safely and learn how to manage emotions in the process.**

We've included:

- *5 Top Tips for Parents*
- *10 Activities for safe expression of emotions*
- *Further resources for reading and getting support*

We hope you find this helpful. Parenting is both a rewarding and a challenging role, but...

**Stay calm and keep smiling - you've got this!**

## 5 Top Tips For Parents: Managing our own emotions

### 1 Self care

It's a well known saying - "you can't pour from an empty cup". In other words - if you're running low on energy or resilience, you can't support anyone else. A bit like putting your oxygen mask on first before you can help others. Looking after you is not selfish, it's the best way to be well enough to help those who rely on you or look to you for guidance.

Demonstrating to your children that you know how to look after your wellbeing sets a great example and helps embed this as a skill they have, to manage their own self care and wellbeing as adults. For Self-Care ideas - see our Wellbeing Guide and Managing Anxiety Guide [here](#).

### 2 Name it to tame it

When we're feeling intense emotions, it can help us - and others around us - if we can name what we're thinking and feeling. As an example, if we feel angry or frustrated, it can help to say this calmly out loud (eg 'It's no-one's fault - I just feel really angry, frustrated, upset about ... ') This verbal acknowledgement signals to our brain and body and to others that we know what's going on - that we're 'taming' the feelings. We've recognised a feeling that has the potential to overwhelm our internal alarm system.

Just doing this can help retain a level of calm in managing the emotions and sensations we're feeling. Having intense emotions is normal in life - particularly during lockdown and easing from lockdown - and it's ok to feel this and acknowledge it. This helps us to avoid bottling things up and reacting or overreacting to a situation.

### 3 This is temporary and not forever

Acknowledge that the emotions you're feeling, thoughts you're having will change - none of this is forever. It can be too easy, when we have so much uncertainty, to feel as if this is all there is. We know though that this time too will pass, so reminding yourself of this frequently (hourly if need be!) helps us stay calm and positive.

The Covid-19 crisis and the emotions it stimulates, is not 'all of us'. We still have space for laughter, joy, curiosity, acceptance and gratitude in our lives, if we can just notice these things as well.

### 4 Reaching out for support and connection

None of us are superhuman. We all need support and being a parent in a crisis is an incredibly tough job. Connect with friends, family and wider support networks(phone, text, email WhatsApp, online group chats, writing letters) - ideally at least once every hour during the day - just 2 minutes can help..

Use a video link when you can, as seeing facial expressions (smiles, laughter, empathy) gives us a deeper sense of connection and a sense of the person's presence. This connection helps us stay grounded and breaks up the day so that our human (and maybe cat or dog fur-baby!) connections are varied.

### 5 Breathing deeply

It's so simple we can forget how powerful oxygen and breathing can be for our physical and mental health. Just taking 3 long deep breaths every hour oxygenates our body and brain, enabling us to think clearer and reducing chemicals that create anxiety in our nervous system. Breathe in for 4 and breathe out for 8 at least 3 times every 60 minutes. More breathing techniques are explored in full [here](#).

# 10 Activities to Safely Express Emotions With Children

It's important to remember that helping children to express emotion works much better through play and creativity. You might notice that asking your child directly how he/she is feeling seems to confuse, embarrass or irritate them. Sometimes this is because they genuinely don't know how to answer the question. So, for the exercises below where we're seeking to understand what a child is feeling or what they need, you'll notice we're using story-telling, characters or art.

This is to create a playful way of learning about what we're feeling in a light-hearted way. To do these exercises, do ring fence space in your day when you can shut off your phone, or laptop and do some of these activities together.

Safe expression - letting emotions out and feeling more balance:

## 1 Pillow fighting



Pillow fighting is fun and a good way to relieve frustration and pent-up energy in a safe way. Make this into a fun game with rules/boundaries - eg., No hitting around the face and taking care in the space you're in -, such as staying away from breakables.

Try a 60 second warm up activity where children punch pillows as hard as they can to release any built up emotions/energy, before starting the game and have time-outs to enable fair play.

## 3 Drumming tunes together



Research confirms that drumming relaxes us, reduces stress and can even lower blood pressure. We use both our left and right sides of our brain when we're drumming and the rhythm, vibration and sound helps us to regulate our emotions and body sensations.

We don't need actual drums to play - Pots, pans, wooden spoons, tapping your fingers to beat out a rhythm still works. You can play games with your children and challenge each other to guess the tune or try drumming along to your favourite tunes. This [website](#) has more info.

## 5 Den building



Building a den is one of the best ways to help children create their own safe space to express feelings! Let your children loose in the living room with sheets and blankets - not just young children either. We've run workshops with older children and full grown adults building dens, with exactly the same level of engagement! It's really simple and can help us feel a sense of safety, which can help regulate intense or overwhelming emotions. Fill the den with pillows, paper & crayons, soft toys, games and maybe even have a picnic in there together!

## 2 Ball games



Any activity that is rhythmic and has a regular beat to it helps to regulate our heart beat and calm our nervous system. Playing a ball game with your children can be fun and help you all to regulate your emotions. Bouncing a ball is particularly regulating for the body and mind.

Try games where each person has a go at bouncing the ball for as long as they can or catching with different hands to stimulate the brain whilst regulating the body. Table tennis, bouncing a ball up the wall, juggling - all of these are good activities that help to express and calm emotions. If you can safely play football or kick a ball around in an open space, whilst social distancing - even better.

## 4 Dancing together



Create your own dance club at home with some of your favourite music or challenge your children to create a new dance routine and teach you how to do it! Dancing is a great way to let off steam and get some exercise at the same time. Did you know we use over 600 muscles in the body when we dance?!

Dancing also releases chemicals in the body that reduce stress and increase happiness. If you have Wii Dance, you can challenge each other to a dance off. Even if you don't, you can still challenge each other or learn new dances together - Tik Tok has so many great options for children to challenge parents to a dance off!

# 10 Activities to Safely Express Emotions With Children

## 6 Drawing pictures of how we feel



Children often lack the vocabulary to be able to express how they're feeling, so drawing or colouring out their feelings can be really helpful. Things you can try include:

- Encourage expression through colour - what colour relates to what type of feeling and in what situation, then give names to the feelings - this expands their understanding of emotions and how to express them.
- A drawing competition - who can draw the best self portrait? Or find pictures online or in magazines which best represent how we feel or see ourselves? Children can explain what their features mean to parents and vice versa to explore what they're feeling. Eg. Look at pictures online; in 3 minutes, find 3 pictures that represent you.

## 8 Doing a puppet show

Make puppets together as a family - old socks are ideal for this! You can make hand puppets, finger puppets - even just drawing eyes on your index finger and a mouth on your thumb can make a puppet out of your hand.

Recreate Jungle Book or Frozen or the Lion King as a family or just create some new characters with puppets and have the puppets express different emotions to show how the emotions look and feel and can sometimes prompt us to behave. Great conversations about how to explain what we're feeling, instead of just reacting or acting out, can come from just making puppets and this type of creative activity is good for calming down the brain and body regardless.

## 10 Appreciation game

In the western world, we often forget to recognise and appreciate our achievements or what has gone well in our lives each day. Research confirms that appreciation, recognition and gratitude are important for good mental health and wellbeing, so it's a good habit to get into to help children to notice what makes them happy, grateful and valuable on a regular basis. This can often be the difference between poor and good mental health as we grow older. Try taking time every evening at mealtimes for each member of the family to share what they appreciated about other members of the family:

- What did your child do today that you appreciated?
- What strengths or skills did they display today?
- What values or characteristics do they show that it's important to encourage?

Doing this daily helps to keep our brain in balance with positive and negative experiences and reminds us all that we bring our own unique value and skills.



## 7 Checking in with each other daily

Put up an emotional thermometer (on the fridge/on the wall) to help children express how hot (angry) or cool (calm) they're feeling and help everyone in the family to get used to expressing emotions and understanding how we can each regulate our emotions by taking action (talking it through, doing some exercise, working out what we need to help us feel calmer - which could include sleep, food, rest, attention, space or exercise)

## 9 Storytelling with toys



Children can often explain how they're feeling and express their emotions more easily by telling us a story using toy characters or re-enacting a situation using soft toys. Encourage story-telling about situations at school, at home and allow your children to suggest the character that you play and narrate the story for and with you, so that they know it's ok to express how they feel about certain situations. Avoid changing the story to suit your own experience or version of events. Remember - this is how they perceive the situation from their naive and young perspective, so it's important to validate their experience before jumping in to share our own.

*Be aware that sometimes during challenging times, children will use toys as transitional objects - your child might seem to regress during this, or other difficult periods - perhaps returning to playing with or cuddling an old toy, or displaying clingy behaviour which they haven't done for years. This is normal, and try and accept it as part of their development. Any rebuke or light hearted comment such as "You're a bit old for that now!" won't help - your child is just trying to self-soothe and their brain is telling them this will work! Once they feel a bit more secure, chances are the old teddy or doll or action figure will go back on the shelf or in the cupboard again.*

## Resources

- My Big Bag of Worries
- Margot Sunderland - books for adults and children to help with managing anxiety, overwhelm and other intense feelings.
- [My Hidden Chimp](#) (for kids)
- [Creative Ways to Help Children Manage Big Feelings](#) (for kids)
- [The Chimp Paradox](#) (for adults)
- [Untangled](#) (For parents of teenage girls)