

Coping skills for children

As they grow and develop, all children encounter situations where they feel worried, nervous and sometimes even scared. Starting school involves a big change for your child as they settle into a new environment and begin forming relationships with peers and school staff. Even if your child's transition to school goes smoothly, it is likely that they will encounter some ups and downs throughout their primary school years. Helping your child to learn coping skills as they start school will allow them to develop and practise skills that will enable them to cope with future changes and challenges. This will help to strengthen your child's mental health and wellbeing now and into the future.

What are coping skills?

Coping skills are what we think and what we do to help us get through difficult situations. Your child will begin to learn and use different coping skills from the time they are born. You can build on the skills they are already using, as well as assist them to learn new ones. This may include asking for help, talking with friends, problem solving and taking time out when they need a break. You may also explore how you can help your child manage strong emotions, promote helpful thinking and assist them to break down tasks into smaller, manageable chunks. Following your child's lead will help you work out what approach will be best for them. For some children, talking about a problem too much may lead to an increase in anxiety.

Helping children cope

There are lots of ways you can help your child to cope during challenging or worrying situations. You might like to:

Listen and talk to your child. Help them to identify their concerns or worries and acknowledge how they are feeling. For example, you could say, "it sounds like you are worried about who you will play with at school tomorrow." (For more information on active listening, see the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet.)

Comfort your child. There may be times when your child does not want to talk and just having a parent nearby engaging in a shared activity or giving them a cuddle is helpful.

Reassure your child when they are feeling worried or unsure. For example, you could say, "it is a big playground but there is an area for just the little kids to play."

Demonstrate and model ways that you cope with situations. For example, you could say, "I am going to take five deep breaths to help myself relax."

Prepare your child for changes. Talk positively with your child about school, show them their new surroundings and do activities together that relate to starting school, such as reading stories about change.

Encourage help-seeking by teaching your child when to ask for help. For example, your child could ask a teacher for help to open their lunch box.

Problem-solve the situation with your child through a step-by-step process. (For more information, see the Starting School *Problem solving* information sheet.)

Encourage your child by talking positively about their attempts to cope.



Managing strong emotions

When faced with a difficult or challenging situation your child may feel angry, worried or perhaps distressed. It can be hard for them to think clearly at these times, and it makes communication and cooperation difficult. If your child is experiencing a strong emotion, it's important to acknowledge it and be nearby to support your child. You may also consider teaching your child strategies to calm themselves. There will be different strategies that help each child to feel calmer, and some children need more time and structure than others. Follow your child's lead to find out what helps them to feel relaxed.

Some suggestions include:

- counting to ten
- taking five deep breaths
- jumping on the trampoline
- going to a quiet place
- playing with toys.



Promote helpful ways of thinking

Another way you can help your child to cope is by helping them to begin to understand that how we think affects the way we feel and how we behave.



This means that how we think also affects how we cope with a challenging situation. You can begin to teach your child that sometimes we have 'helpful' thoughts that make us feel and act in positive ways. Some examples of helpful thoughts include:

- "I drew a really good picture at school today."
- "This is hard to do, but it will get easier the more times I try it."
- "I can try my best."
- "I can always ask my teacher if I need help."

You can also begin to teach your child that at other times we have 'unhelpful' thoughts that can lead us to feeling negative or bad about ourselves or a situation and can stop us from doing what we want to do. Some examples of unhelpful thoughts include:

- "I can't do this."
- "No one will like me."
- "I won't be able to do it without Mum."
- "I'm stupid."
- "It's too hard, I will never be able to do it."

Example: Cassandra and Soo-Meng

When arriving at school, Cassandra waved to her friend Soo-Meng across the playground. Soo-Meng did not wave back to Cassandra.

- An unhelpful thought Cassandra might have had in this situation is: "Soo-Meng doesn't like me anymore." (Thought)
- Having this thought is likely to make Cassandra feel sad and unhappy. (Emotion)
- Cassandra may then avoid Soo-Meng if she thinks she doesn't like her anymore. (Behaviour)

Examples of more helpful thoughts for Cassandra might be "Soo-Meng didn't see me wave" or "Soo-Meng is just busy playing". This will help her to feel okay about herself and her friendships. Cassandra may then approach Soo-Meng to play with her later.

Children need to understand that it's not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts as everybody has them, but that learning to recognise unhelpful thoughts and finding more helpful ways of thinking is a way to better manage their feelings. Young children need adult support to find more helpful ways to think, but as they get older they can slowly start to learn to do more for themselves.

You might have already found some ways to help your child to see things from a different or more helpful perspective. You might say things like:

- "It doesn't mean she doesn't like you anymore. Do you think there are other ways we could think about that?"
- "Yes, it does look a bit tricky but how about just giving it a try?"
- "You were brave when you had your last injection; let's be brave like a lion again and it will be over in no time."
- "It doesn't have to be perfect. Just have a go."

How to support your child's helpful thinking

- Acknowledge and validate how they are feeling (eg "it sounds like you're feeling worried because you won't know anyone at school"). Dismissing what children are feeling (eg "don't think like that") can lead them to believe they are wrong to think or feel that way and stop them from expressing their feelings with you the next time a problem arises.
- Help your child to look at the situation from a more helpful perspective. Thoughts such as "I can be brave" or "I can only try my best" can help to replace negative thoughts.
- Remind your child of a time they coped with something similar in the past (eg "Remember when you started preschool you felt worried, but then you got to know everyone and you felt okay").
- Model helpful thinking. Children learn a lot from watching family members use helpful thinking to cope with challenging situations. Thinking out loud can help to teach your child how to come up with helpful thoughts (eg "I'm feeling nervous about meeting the other parents too but I can just be friendly and say hello").

Helpful thinking is about promoting positive coping skills and encouraging children to feel good about themselves. This will help your child to feel more confident in new situations.

A plan for coping

Your child might be facing a challenge or worry that seems too overwhelming for them to tackle all at once. Breaking down the worry or challenge into small steps will help your child to slowly face their fear. You can devise a plan with your child where you work out small steps to help them reach their goal.

Take the following example of Jalak who has trouble speaking in front of his preschool group during show and tell. His mother, father and Jalak sat down together to work out the following plan:

Jalak's goal	To speak in front of the class at preschool
Step 1	Practise in front of his favourite teddy with no one watching
Step 2	Practise in front of Mum and Dad
Step 3	Practise in front of the whole family (parents, siblings and cousins)
Step 4	Practise with a small group at preschool
Step 5	Participate in show and tell in front of the preschool class

Jalak was slowly able to face his fear of speaking in front of the class with lots of practice in small steps and the help of his early childhood educator. Jalak felt very proud that he was able to achieve success.

The following tips will help you develop a plan for coping:

- Ensure that the first step is achievable for your child. This will build their confidence and help them to feel good about themselves.
- When your child feels comfortable with the first step, encourage them to start the next step. If your child is resisting, you may need to return to your plan and break it down into smaller steps.
- It is not uncommon for children to need to return to an earlier step or need extra time and practice at one of the steps before feeling ready to move forward. Remember to proceed at a pace that is comfortable for your child.
- Think of ways you can encourage and recognise your child's effort and hard work in facing their fears.





For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Keeping a balance: Managing feelings and behaviours*
- *Coping skills for managing emotions*
- *Supporting children to cope with stress*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *How thinking affects feelings*
- *Helping children cool down and stay calm*
- *Coping with fears and worries*
- *Fears and helpful self-talk*

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool



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