

Talking Matters

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Helping your child to reach their potential



Changing bad feelings to good

Being able to manage your emotions is important for having good mental health and being able to get along with others. Positive interactions with caring adults helps children develop the ability to manage their own emotions and behaviour.

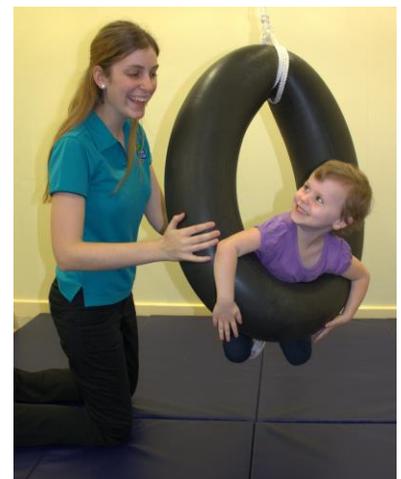
When a child's needs are repeatedly met by a caring adult they develop a **positive sense of self**. Children become secure in the relationship and return to the adult when they are needing emotional support. If adults help children to manage their emotions and develop a sense of calm when they are feeling overwhelmed, insecure or afraid, children gradually learn to manage their emotions on their own. When adults model appropriate expression of emotion and appropriate behaviour children gradually learn these things too. Gradually children become more independent in managing and expressing their own emotions. Turning to others for emotional support continues to be an important strategy for people of all ages when they are feeling stressed. **Children who have warm, trusting relationships develop a sense of control, optimism and resilience.**



Our “good” and “bad” feelings relate to levels of different hormones in our bodies. When we are anxious, scared or stressed we have higher levels of cortisol and adrenaline, preparing us for a fight or flight response. When we feel “good” we have lower levels of these hormones and higher levels of dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin which help us feel calm, safe, trusting and pleasant. These hormones help with memory, attention, and the development of empathy and social skills. Caring for children releases these hormones in adults too, helping them to continue to care for the child. Children produce more good hormones when they do things in their own way and time and more bad hormones when they are rushed, stressed and tired. This can result in tantrums, sleeping problems and poor behaviour and reduce the child's ability to concentrate, solve problems and try new experiences. Ongoing high levels of stress can lead to aggression, anxiety and social problems.

When children have high levels of stress hormones they may:

- Run away or be defensive when upset
- Be silly or hyperactive
- Appear sad, tired or “flat”
- Not respond to others and not express themselves
- Not focus well
- Seem worried or watchful
- Seem difficult and hard to please
- Not sleep well



An adult who provides a child with calm, safety, emotional warmth and security can lower stress hormones, increase “good” hormones and help that child learn to manage their emotions.

The Circle of Security is a program which describes how adults help a child organise their feelings when the child is overwhelmed. The idea of a circle shows a child’s continual journey out into the world to explore then back to the adult to receive support and reassurance. It is during this checking back that the adult provides the calming support when a child feels overwhelmed, upset, frustrated, afraid or tired.



Nurturing children through holding and using positive touch can be a good way to lower stress hormones, and increase good hormones. This helps children become calm, both physically and emotionally more quickly.

Positive touch:

- Includes pats, hugs and cuddles
- Is respectful and appropriate
- Conveys an understanding of the child’s feelings
- Helps develop positive relationships of giving and taking care and support
- Needs to be wanted and accepted by the child
- Some children do not like touch and may need another response

Other ways to offer positive caring responses include:

- Begin physically close
- Getting on the same level as the child
- Making eye contact
- Having a positive expression
- Having an open body position
- Using a calm, soft, even voice
- Asking open ended questions
- Giving the child time to respond
- Listening to their responses carefully
- Reflecting back the child’s responses



It is not possible to remove all stresses from a child’s life. Children need to experience manageable, age appropriate challenges and to learn how to regulate their emotional responses and behaviour and deal with frustration.