

# Talking to Children and Youth

## Keep in Mind:



Children and youth are hearing a lot of information and misinformation from a variety of sources. Even very young children are hearing news and adult conversations about the pandemic and financial worries. They need accurate information and an opportunity to talk with adults about their questions and concerns.



- It's helpful to provide straight-forward accurate information that is developmentally appropriate for your children and/or youth when they are interested and ready to hear the information.
- Parents can learn to recognize the “signals” that children and teens want information as well as “signals” that it's not a good time to talk. Noticing and respecting signals shows your children and teens that you are there for them when they need you and you also respect their need for privacy and space.
- Use simple, concrete, developmentally appropriate language when you talk to children about the pandemic. Use accurate words like “COVID-19” and “pandemic.” Children are hearing these words all the time. Explain them in ways that your children will understand.
- Most importantly children and teens need to hear that they are loved, adults are actively working together to understand and solve the problems, “this will pass” and their family can “weather the storm.”
- Try to make family conversations genuinely respectful and collaborative. At the same time, children and teens feel most secure when they consistently and dependably have a sense that their parents are “in the lead” in the family.

Tips:



## “Follow your child’s lead” when providing information.

- Recognize your children’s and teens’ “signals” that they want or need information.
  - Notice times when they express curiosity or ask questions.
  - Notice if they are communicating a need for more information or support through their emotions, behaviour and/or play.
    - Young children often don’t know how to ask questions. They usually “communicate” their feelings and needs through their behaviour and play.
    - Older children and teens may also have difficulty directly expressing their need for information and support when they are experiencing intense stress.
    - Some children and teens withdraw (look still and quiet) when they experience stress (we this “internalizing”) and others become more reactive and/or expressive when they are experiencing stress (we call this “externalizing”). Knowing your child’s “style” can help you “read the signals.”
- Just as importantly, recognize your children’s and teens’ “signals” that it’s NOT a good time for them to get information.
  - In times of uncertainty and stress, everyone needs to pace the information they absorb.
  - Notice signs that your child or teen is not willing or able to “take in information.” They may look away or actively focus on other things. Try to recognize and validate the signals with your words and actions:
    - *“Maybe it’s better to talk about this another time.”*
    - *With older children or teens, it’s helpful to add “We all need to pace ourselves. I’m here if you want to talk later.”*





## Provide information in small manageable “chunks.”

- Listen for times when children and teens ask questions or express interest in talking.
- Invite them to tell you what they already know about the topic. This builds their confidence and mastery. It also informs you about gaps in their knowledge and/or misinformation. Try not to immediately correct them: this makes them less likely to share information with you in the future. Instead, link what they say to accurate information.
- Children and teens are often satisfied with short answers and small “doses” of information. They’ll let you know when they want to know more, especially if they know you are willing to be honest and direct with them.



## Practice realistic thinking together.



- Talk together about sources of information and whether information is accurate (or “misinformation”).
- Talk about which “worried” or anxious thoughts might be realistic and/or helpful and which thoughts might be inaccurate, overly distressing and/or unhelpful.
- Talk about ways to challenge and/or “talk back” to misinformation and unrealistic or distressing thoughts and feelings and then practice together.
  - *“I feel very frightened because a friend told me that they heard (add misinformation here). My heart is racing and my hands are sweaty but the information does not come from a reliable source. I know I need to breathe, calm myself down and check a reliable source.”*
  - *“That may or may not be true but I’m feeling overwhelmed and it’s too much for me to think about right now. I’m going to step back, take a break and choose to do something that helps me feel better for a while.”*



# Recognizing and Validating Emotions and Needs

## Keep in Mind:



### Parents' feelings and needs.

- Having feelings and needs is an important part of being human.
- Unfortunately, trying to notice and manage our feelings and needs as parents can be complicated, especially when we're spending a lot of time with our kids.
- Ideally, it's best if parents have the time and space to "feel our feelings" and "get support from adults."
  - This allows us to choose how and when to talk about our feelings with our children and teens.
  - It also makes it more likely that we will talk about our feelings with our children directly and calmly – rather than have our feelings negatively affect the way we make parenting decisions and interact with our children and teens.
- Most of us have times when our feelings "get bottled up," "explode" or affect our parenting in other ways. This is especially true in stressful and uncertain times.
- Children and teens often sense when their parents are experiencing strong feelings, even when we try to hide them. Some kids respond to this by withdrawing or trying to help the parent ("internalizers") and other kids act up or express their own emotions reactively ("externalizers").



## More to Keep in Mind:



### Children and teen's feeling and needs

- Having feelings and needs is an important part of being a child or teen.
- For many reasons, parents often reassure or distract their children and teens when the children/teens experience emotions. Many parents want the best for their children and teens and do not want them to experience unpleasant, sad, angry or worried emotions. Some parents feel uncomfortable when their children have feelings because they are reminded of people or times in their own lives that they experienced as unmanageable. Other parents are worried their children or teens will lose control and/or behave inappropriately. The urge to protect ourselves and our children is understandable.



- Many parents find it helpful to remind themselves that children and teens develop mastery, resilience and a sense of security and well-being from gradually learning to recognize and experience their emotions.
- Emotions arise and they pass. They are part of being human and we don't need to be afraid of them. Knowing that they can recognize and experience feelings constructively (within their "window of tolerance") helps children and teens manage life's ups, downs and challenges. This supports them to feel more confident and capable and create healthy relationships.
- Some feelings are too BIG and/or overwhelming for children and teens. We talk about emotion regulation including the window of tolerance in the next section.

## Tips:



### Take time to feel and acknowledge your own feelings

- Notice your breath, your body sensations, your emotions and your thoughts. When possible, take time to deeply feel your feelings.
- Some people find that writing, drawing or moving their body helps them experience and express their feelings.
- Make it a priority to share your feelings, and your thoughts about your feelings, with trusted adults. It is less likely that your emotions and needs will “bubble up” (some people say “get triggered”) when you are interacting with your children and teens about their behavior, needs or emotions if you are getting emotional support from adults.
- If you don’t have trusted friends or family, talk to yourself kindly (like you would talk to a friend) and consider reaching out to a crisis line, counsellor or your family doctor.



### Kindly tend to feelings and needs that are more challenging for you to “be with”.

- All parents have some feelings and needs that are more challenging to “be with.” This applies to our own feelings and needs and those of others, including our children and teens. For example, some parents feel overwhelmed when they feel sad or see another person crying and may want to run away or shut things down. Others feel highly activated at the first signs of anger. Some parents feel worried when their children and teens are moving away and exploring the world and others feel uncomfortable when their children are moving towards them with emotional needs.
- It is very helpful to kindly recognize these sensitive areas and gradually increase our ability to recognize and “be with” the full range of feelings and needs. This can start with trying to recognize and “name” when it is challenging to be with a feeling or need.
- The Circle of Security model describes the idea of parents’ “shark music”.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy3EwAQ0lwo>





## Model “recognizing and managing” your thoughts and feelings, including worry and anger.

- Calmly and kindly talk to yourself out loud in front of your children and teens:
  - *“I notice that I’m getting too worried. I think I’ve been watching too much news on TV. I’m going to turn off the TV for a while and focus on things I can choose to do that would make me feel calmer.”*
  - *“Oh, my heart is beating faster than usual. I need to take a break and calm down.”*
- Rather than telling your kids to do these things, it’s very helpful for them to see you actively making choices to recognize and manage your thoughts, feelings and body sensations.

## Notice and validate children’s and teens’ emotions, especially in changing and uncertain times.

- Adults often think we need to “solve” and reduce our children’s and teens’ feelings. But if we can simply acknowledge the feelings and name them, we may find their feelings flow like the tide – in and out in a cycle. This is called “being with” our children’s emotions.
- Demonstrate when you “get it” with sincerity.
  - *“I can understand...”*
  - *“It makes sense...”*
  - *“I hear you...”*
- Here is a website that provides useful information about validation.

<https://www.emotionfocusedfamilytherapy.org/steps-of-emotion-coaching/>





# Supporting the Development of “Emotion Regulation”

## Keep in Mind:

Emotion regulation is the ability to recognize and “manage” or “titrate” emotions. This involves noticing feelings and body sensations and developing the ability to deliberately lower (or sometimes increase) the intensity of the feelings and body sensations in order to be able to think constructively and make choices about how we respond and/or behave.

- It’s useful  for everyone to “feel their feelings” when the feelings are “small or medium sized,” feel more or less manageable to the person and don’t lead to inappropriate behaviour or feeling overwhelmed and/or “out of control.”
- Everyone also needs to have ways to recognize and manage BIG emotions that don’t feel safe or manageable and often result in inappropriate behaviour.
- In times of stress and uncertainty, most individuals and families have challenges with emotion regulation.
- It’s possible to improve emotion regulation with focus and practice.
- It is helpful to develop emotion regulation skills by practicing with small and medium sized emotions so we can resource them when we have BIG feelings.
- Many children and youth have been taught emotion regulation strategies at daycare and school.
- It’s very helpful when families create a family emotion regulation plan together and then actively practice, discuss their progress, find ways to overcome obstacles and focus on their success.
- Supporting family emotion regulation is one of the most  helpful things you can do for yourself, your children, teens and family



## Tips:



### Think about your own emotion regulation.

- It's important to be honest and also very kind. Emotion regulation is difficult for most people, especially in stressful times.
  - How do I recognize and regulate my feelings, especially BIG feelings? (This could include noticing body sensations, thoughts, and feelings and doing specific things to change your body sensations, thoughts and feelings. It could involve seeking connection with others or withdrawing from others. It could also include trying NOT to notice your feelings and “regulating your emotions” through venting, avoidance, numbing, distraction, substance use or something else. Be as specific as possible.)
  - Do I tend to seek connection with or withdraw from others when I have BIG feelings? How does this affect my children and teens?
  - How do I communicate with my children and teens when I have BIG feelings?
  - How do I respond when other family members have BIG feelings?
  - How am I modelling emotion regulation in my family? What are my children learning from my behaviour?
  - How does my emotion regulation affect my children and their emotion regulation?
  - Is this something I want to change?
  - What are very small practical steps I can take to improve my emotion regulation?
  - When we're not in crisis any more, it's also helpful to think about how the family, or families, you grew up in understood and managed emotions and also ways your early experiences affect your emotion regulation and parenting now.



### Learn about “flipping your lid.”

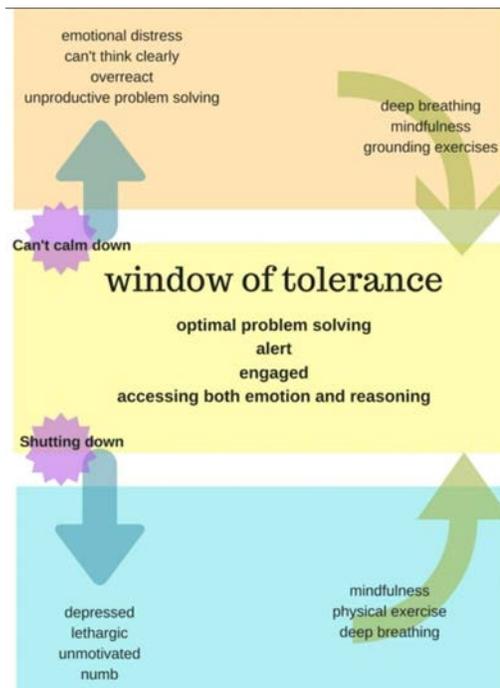
- Dr. Daniel Siegal developed a hand model that shows what happens in the brain when we “flip our lid” or surge into intense emotions. These videos are better than written words:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc>





## Visualize a “Window of Tolerance” Model

- The Window of Tolerance model provides a way of visualizing and understanding whether a person is in a state where they are able to “process and manage” stressors, feelings, communication with others and/or other challenges.
- This model can really help parents understand and support themselves and their children and teens.
- When a person is in their “window of tolerance” they are able to experience their emotions and still maintain their ability to think, integrate new information and make choices. They can cope relatively effectively and “handle things” as needed. Even if they get a little agitated, they know they can soothe themselves and bring themselves back into a comfortable, capable emotional zone.



- When a person experiences too much stress or challenge they move out of their window of tolerance and their ability to think, feel and problem solve effectively changes
- When a person goes ABOVE their window of tolerance they often experience emotional distress and are more likely to express their thoughts and feelings reactively. We often think of this as the “fight or flight” response.
  - Children often “act up” when they are in this state.
  - Parents tend to either overly express their intense thoughts and feelings or withdraw from their children and teens because they are focused on their own experience and needs.
- When a person goes BELOW their window of tolerance they often feel numb, empty and/or shut down. This is also called the “freeze” response.
  - Sometimes parents don’t notice when children and teens are BELOW their window of tolerance because they are quiet, withdrawn and aren’t seeking support. (This is very different from a child or teen being comfortably quiet or enjoying time on their own.)
  - It’s challenging for children and teens when parents go BELOW their window of tolerance because the parent is emotionally unavailable. This can be just as frightening for children as having their parent over-react.