

Talking to and Supporting Children in Distress



Lancaster
University



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What Will I Learn?

This short presentation will help to explain why children often become overwhelmed by feelings, and gives some advice on communicating with and supporting children in distress.

Why is this important?



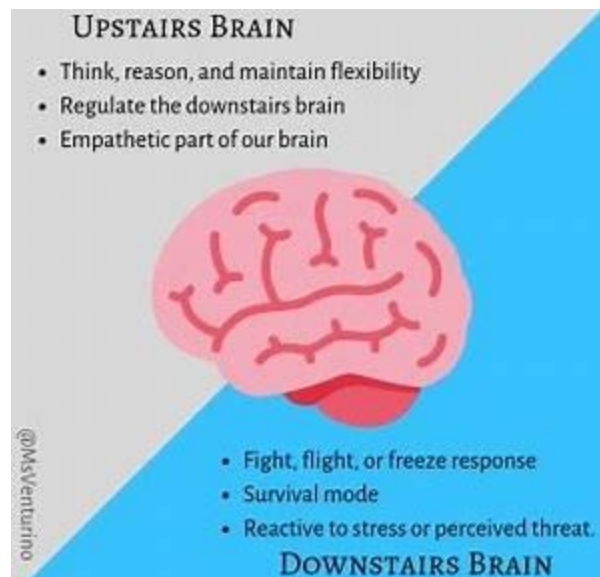
The unique situation of Covid-19 has brought many changes to children's lives, including; a change in routine, global worries about health, reduced social contact and a loss of the school/college environment. Children are trying to adapt to these changes, and this could bring about many worries, concerns and difficult feelings.

Children might experience a range of feelings from sadness, boredom, excitement and anxiety. All of these feelings are understandable, but they can be difficult to cope with. Children might find it difficult to explain to others how they feel. As adults, there are many things we can do to help children feel safe, secure, and more able to share how they feel.

Understanding The Brain

The brain can help us understand why young people become overwhelmed by feelings. Put simply, we have two parts of the brain, an upstairs brain and a downstairs brain.

- The downstairs brain acts like an alarm system trying to keep us safe. It keeps track of everything that is going on in the environment and lets us know if there is anything stressful or threatening.
- The upstairs brain is our thinking brain. It allows us to plan, learn new things, think rationally and make good choices. When children encounter anything that is stressful or threatening, the downstairs brain switches on quickly. When this happens, the brain becomes focused on threat and survival, and the logical upstairs brain is turned down. This leads to a range of emotions and behaviours being expressed. It is harder for the young person to be calm and to think rationally. Covid-19 is a significant threat to our wellbeing. For children and adults living during Covid-19, the downstairs part of the brain will likely be switching on much more than usual, and much quicker! It is not surprising that children might be experiencing a range of difficult feelings.



1 - For more information on understanding the brain see Dr Dan Siegel [Dan Siegel - Whole Brain Child](#)

How Can We Help?

We can't always take away the reason a child is upset, but we can support them and try to understand how they feel. Some good ways to do this can be through: 1. Increasing **Security** 2. **Listening Well** to fears and feelings 3. Looking for **Hidden Needs**



1. Increasing Security



When children are feeling unsettled, they often need more positive time with the adults around them. For young children we might call this 'special time' and for older children we could think of it as 'connecting time'. Having 'special time' or 'connecting time' is important as it increases trust and helps

children feel safe and secure. It helps children know that they are important to us, and it gives them a safe place to explore how they feel. So, how do I do it?

How Do I Do It?

'Special Time' or 'Connecting Time' is a time during the day (or week) when you spend 1-1 time with your child. The focus is on being together, and on connecting through your relationship.

- Choose a time when you are able to give your child your full attention and turn off any distractions
- Allow enough time to play, and let children or young people choose the activity
- Young children might enjoy role play or playing with toys. Older children might enjoy watching a film together, doing exercise together, or completing a project together.
- Decide how long you are able to play for, and let them know when special time has to end.
- Keep the focus positive and try to do activities that are playful rather than structured.

Click on the links below to get more information on special time... [Special Time Tips](#)

[Special Time Video](#)



2. Listen Well



Covid-19 has changed children's lives in many ways and this might lead to them having a range of different feelings such as anger, frustration, worry and disappointment (sometimes all in one day!). Children often find it hard to express their feelings because they don't have the words to describe how they feel! This can be a problem, as it can lead to their feelings building up and this can have a negative impact on their well-being. Listening well to children's feelings and concerns helps them to feel safe, secure and understood.

Listen Well

Think for a moment about a time someone has listened really well to you? What did they do that made you feel better? Often, we can learn about how to listen to others by thinking about how we have been helped ourselves. Here are some ideas we came up with, on how to listen really well.....

Focus on them - It is important to show children that we are interested in what they have to say. We can do this by putting down distractions, and choosing a time when we can really focus on their needs. If we are stressed or worried ourselves then this might stop us being able to help. It is important to get support for our own feelings first, so that we focus on the child.

Consider body language - Try to communicate warmth through your body language, tone of voice and use of gestures. We can do this by turning towards the child, getting down on their level, giving eye contact and using encouraging expressions such as smiling or nodding. In doing this we are showing that we are interested and ready to hear what they have to say.

Allow space and time - Children will need more time than adults to express how they feel, so it is important to give space, time, and come back to the conversation later if they need to. Try to listen to children without interrupting and without giving any of your own advice or judgement.

Ask open questions - You can ask open questions to get more information about how a child is feeling. Open questions give more than a yes/no answer and often start with How, What, or Where. Some good examples are: "How do you feel about not being in school?" or "What is the new routine like for you?"



Clarify and summarise - When the child has finished speaking, summarise what they have said to you using your own words. This shows that you have understood them and it also gives them chance to tell you if you've understood them incorrectly. You could say "It sounds like you are really upset because you can't go to school at the moment. You are missing your friends, and that makes you feel fed up and sad." **Say what you see** - Young children find it very hard to use words to describe how they feel. You can help them by noticing how your child is feeling and saying what you see. For example, if your child is angry you could say "It looks like you are feeling very angry that we can't go outside." This helps them to learn the word to describe their feeling for next time. **Accept all feelings** - It is important to let children know that all feelings are ok, even if we don't agree. **Try not to 'fix'** - As adults, we are often tempted to reassure children that things will be ok or we try to find a solution to their problem. In reality, we often can't away the reason they are upset, and we can't always be sure that 'things will be ok'. This is especially true during Covid-19. Instead of trying to fix problems, we can support children best by listening to them, understanding their worries and validating how they feel "I can see that you feel stressed at the moment and I'm here for you".



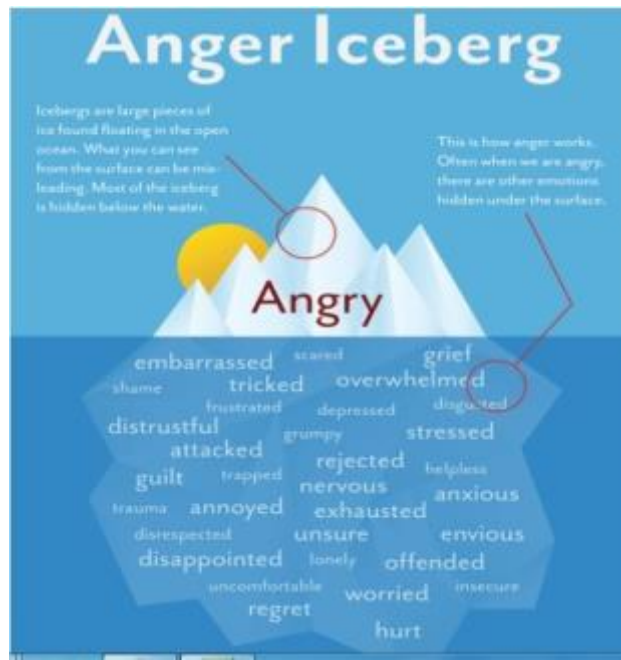
3. Look For Hidden Needs

In a unique situation like Covid-19, it is normal and natural to see a change in children's behaviour. Children might be more clingy, fight more with their siblings, and they might be more snappy and difficult than usual. Have you noticed a change in your child's behaviour, but you're not sure why? Take a look at the next slide to think about how we can use Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to understand children's Hidden Needs.....



Understanding Hidden Needs

When children have overwhelming emotions or difficult behaviours, they are trying to show us what they need. We can think about this as being like an iceberg, their behavior is the tip of the iceberg (what we see on the surface) but underneath are their hidden needs (wants, needs and feelings).



More On Needs....

We all have needs which need to be met, if we are to feel safe, content and happy. In the famous hierarchy of needs, Maslow describes these needs as;

Physiological - (Is the child tired, cold or hungry?)

Safety & Security - (Does the child feel safe and secure?)

Belongingness - (Does the child feel included?)

Esteem - (Can the child achieve what is being asked of them?)

Self actualization - (Does the child feel valued?)

When children are having difficulty, either with feelings or behaviour, we can look at the hierarchy to see what they might need. For example, a child might be clingy if they need more safety and security, or grumpy if they are tired and hungry. Some of these needs might be harder to meet during Covid-19. Children could have concerns about food supplies, they might feel less secure without their normal routine, and they might be missing the sense of belonging that usually comes from seeing their friends.

Instead of responding to the behavior you see in your child, try to look for hidden or unmet needs. Can we help to meet these? Can they connect virtually with friends? Or do jobs at home to meet esteem needs?



Where can I find information on further support?



If you are looking for more information about local support services we have put together a list of services and links [here](#).

Or you can search a local directory of services [here](#).

Lancashire County Council has published details of local support services, including Community Hubs [here](#)

To go back to our main menu page, click [here](#).