

Fact Sheet

COMMUNICATING WITH Children and Young People in Times of Crisis



Times of crisis can be difficult for all of us, whether it be on a personal level such as a previously traumatic experience, or in the family with the loss of a loved one.



Sometimes a crisis might involve the whole community in the form of a natural disaster. How we communicate with one another during these times can significantly impact on our ability to cope with the stress and trauma that a crisis might bring.

For children and young people, who are still developing both physically and emotionally, the effects of a crisis can potentially extend into adulthood impacting both negatively and positively on their future capacity to cope with similar situations.

How we communicate with children and young people during a time of crisis can directly influence these outcomes. For some adults this is not a problem, but not everyone finds it easy to

have a difficult conversation with a young person, especially when the crisis might be affecting them too and emotions are running high. Here are some tips for having a conversation with children and young people during times of crisis.



Keep it Real

Children are very good at identifying when adults are putting on a 'front'.

If you are finding it awkward to have a conversation about a difficult subject, own up to it. Young people appreciate honesty and authenticity the same as you do. You might consider saying something like 'I'm finding this tough to talk about, maybe you are too'.

Language

Try to use language that is simple and easy to understand.

Using words and language you are unfamiliar with or unused too such as slang, may mean they take you and the content less seriously and cause them to disengage from the conversation and the situation at hand.

Silence

Don't be worried if you get met with a wall of silence.

Children sometimes find it difficult to put into words what they really want to say. Silence also allows them time to process what you might be saying, so it is important not to immediately interrupt when this occurs. Space and time are both valuable components in processing information.

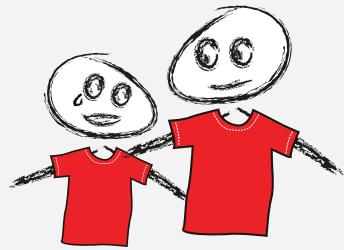
When young people struggle to articulate how they feel it might be helpful to present them with a list of options – It looks like you are upset. Are you feeling sad, angry, scared, etc. It can sometimes be useful to utilise 'feelings' or 'emoji' charts to help them explain how they feel.



Environment

Where a conversation takes place can be crucial in enabling a young person to open up.

Young people often find it easier to talk when they are involved in another activity. Talking to a child while they are helping with household chores – drying dishes, meal prep, etc. - or playing a game, can help to make them feel more comfortable, especially if they do not have to maintain direct eye contact for a sustained period of time. It is also worth asking them if there is somewhere specific they would feel more comfortable to talk.



Validate Feelings

Try not to draw too many comparisons between your own childhood experiences and what they are currently going through.

While this might help us to empathise, it is important for us to recognise that each generation experiences new situations and dynamics that may affect them differently. Comments like 'in my day we had it much harder', do not help them to feel any less stressed or anxious.

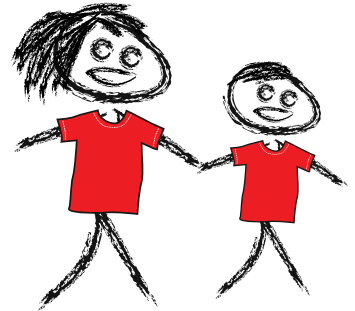
Don't make fun of or be dismissive of how a child or young person might be feeling because of a crisis situation. Doing so will send them the message that their feelings are not important and might cause them to be less open with you about other more serious things going on in their life. Worse still if they don't feel they can talk about their feelings with you, they may seek validation from individuals outside of the home who are unsafe.

Body Language

It is important to be mindful of your own body language when talking with a young person in a time of crisis.

The way you position yourself physically during a conversation can send all sorts of signals to a young person. Defensive or domineering body language such as having your arms folded or standing over a child while talking with them will make it difficult for them to fully engage.

It is important to appear relaxed and open regardless of how they themselves might be coming across. Sit or stand next to them rather than directly in front of them. Keep your voice low and steady and try not to raise your voice or tone if they tell you something that shocks you.



Feedback

Providing positive feedback during a difficult conversation can make a young person feel more comfortable and influence how much they are willing to share with you.

Using statements like 'I think you're really brave talking to me about this' or 'I'm proud of you for telling me that' go a long way towards building their trust in you as a safe person to talk to in times of difficulty. Remember, staying connected is your main goal.

Where to Get Help



- In an emergency, call the Police or triple zero (000)
- Keeping Kids Safe Resources – The Daniel Morcombe Foundation provides free downloadable activities to engage children and young people in learning about personal safety at <https://danielmorcombefoundation.com.au/keeping-kids-safe-resources/>.
- Parentline - 1800 30 1300 provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available at <https://www.parentline.com.au/> to support parents and carers to understand a wide range of issues related to raising children and young people
- Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800 provide a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 on 1800 55 1800. Resources and webchat are available at <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>.