



Preparing for Secondary School

A short guide for families

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Publication Date: August 2023 - London

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the authors and creators of some of the graphics used in the booklet whose authorship is unknown. Many of these graphics appear on social media and have been widely disseminated so the original creators are unknown.

The GIVE, FAST, and DEARMAN exercises in chapter 5 are from Dialectical Based Therapy developed by Martha M Lineman.

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We work closely with parents, carers, and young people to develop a service that assists parents to help children and young people to effectively manage their emotional and mental health and respond to change.

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1. Setting the scene

Your child is completing primary school where they probably know most people, they are the eldest and biggest children and all the younger children look up to them. Your child is about to enter secondary school where they will be the youngest, the smallest and part of a much bigger school where they won't be known or know everyone else.

At the same time, your child is beginning to go through puberty where they change from children into young people and eventually into adults. Your child's body and brain are physically going through significant change, which they are having to deal with. Added to this, their parents, carers, teachers and friends have changing and growing expectations of them.

These are a lot of competing pressures for a child to manage. Through our digital activities, the weekly parents meeting and these e-book chapters we will provide guidance and support to parents and carers. This guidance and support will assist parents in preparing their children emotionally for their successful transition to secondary school.

The significant changes or transitions for children at this point in their lives is when they most need preparation and support to help them learn and develop, intellectually and emotionally. It is much easier to gradually build your child's skills and confidence to manage the changes in their lives, than trying to change things afterwards.

Preparing your child for the changes that are taking place is essential for their emotional and mental health.

Parents and carers are the most important people in their child's lives.

**Parents care the most,
are there the most
and they can offer the best support.**

Children and young people role model themselves on their parents and carers. Therefore it's essential to show and role model the behaviours you want to see in your child. Role modelling is where children and young people learn from most of all.

The most important thing for children and young people's mental health is the quality of the relationship they have with their parents or carers.

Parents and carers have the most impact on a child or young person's mental health through their parenting style, their mental health and the overall family environment.

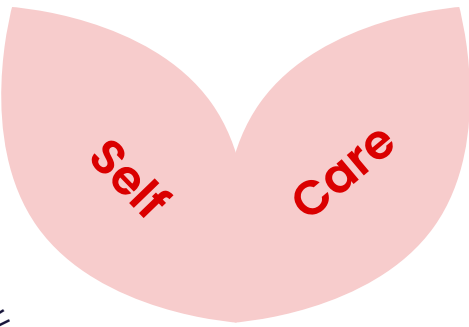
Lots of different things can impact a child or young person's emotions. Helping them understand and find ways to manage emotions is the key to giving your child the best opportunity for life-long mental health.

To be clear, we are not saying parents cause mental health problems in children and young people. There are many factors that can contribute to poor mental health including trauma, genetics, temperament, cultural and life stressors.

The key role of parents and carers is to support the young person in managing the impact of these factors. Parents and carers can support children and young people to process their emotions and create the family environment for all family members to thrive.

Parents and carers well-being and self care

There are many competing demands on parents. As parents you are your child's most valuable resource. It is essential that you have good mental health too. Make sure you practice self care to give you the strength to support your child. You are also role modelling what you want your child to learn.



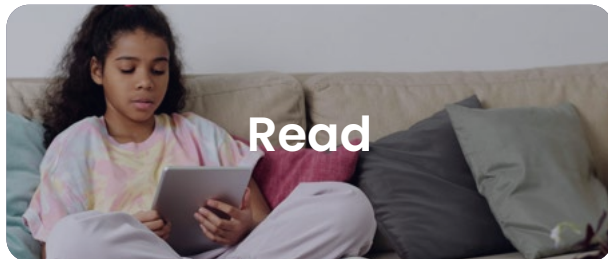
Speak kindly to yourself



Ways to prioritise your mental health



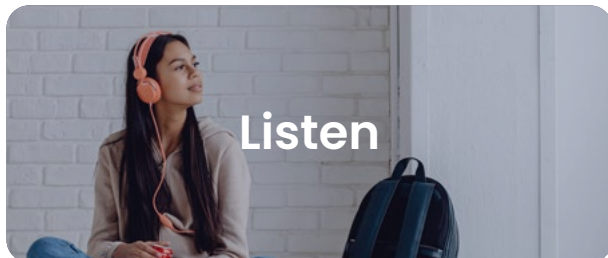
Walk



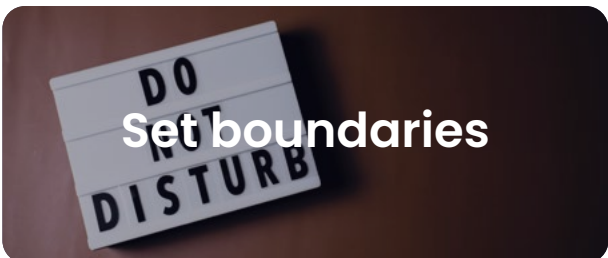
Read



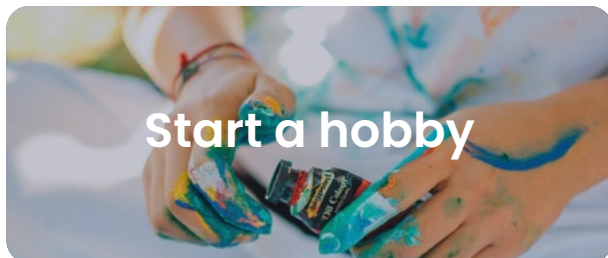
Rest



Listen



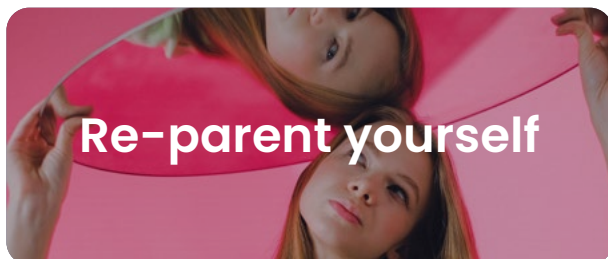
Set boundaries



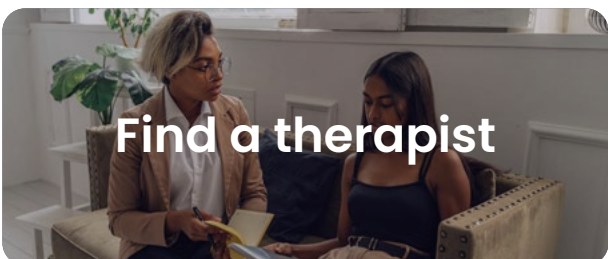
Start a hobby



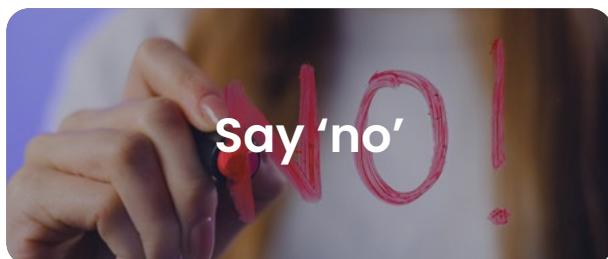
Talk



Re-parent yourself



Find a therapist



Say 'no'

Why is parent and carer mental health so important?

- You need to look after your wellbeing – its essential – its not a luxury.
- Being a parent is stressful – no family is perfect it takes a lot of work.
- We need to care for our mental health to be able to parent effectively- we can't pour from an empty cup!
- As a parent you are your child's most valuable resource – you need to be in good condition.

Your self care:

What are your thoughts about your self care?

How do you practice self care?

What gets in the way of self care?

What's one small thing you can do starting today, that wouldn't cost anything and will help you feel like you have cared for yourself?

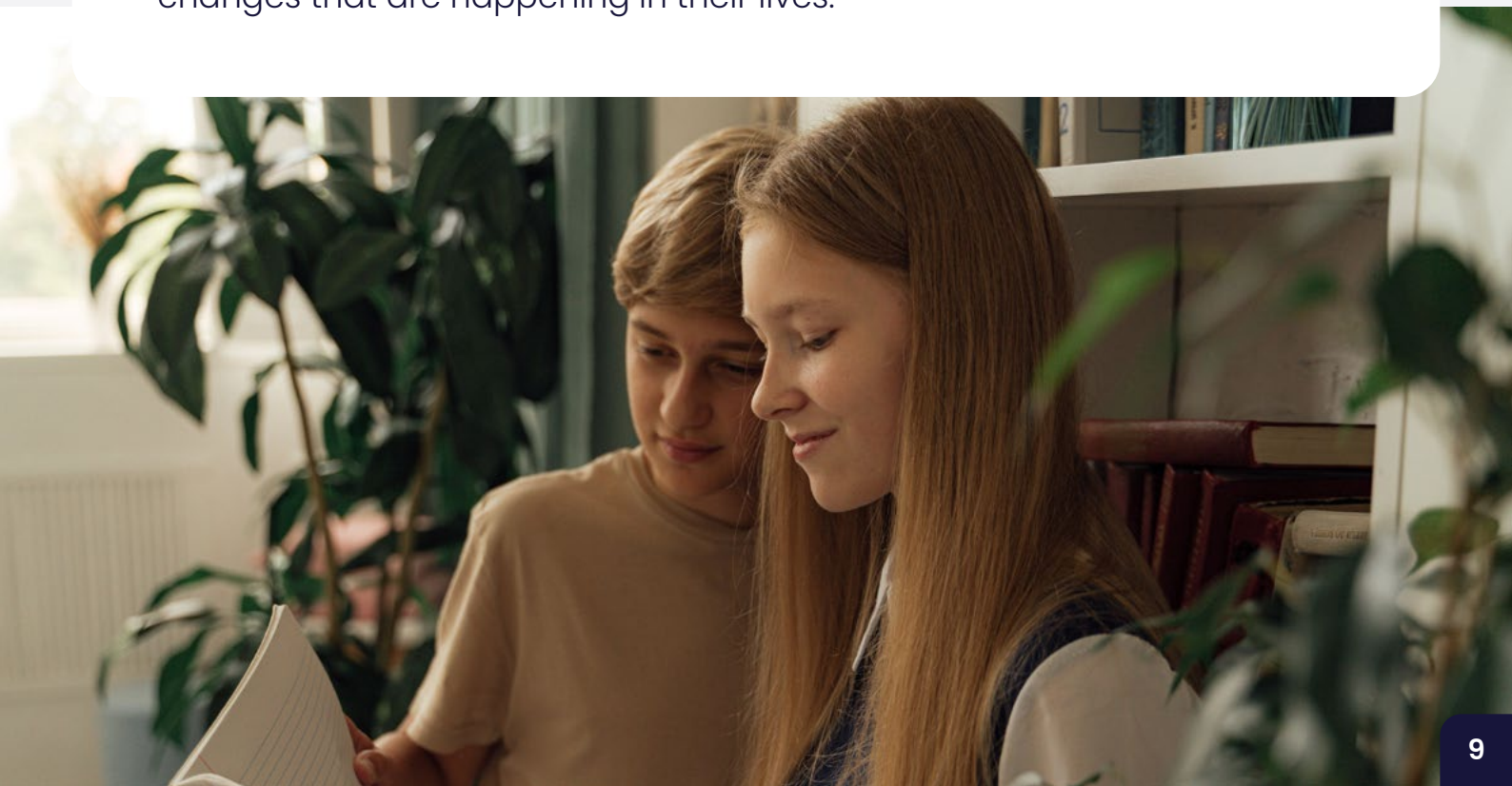
How will you support and encourage your child to manage their self care?

Chapter 1: Summary

In this first chapter we have set the scene – showing how important our own emotional and mental health as parents and carers, is to our children. By caring for our own mental health, we are more able to have strong, positive relationships with our children. This means our children can trust us and talk with us so they can be open and honest about the difficulties and challenges they are having, that all children experience. It also means our children can role model themselves on the behaviour they see from their parents.

Having a good relationship with our children helps them grow up having confidence – knowing they can rely on us for care and support, even when they find things are difficult or they make mistakes.

The chapters that follow will focus on how you can support and help your child successfully make the move from primary to secondary school. We will give you techniques to support you to help your child overcome fears, worries and concerns that they have, as they prepare for the major changes that are happening in their lives.



2. Keeping Open Communication

Keeping open communication is crucial to helping children and young people manage their emotions and their mental health. In this next chapter we explore how to keep communication more open and develop a stronger relationship

10 Key Ways of Keeping Communication Open

(even when it feels hardest)



Talk



Listen



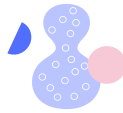
Hear



Text



Respect



Empathy



Share



Encourage



Checking



Hugs

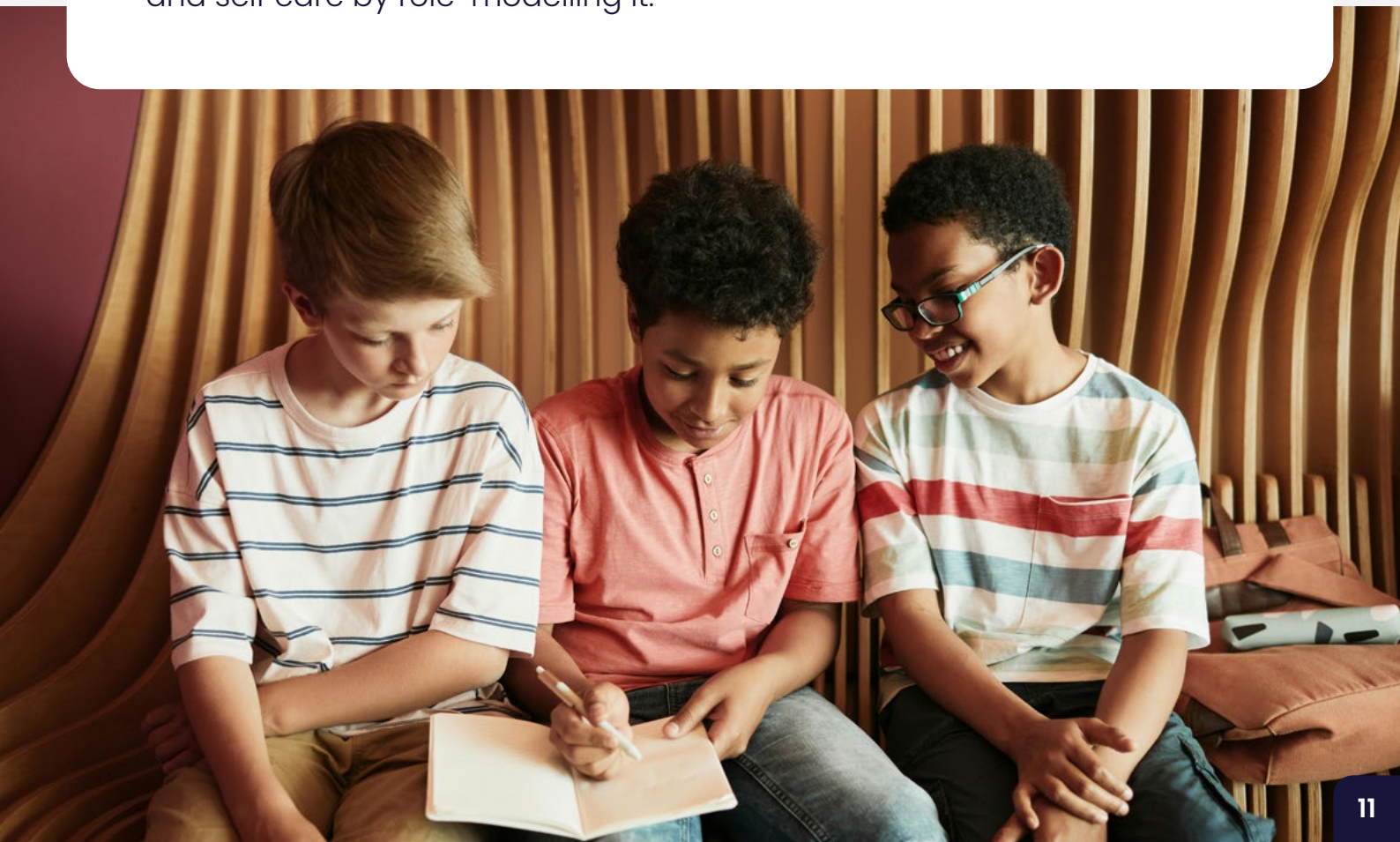
How do you feel about gardening?

Probably seems like a strange question to ask.

However, children and young people can be compared with flowers – some are like orchids – they need lots of care and input to grow and flower. Whereas other children and young people are like dandelions, which need less time or attention to thrive.

The differences in whether children thrive are due in part to their biology and the way they respond to their environment. That is why even in the same family children react to the same circumstances in very different ways.

Parents' responsibility is to understand their individual child's needs to help them thrive and respond to the changes they undergo throughout their development. Parents can help children learn about mental health and self care by role-modelling it.



Curiosity and empathy?

In families, encouraging each other to be curious about how another person thinks and feels can help family members understand each other. This usually means that family members can get on better when they realise not everyone thinks or feel the same way. Even when they have the same experiences.

Encouraging family members of all ages to check in with each other and ask about the things they are excited about or what is worrying them is a good way to practice being curious.

Sometimes when family members argue or get into strong disagreements, it can help to ask questions to understand the others point of view, and encourage them to ask questions in return.

Genuine curiosity about the other person's point of view can lead to more understanding – whatever their age. It also makes the other person feel valued and cared for if you are trying to understand and you are showing empathy.

You do not necessarily have to agree with your child but showing we understand and accept their view and feelings shows your child they are valued. Parents' responsibility is to understand their individual child's needs to help them thrive and respond to the changes they undergo throughout their development. Parents can help children learn about mental health and self care by role-modelling it.

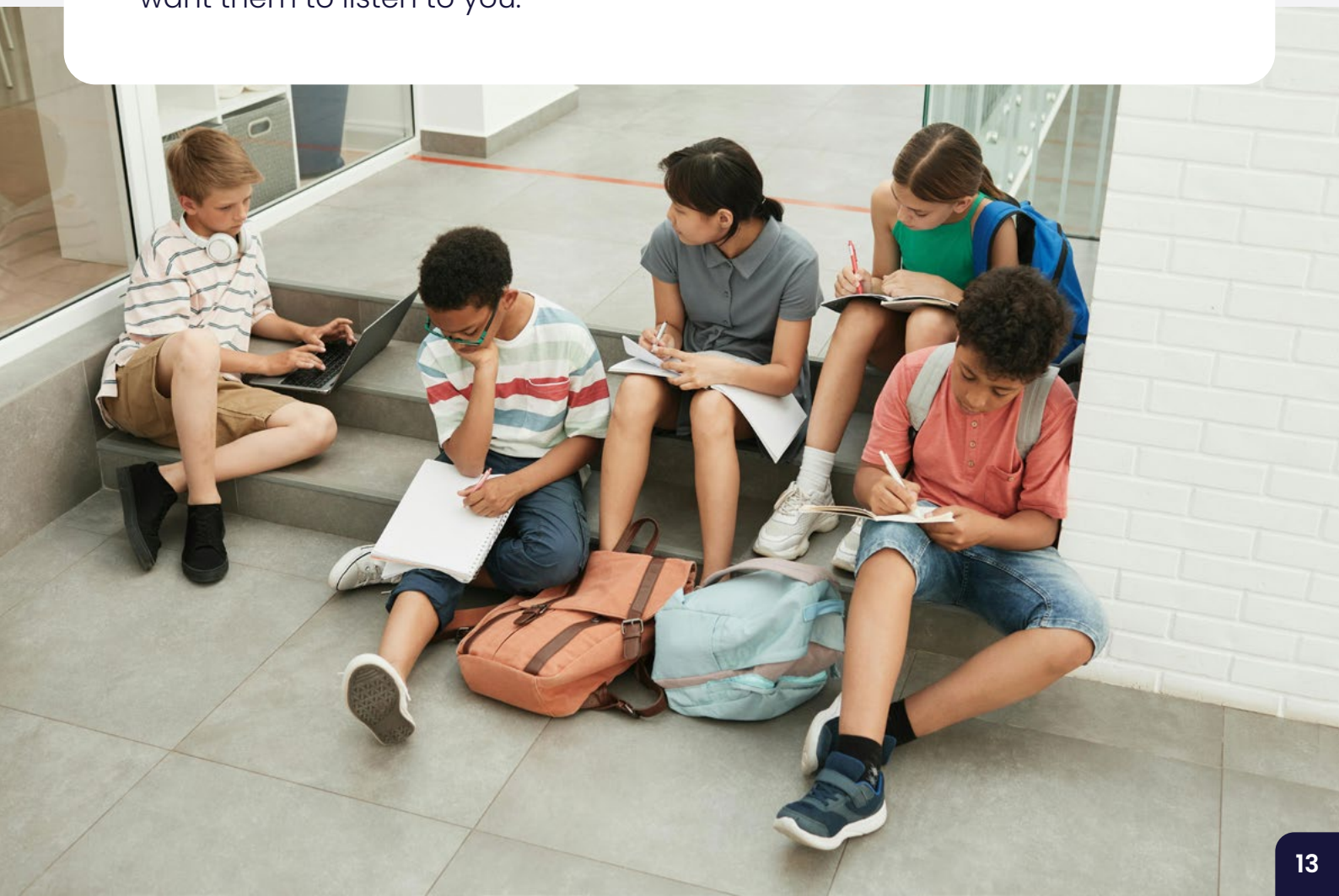
Judgment and assumption

An essential part of feeling understood, seen and heard is also to feel that it is done without judgment.

Sometimes this can be difficult, especially if we are feeling angry, frustrated or simply do not understand why a child or young person is behaving or responding in a particular way.

Take some deep breaths and then ask genuinely curious questions about what your child is feeling and thinking. Try not to assume you know - give them time to explain so that you can look at things from their point of view.

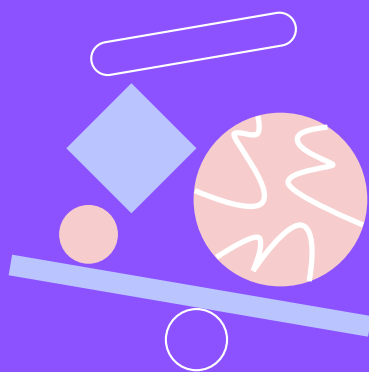
It will also role model the behaviour you want them to follow when you want them to listen to you.



You do not necessarily have to agree with your child. However, by listening to their view will mean that:

- The child or young person feels understood, seen and heard
- It removes the heat of strong emotions and helps them become calmer.
- As they grow calmer, they are more able to listen
- When your child can listen, you can build closer connections
- Connection builds trust and that leads to stronger relationships between parents, carers and children.
- This results in better emotional and mental health for all the family.





Listening activity

As parents and carers our first instinct is to often say

“I understand why you might feel / think / want _____ BUT...”

For example: **I understand why you might feel anxious about going to secondary school BUT you have to go.**

We all do it as parents, however it can make a difficult situation worse because it makes a child feel you have not understood them.

A more effective way of engaging a child or young person is to say **“BECAUSE”** instead of **“but”**

For example: I understand you feel anxious about going to secondary school BECAUSE...

- Its a new and bigger school
- and you're worried you won't know anyone
- and you're concerned you won't be able to find your way round.

This second example shows empathy and understanding and will increase the connection and trust with your child and they will see things from your point of view too.

Notice too that you give three reasons when you say “because”.

**Practice
makes perfect**

Keep trying to focus on saying “because” rather than “but”.

It takes practice, and sometimes you’ll get it wrong but keep trying. Parents say this simple change brings great benefits in their interactions with their child.

If you forget and it goes wrong – you say “but” don’t be hard on yourself – we are all human. Apologise to your child and then explain using “because”.

Also remember that when we mess up it is an opportunity to role model amends and self-compassion.



3. Identifying worries and concerns

Moving from primary to secondary school can raise many mixed emotions for your child and for you as their parent and carer. On the one hand they are likely to be excited at the prospect of all the new things they can learn, the new people they will meet, and they are beginning to feel more grown up.

At the same time they might have a several worries and concerns, some of which they might be reluctant to talk to you about. Children and young people often do not want to worry their parents and carers, so it's often worth asking them directly how they are feeling about their move to secondary school. What are they looking forward to? What do they feel worried or concerned about?

Worries and concerns might include; getting lost in a much larger building, whether they will make friends, fears about whether they can keep up with the schoolwork and also what to do about bullying.



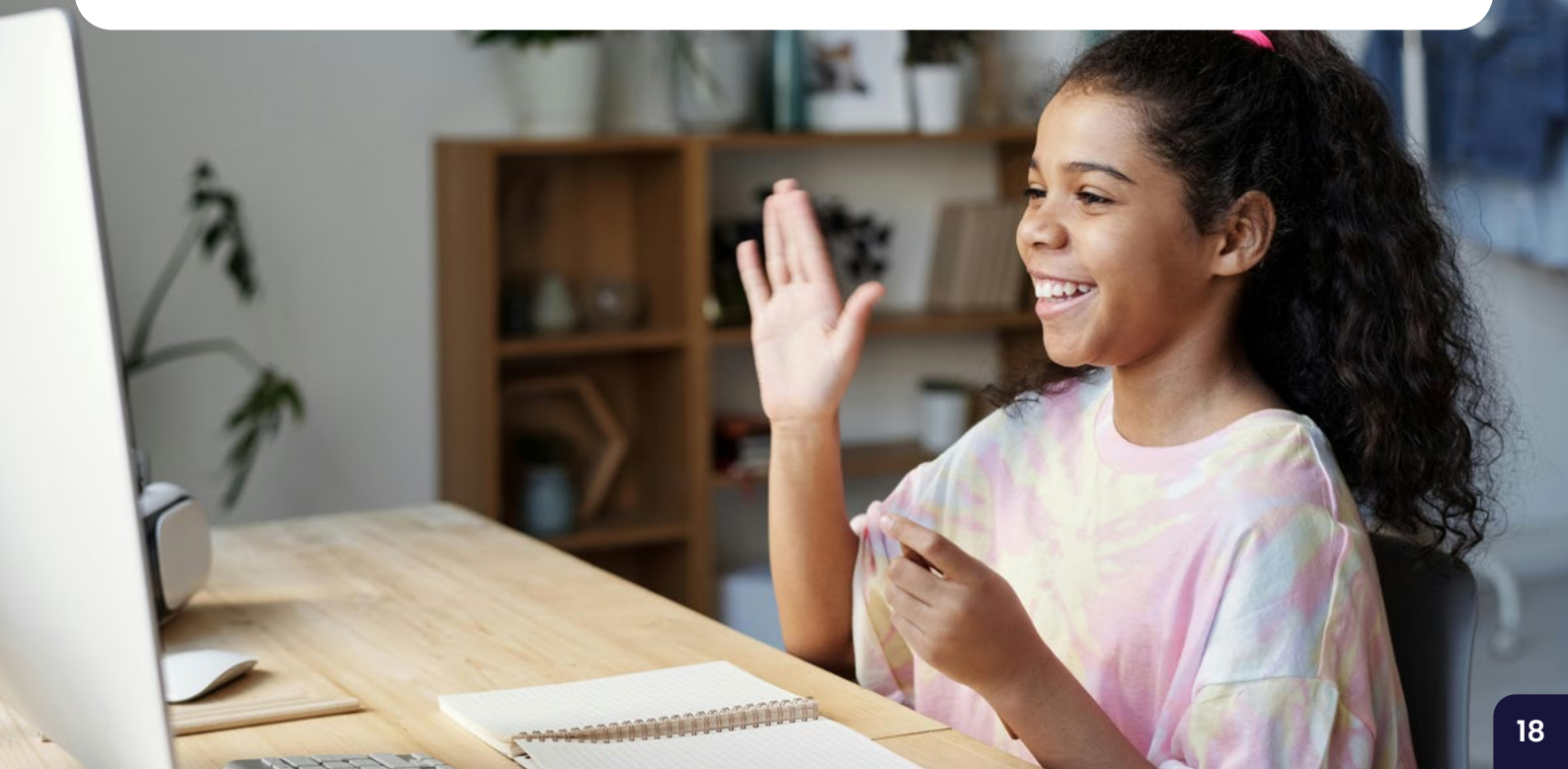
Ways to help with worries and concerns

Acknowledge that most people, including adults can have worries and concerns when they are trying something new. Encourage your child to recognise this is a normal feeling and that the best way to manage it is to talk it through with you or their friends.

Share ideas and create plans about what the young person can do for the different or difficult situations they are feeling worried about. When things go well, praise your child and celebrate their achievements. If things go wrong, remind them that things do sometimes go wrong and then explore together what can be done to put it right.

Staying calm and supporting your child to come up with ideas and make decisions also encourages independence. Your child will develop responsibility and begin acting more maturely. Giving them feedback on their growing maturity will reinforce it.

Do not worry if your child gets things wrong or makes poor decisions. Stay calm and talk it through with them so that they can learn.



4. Managing thoughts, feelings and emotions

Learning to manage thoughts, feelings and emotions and giving yourself the time to be aware of them is essential for young people's emotional health. The young person also needs help to recognise that separating their thoughts, feelings and emotions can help them make better decisions.

Mindfulness is being aware of your present moment (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations) without judgment and without trying to change it. It is full awareness, having an open mind.

Mindfulness gives you more choices and control over your behaviour, it:

Reduces suffering, increases pleasure

Helps improve important decisions

Increases compassion for yourself and others

It can lessen tension, pain, and distress

Focuses attention, making you more productive and effective

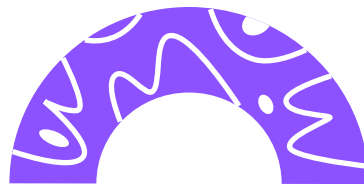
Thoughts, feelings and emotions

A big part of learning to manage thoughts, feelings and emotions is recognising they are all separate things, even though we might experience all of them at the same time.

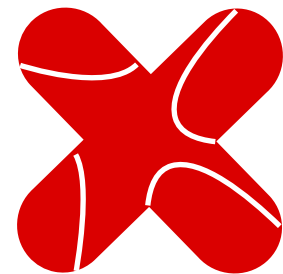
There are six types of basic emotions:



Happiness



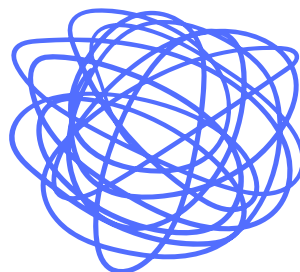
Sadness



Fear



Disgust



Anger



Surprise

Talk to your child and help them to learn to identify and label their emotions. This can help them express more clearly how they are feeling, which leads to better communication.

Behind every emotion there is a physical response or feeling, and with those feelings come needs. If the need is not met the body acts automatically. Helping children and young people consciously recognise the feelings can help them manage their emotions.

Managing fear, sadness, and anger

Fear, sadness and anger can be the most difficult basic emotions to deal with.

Label	Fear	Sadness	Anger
Bodily felt sense	Heart racing Sweaty palms Slowed digestion	Heaviness Slowness	Heart racing Feeling hot Tension in the body
Need	Safety	Comfort	Boundaries
Action	Run, hide, fight	Reach out	Defending boundaries

Fear, sadness and anger can be managed.

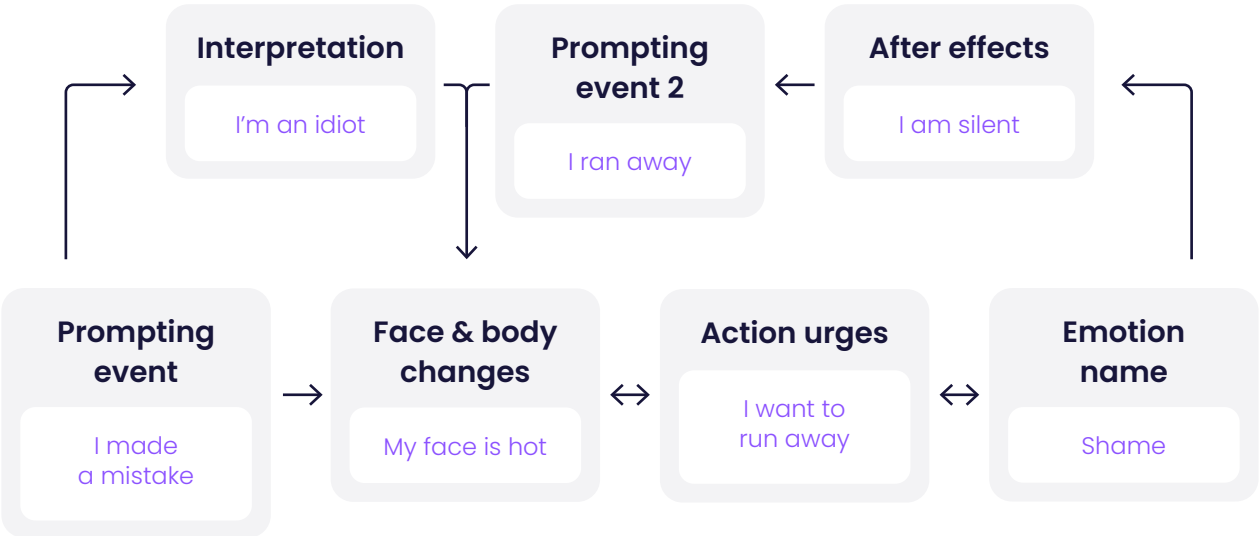
It's important to help your child recognise the emotion they are feeling, why they are feeling it and then discuss what they can do to manage their thoughts about the emotion.

For example, your child might get told off by their teacher for not doing their homework properly. Some children and young people take the telling off very personally and they assume the embarrassment, shame and upset they feel means that they are a bad person or they are a bad student. Their instinct might be to hide away, think negatively of themselves and fear doing things.

In these types of situation with a sensitive child or young person, they need some help to separate their feelings, thoughts and emotions. That is, explain that they are feeling embarrassed because they did not do well in their homework, this does not make them a bad person or a bad student. Something simply went wrong at the time of them doing the work. You can then discuss with them how they might approach their homework differently next time, whether that's allowing more time to complete it, asking more questions or more studying. Without judgment, encourage the young person to reflect on what they could do differently and how they will approach the task next time. Help them understand that poor homework was a result of their actions not of them as a person.

The process of emotions

The diagram below shows how inter-related our emotions, thinking and feelings can become. It can be very difficult them to disentangle them. Partly because they all happen so quickly and partly because we are unsure how and when we can stop the process.



To manage the process, the first thing to do is notice the feelings. If you can name the emotions causing them and then ask yourself why you are feeling those emotions, is there an alternative way to look at the cause?

In the above example - you might notice you face is hot and you are feeling shame but can you take some deep breaths and then think - "I made a mistake, we all make mistakes, we're human, ok I can say "sorry" and then put the mistake right".

Taking this approach rather than running away helps you regain control of your emotions and most people understand mistakes are made and can be put right.

Alternative ways to manage emotions

Sometimes emotions and feelings can feel very overwhelming, especially if your child does not understand the emotion or feeling.

It can help to try and help your child regulate their overwhelming feelings. A good way to manage intense or overwhelming emotions is distraction - you should try to return to talk about the emotion or feeling later when the child or young person might feel better able to explain it.

What distraction can you think of to suggest to your child that they might enjoy doing?

Here's a list of some of the distractions we use when trying to understand our emotional response that you can perhaps suggest to your child:

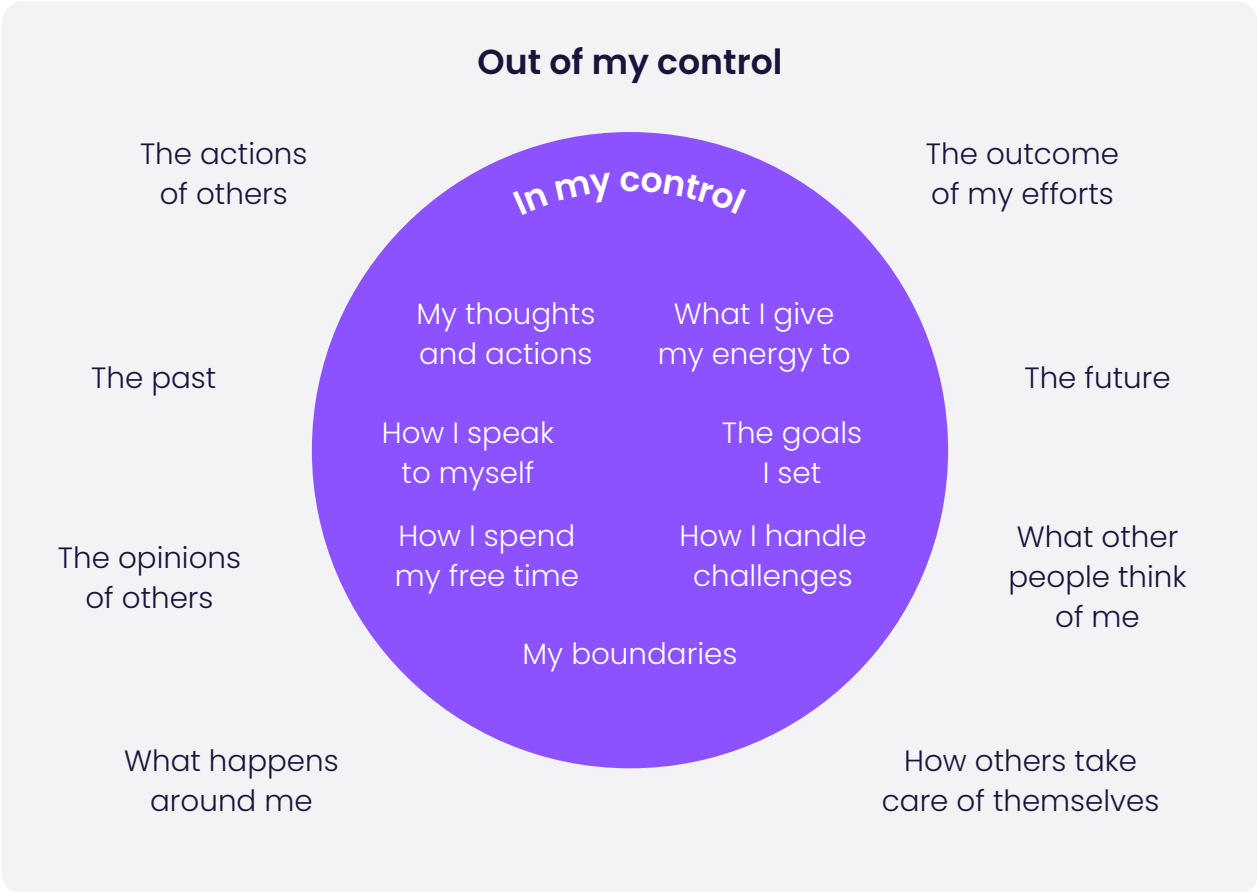
- | | |
|--|--|
| Go for coffee | Tidy their bedroom |
| Go cycling, walking or running | Go out for a treat - such as a meal or to the cinema |
| Go out with a friend | Do a puzzle |
| Dog walk | Play an instrument |
| Play with a pet | Listen to music |
| Go shopping | Talk about happy memories |
| Feed the ducks | Visit friends and relatives you both enjoy seeing |
| Play a sport or game requiring physical activity | Arts or handicrafts |
| Watch sport - live or on TV | |
| Watch a favourite film | |

What other things does your child enjoy? And what might you enjoy doing with them?

Spending time together will help them trust you and make it easier for them to talk to you about their feelings and emotions.

Out of my control

Finally a good way to help your child get through difficult emotions and feelings is help them understand the things they can and can't control. Supporting them to understand what things they can control can empower them to engage more positively with change, including a change of schools.



It is probably worth spending some time with your child explaining the things that are in and out of their control. Where you can give them examples from their own or your day to day lives. This will assist the development of their emotional health and wellbeing.

5. Building your child's confidence

There are several ways parents and carers can build children and young people's confidence.

- 1 **Praise their efforts** - not just their achievements. This will help children and young people to keep trying new things and not be afraid of failing. Encouraging effort enables children and young people to see and seek out new learning opportunities, which gives them a growth mindset.
- 2 **Encourage** children and young people to try new things, provide support and encouragement when they step outside their comfort zone, and acknowledge their courage in doing so.
- 3 Help the young person **set their own goals** - help them set realistic goals that they can achieve and celebrate their progress in achieving them.
- 4 **Role model confidence**, show them that you are confident and willing to try new or different things even if it feels a bit scary.
- 5 Help them **identify their strengths**, so that they feel good about themselves. If they identify weaknesses, acknowledge that no-one is good at everything. Discuss with them what they can do to improve on their weakness or perhaps there's a different way of looking at it, depending on the context.
- 6 Teach children and young people to **handle failure**, let them know that everyone fails and its not necessarily a bad thing because its an opportunity to learn.
- 7 **Be patient**, building confidence takes time, keeping providing support and encouragement. Finally don't compare your child with others or put them down.

As previously discussed the transition to secondary school coincides with the onset of puberty when your child is becoming a young person. This means lots of changes for them, physically and psychologically and it also means changes for parents and carers too.

Your child is beginning to see themselves as more independent, and more grown up. They want to increasingly make more decisions for themselves and seek more privacy. As a parent or carer it can be difficult finding the right balance as the level of independence a young person wants might vary from hour to hour let alone day to day. Also it's easy to try second guessing what's happening or what your child wants or needs.

Learning to get along with others whilst making clear your own needs is an essential skill that is vital to all healthy relationships. Supporting your child or young person to clearly express themselves to you and to others in their lives in a way that is respectful to themselves and anyone they meet, including family, friends, romantic partners, peers and teachers.

There are three acronyms to help you remember in thinking about how you assist your child in developing positive, healthy relationships:

GIVE

FAST

DEARMAN

1. G.I.V.E for building effective relationships

GENTLE: Don't attack, threaten or express judgement during their interactions. Accept there may sometimes be a no to your requests.

INTERESTED: Show interest in the other person without interrupting.

VALIDATE: Acknowledge the other person's thoughts and feelings and respect their opinions. Recognise sometimes your requests are difficult for them.

EASY: Have an easy attitude, smile and show warmth towards the other person.

GIVE

FAST

DEARMAN

2. F.A.S.T for maintaining your self respect

FAIR: Be fair to yourself as well as others.

APOLOGIES: only apologise when its warranted, there's no need to apologise for making a request, having an opinion or for disagreeing.

STICK: Don't compromise or give up on your values just to be liked or get what you want. Stand up for what you believe in.

TRUTHFUL: Avoid dishonesty, do not lie, exaggerate or try to manipulate others.

GIVE

FAST

DEARMAN

3. D.E.A.R.M.A.N for being clear about what you want out of a situation.

DESCRIBE: describe the situation objectively. Stick to the facts by avoiding opinion and interpretation. The aim is to see whether everyone has the same understanding.

EXPRESS: Tell other how a situation makes you feel - others cannot read your mind, so try stating: "I feel _____ because _____"

ASSERT: Say what you need to say. Say "I cannot go to the shop because....." instead fo saying "oh well I don't know if I can go to the shop"

REINFORCE: Reward people who respond well with a smile or a thank you - it makes the other person feel valued.

MINDFUL: Keep focused on what you are trying to achieve through the interaction. Its easy to get side tracked and lose focus, which can result in arguments.

APPEAR: Appear confident - consider your posture, tone, eye contact and body language. Adopting a positive appearance helps you feel more confident too.

NEGOTIATE: No one can have everything they want from an interaction all of the time. Be open to negotiation. For example you can say "if you wash the dishes, I'll put them away"

6. Practical planning for the new school

Preparation for the new school: Give your child chance to visit the school before starting there. If you can go through the routine with them and show them how to get there and get home.

Do lots of things together in the holidays before they start secondary school. It doesn't have to be things that cost money, going for walks, listening to music together, sharing and discussing ideas. Generally have fun and joke together.

Encourage your child to look forward to the change - acknowledge that they're feeling nervous too and also reassure them that's normal for everyone. Do ask if there are any particular things they are feeling nervous about - discuss how to manage the feelings and recognise that even small things can feel daunting if you're unsure.

Provide your child with clear boundaries and expectations about their behaviour, especially as they come across new experiences. For example, give them times when you expect them home. Discuss with your child how to speak to yourself and others with respect, if they want the same respect in return.

Discuss with your child about how to make new friends. Being kind and helping a class mate will help or joining school clubs such as music, sport, chess or computing might be some of the ways to start.

Talk through how to manage friendship situations if things go wrong - explain that this is a normal part of finding out who your friends are and who shares your values.

Supporting your child get the most from their time at school

Finally a good way to help your child get through difficult emotions and feelings is help them understand the things they can and can't control. Supporting them to understand what things they can control can empower them to engage more positively with change, including a change of schools.



Planning

Planning for the year ahead – what are the things they can look forward to? Learning new skills, meeting new friends, special days out, a holiday or the promise of a new pet. Even small things such as a weekend walk and the promise of spending some quality time together.

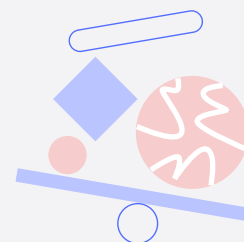
Talking to your child and identifying what goals they want to set for themselves for the coming year and ask how you can assist them.

Routines

Plan with your child how they and you will get into a good routine, from going to bed, getting up and having breakfast and going to school.

Schedule times for your child to do their homework and help them think about how to manage their deadlines.

Encourage you child to plan doing the things they enjoy and things that can help them relax.





Validation

Encourage your child to achieve for themselves and not to compete with others.

Let your child know you value them for them - not for their achievements.

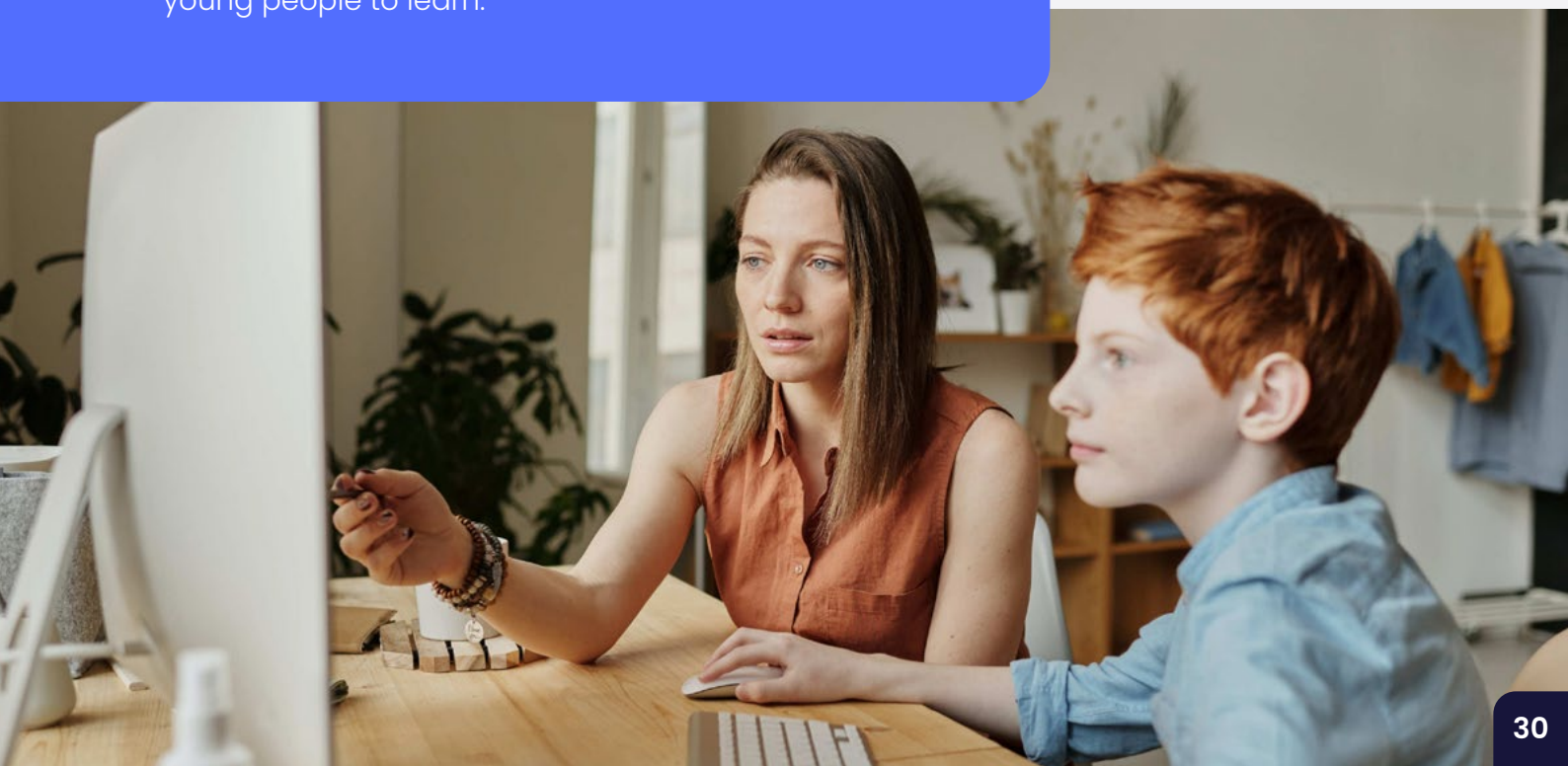
When your child does well, big or small, celebrate it - even in small ways with treats such as their favourite meal or watching their favourite film.

Encouragement

Offer your child encouragement and feedback on the things they do well. Notice when they do things you want them to do and comment on it.

Focus on positive development, when they show increased maturity, responsibility or considered decisions.

Role-model the behaviours you want your children and young people to learn.



7. Settling in to the new school

New experiences: discuss with your child all the new experiences that are available to them as they start a new school.

Get involved: encourage your child to get involved in schools and activities to meet new friends. Explain this will make school more enjoyable and enable them to learn more – not just school subjects.

Be themselves: Get your child to recognise the importance of being themselves and let their personality come through. That way they will find the right friends to connect with through shared values.

Ask for help when you need it: It's ok to feel you do not know or understand something, whether that's schoolwork, friendships or just getting used to a new school. Let your child know that they can ask for your help, or their teachers or other trusted adults.

Taking care of yourself: Help your child develop routines for caring for their physical and mental health. Making sure they get enough sleep, eat healthily and exercise regularly. Support them to recognise that it's important to relax and de-stress.

Every day is new: Even if some days do not go so well. Everyday is the chance of a new start.



Additional tips to share with your child

Take some time to get to know your new teachers – this will help you feel more confident and comfortable to ask questions.

Don't be afraid to ask questions, you can ask teachers or your classmates that you trust.

Be patient with yourself, it takes time to adjust to new things and it might take a few weeks or even a few months to feel comfortable.

Don't be afraid to make mistakes – everyone makes them so don't let them hold you back. Learn from the mistake and move on.

Enjoy the experience, live in the moment and see what happens – being nervous about starting school can help add to the excitement if you can relax and enjoy the new experience.

8. More support and advice

We hope you found this short e-book useful.

At LOHA we have a whole range of activities that can help parents support their children with their emotional and mental health throughout their development.

Our activities are called 'Systemic Therapy' and are delivered digitally to your phone or tablet each week.

The activities help build connection through curiosity, understanding resilience and empathy between all family members. These activities assist parents to give their child the knowledge and skills they need to manage all types of situations.

Systemic Therapy gives children and young people the ability to develop the emotional intelligence they need to help them form strong and positive relationships, personal and professional.

Skills learnt through Systemic Therapy with last you and your child a life-time.

See our website: www.LOHA-community.com

If you would like more information please contact us.

Email: Alison.Metcalf@LOHA-community.com

We look forward to hearing from you.

