

## Coping skills

As they grow and develop, all children encounter situations where they feel worried, nervous and sometimes even scared. Starting school involves a big change for your child as they settle into a new environment and begin forming relationships with peers and school staff. Even if your child's transition to school goes smoothly, it is likely that they will encounter some ups and downs throughout their primary school years. Helping your child to learn coping skills as they start school will allow them to develop and practise skills that will enable them to cope with future changes and challenges. This will help to strengthen your child's mental health and wellbeing now and into the future.

### What are coping skills?

Coping skills are what we think and what we do to help us get through difficult situations. Your child will begin to learn and use different coping skills from the time they are born. You can build on the skills they are already using, as well as assist them to learn new ones. This may include asking for help, talking with friends, problem solving and taking time out when they need a break. You may also explore how you can help your child manage strong emotions, promote helpful thinking and assist them to break down tasks into smaller, manageable chunks. Following your child's lead will help you work out what approach will be best for them. For some children, talking about a problem too much may lead to an increase in anxiety.

### Helping children cope

There are lots of ways you can help your child to cope during challenging or worrying situations. You might like to:

**Listen and talk** to your child. Help them to identify their concerns or worries and acknowledge how they are feeling. For example, you could say, "it sounds like you are worried about who you will play with at school tomorrow." (For more information on active listening, see the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet.)

**Comfort** your child. There may be times when your child does not want to talk and just having a parent nearby engaging in a shared activity or giving them a cuddle is helpful.

**Reassure** your child when they are feeling worried or unsure. For example, you could say, "it is a big playground but there is an area for just the little kids to play."

**Demonstrate and model** ways that you cope with situations. For example, you could say, "I am going to take five deep breaths to help myself relax."

**Prepare** your child for changes. Talk positively with your child about school, show them their new surroundings and do activities together that relate to starting school, such as reading stories about change.

**Encourage help-seeking** by teaching your child when to ask for help. For example, your child could ask a teacher for help to open their lunch box.

**Problem-solve** the situation with your child through a step-by-step process. (For more information, see the Starting School *Problem solving* information sheet.)

**Encourage** your child by talking positively about their attempts to cope.



## Managing strong emotions

When faced with a difficult or challenging situation your child may feel angry, worried or perhaps distressed. It can be hard for them to think clearly at these times, and it makes communication and cooperation difficult. If your child is experiencing a strong emotion, it's important to acknowledge it and be nearby to support your child. You may also consider teaching your child strategies to calm themselves. There will be different strategies that help each child to feel calmer, and some children need more time and structure than others. Follow your child's lead to find out what helps them to feel relaxed.

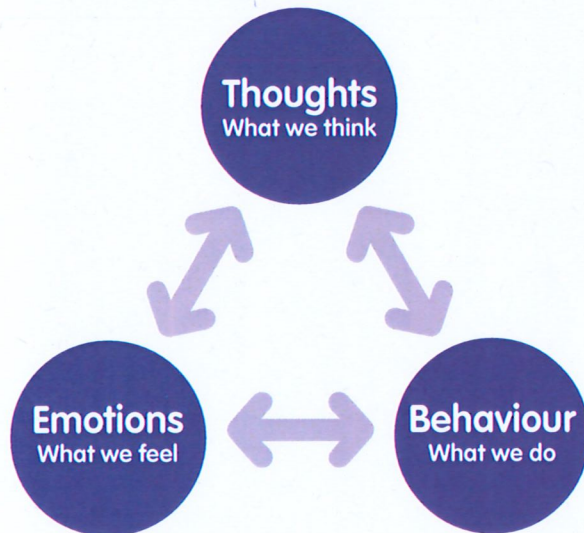
Some suggestions include:

- counting to ten
- taking five deep breaths
- jumping on the trampoline
- going to a quiet place
- playing with toys.



## Promote helpful ways of thinking

Another way you can help your child to cope is by helping them to begin to understand that how we think affects the way we feel and how we behave.



This means that how we think also affects how we cope with a challenging situation. You can begin to teach your child that sometimes we have 'helpful' thoughts that make us feel and act in positive ways. Some examples of helpful thoughts include:

- "I drew a really good picture at school today."
- "This is hard to do, but it will get easier the more times I try it."
- "I can try my best."
- "I can always ask my teacher if I need help."

You can also begin to teach your child that at other times we have 'unhelpful' thoughts that can lead us to feeling negative or bad about ourselves or a situation and can stop us from doing what we want to do. Some examples of unhelpful thoughts include:

- "I can't do this."
- "No one will like me."
- "I won't be able to do it without Mum."
- "I'm stupid."
- "It's too hard, I will never be able to do it."

### Example: Cassandra and Soo-Meng

When arriving at school, Cassandra waved to her friend Soo-Meng across the playground. Soo-Meng did not wave back to Cassandra.

- An unhelpful thought Cassandra might have had in this situation is: "Soo-Meng doesn't like me anymore." (Thought)
- Having this thought is likely to make Cassandra feel sad and unhappy. (Emotion)
- Cassandra may then avoid Soo-Meng if she thinks she doesn't like her anymore. (Behaviour)

Examples of more helpful thoughts for Cassandra might be "Soo-Meng didn't see me wave" or "Soo-Meng is just busy playing". This will help her to feel okay about herself and her friendships. Cassandra may then approach Soo-Meng to play with her later.

Children need to understand that it's not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts as everybody has them, but that learning to recognise unhelpful thoughts and finding more helpful ways of thinking is a way to better manage their feelings. Young children need adult support to find more helpful ways to think, but as they get older they can slowly start to learn to do more for themselves.

You might have already found some ways to help your child to see things from a different or more helpful perspective. You might say things like:

- "It doesn't mean she doesn't like you anymore. Do you think there are other ways we could think about that?"
- "Yes, it does look a bit tricky but how about just giving it a try?"
- "You were brave when you had your last injection; let's be brave like a lion again and it will be over in no time."
- "It doesn't have to be perfect. Just have a go."