

Helping children
talk
about
their
feelings



How to use this guide

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when it comes to your child's wellbeing.

It's been a difficult few years for many of us with the pandemic affecting so much of life, and now the toll that the cost-of-living crisis is having on households. On top of that, your child could be facing school changes, sensitive family matters or problems with friends. It can be hard to know how to help.

Having worked with the world's most vulnerable children for over 70 years now, World Vision has learnt a thing or two about children and their wellbeing. And every child is different – meaning the right approach can vary. But this guide aims to give you, as a parent or guardian, an idea of how to help your child open up and express how they feel.

Suitable for children up to 12 years old – it's important you tailor this guide to suit your child and their needs.

Photo: Children in Honduras have a safe place to play again, in the aftermath of two devastating earthquakes. World Vision is partnering with a local church here to provide activity days and essential resources for children and families affected.

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Wellbeing journal

It's important for children to talk about their feelings – and to feel heard.

The wellbeing journal on page three can be printed at home for you and your child to complete together. Or you can simply have a conversation using the journal as a guide. But remember, some children may find it easier to draw or write about how they feel instead of saying it out loud.

As well as asking how your child feels, we've included questions around what they eat and how they move. Making sure healthy food and movement are part of their daily schedule has a positive impact on overall wellbeing – and these are simple things for your child to make choices about. Encouraging your child to think about these things means they can start to exercise some control over their own wellbeing straightaway.

My wellbeing journal

This journal belongs to...

.....

Today, I feel...



Happy Excited Sad
Sleepy Bored Lonely

I feel this way because...

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Today, I moved...

Draw a picture below, or write down, how you moved today: maybe you went for a walk? Danced to a really great song? Or played football in the garden?



Today, I ate...

Draw a picture below of all the yummy healthy foods you have eaten today.



Tomorrow, I'm looking forward to...



Are you going to be playing a game, going to school, seeing friends for a walk?

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Talking about hard issues

We've got decades of expertise helping children deal with challenges, trauma and changes in circumstance. It can be hard to know the right thing to say or do when a child's struggling with something out of their control. But it's important we as parents, guardians or carers offer encouragement and support for their emotional needs.

Whatever's on their mind – whether it's difficulty fitting in at school, fear over big events that are happening around the world, or dealing with the loss of loved ones – these five tips should help you talk to children openly and honestly:

Tip #1: Find out what they know

Begin by asking an open-ended question like: "Tell me what you know about..." Then, follow up with something like: "How do you feel about...?" or "Why do you think that happened?" You may find out that your child knows more than you think or that they heard or imagined something inaccurately. By asking this question, we can help stop overthinking.

Tip #2: Explain the situation at an age-appropriate level

Use words and examples they'll understand to explain what is happening – but keep it simple and don't over-share. You don't have to have all the answers. And if you're not sure why something happened, it's okay to say you don't know. But if you're worried about the situation, discuss your own fears and thoughts with another adult, before discussing with a child.

Tip #3: Help your child feel safe

Reassure, give extra hugs, and show your children how you're helping to keep them safe – it helps the child learn how to keep themselves safe too.

If you pray, this is also a great time to pray together – tell God your fears, and ask for comfort and protection.

Tip #4: Draw it out

Use crayons, pencils and paper. Some children might not want to talk about something scary they're thinking about – so it might be easier for them to draw about it. Children's counsellors frequently use this technique, which we also find helpful at the Child-Friendly Spaces we set up after disasters and conflict.

Tip #5: Give them a way to help

It could be as simple as asking them to help with a job around the house, or maybe you could volunteer to help in the community? Giving a child a way to help others is a great distraction, gives a sense of achievement and offers hope for the future.



Photo: At this World Vision education centre in Moldova, Ukrainian children like Kira have found a safe space to continue their learning, to feel loved and protected, and to talk freely about their concerns. © 2023 / World Vision

Managing emotions

With all life's twists and turns, it can be hard to manage our own emotions as adults – let alone expect children to be able to manage theirs. But being in touch with how we feel, and why we feel that way, is really good for our overall wellbeing.

The activities below are used by our teams within refugee camps and aim to help children understand how they're feeling. These activities are especially helpful for

when a child feels anxious about the world around them. You and your child should complete these two activities together – and allow time for an honest conversation after. We recommend completing the wellbeing journal before moving on to the activities below.

Give it a go – you might be surprised with how much it helps.

The energy within

Aim: For children to be aware of the feelings of being energised and being relaxed, and to learn to calm themselves when they need to.

Ages: Young to adult

Materials: None



1. Stand with your children, spaced apart.
2. Ask your children to shake their bodies – starting with their hands, then their arms, legs, torso, head. Shake all parts of the body. (You can join in too!)
3. Next, start walking on the spot, running on the spot, and then running as fast as you can on the spot for at least one minute, to get everyone's heart rate up.
4. Next, tell everyone to stand very still.
5. Ask your children what's happening in their bodies.
Can they feel their heart beating? Do they notice tingles in their belly, legs or arms? Is there heat in their body? Tell them **'This is your energy. Your energy within.'** This feeling might seem similar to when they're very excited. Sometimes when we're excited, we might find it hard to calm down. In these situations, it can help to remember that our energy can also be still and calm.

6. Now (either standing or lying down) ask everyone to close their eyes and think of the floor. The floor is steady. It doesn't move and it keeps us safe. Can your children think of someone who helps them feel safe and steady? Ask them to use their energy within to feel that love and support now.
7. Next, ask the children to open their eyes slowly, gently moving their fingers, their shoulders, their heads from side to side and returning to 'normal'.

Feeling the difference between how being energised and being relaxed feels, helps children (and adults) to understand that they can calm themselves when they need to.

This activity also allows children to know that no matter what changes around them, the ground – and their loved ones – will always keep them steady.

Some children may have difficulty quietening down their energy. You can ask them to try to be very quiet and listen inside. Or ask them to either bend over and touch the ground with their hands, then let their whole body hang down and relax, or to crouch down with their arms around their knees and their heads down like a turtle until they feel more relaxed.

Tree in the wind

Aim: Help your children to relax, to feel grounded and secure, and to use their imagination.

Ages: 6+

Materials: None

Stand with your children – make sure everyone can stretch out their arms without bumping someone else!

Read out the following directions (and follow them yourself, to enjoy a moment of calm too):

1. Please stand nice and straight with your feet placed apart (about as far apart as the width of your shoulders) and bend your knees a little bit. Relax your arms at your sides, letting them hang down.
2. Close your eyes or you can just keep your eyes lowered and look softly toward the floor.
3. Be sure to stay standing on the same spot, and to feel your feet planted on the ground, just like the roots of a tree. Imagine you have roots growing down into the ground, standing firm.
4. Now find the centre of your body (centre of gravity) – you might feel this just below your belly button. Breathe nice slow, deep breaths and imagine your breath going down to your centre.
5. Feel your feet (roots) connecting you to the earth.
6. Breathe into your belly, and as you breathe out, imagine your roots digging deeper and deeper into the soil. Let your roots tunnel down through soil and stones and become strong. Your roots keep you balanced and steady. Your legs are like the trunk of a tree supported by your roots.
7. As you breathe in, imagine energy coming up through your roots and trunk and up into your arms. Slowly lift up your arms like branches and then, as

you breathe out, send the energy into your arms and fingertips to grow branches and leaves. Breathe in the energy from your roots, and breathe out to send the energy to feed your branches and leaves. Let the branches grow and spread – some may be thick and strong, others more delicate. Wiggle your fingers and feel your leaves moving in the wind.

8. Let the leaves and branches reach up to the sun. Imagine the sun's energy coming in from above, and then the energy coming up from the soil below. Feel nourished and refreshed. Let the energy flow.
9. On your firm roots deep in the ground, begin to sway like a tree in the wind. Gently wave your arms from side to side, and forwards and backwards, while you keep taking deep breaths.
10. Now, imagine the wind has stopped. Be still and come back to your centre – your standing tree.
11. Slowly draw your roots and your branches back into your body – bring your arms slowly back in toward your sides. Stand still for a few moments, breathing and feeling calm.
12. Finally, open your eyes and gently 'shake loose'. Begin to lift up each foot, bounce a few times gently on your feet and shake your hands and arms.

Your tree is always there. Whenever you want to feel rooted and strong and calm, you can just plant your feet and grow your roots and branches again!

Variation

This exercise can also be done sitting down. Imagine the roots coming from the base of the body and sitting bones connected to the earth.