

Everyone feels overwhelmed at times

Eli's story



It was Eli's second birthday and he was having a party with his friends. In the lead up to the party Tracy, Eli's mum, had been busy preparing food and games. Tracy and Eli had filled the party bags together. On the day of the party while Tracy was getting everything ready, Eli began pulling the party tablecloth and napkins off the table. 'Please don't do that Eli, I still have a lot to do.' Then Eli tipped out his toy box, scattering toys everywhere. Tracy stopped, took some deep breaths, knelt down with open arms, and smiled while asking Eli to come to her. Eli ran into her arms and snuggled in. While Tracy was stroking Eli's hair she said softly and calmly 'I know you are excited about your party. It won't be long now'. Eli relaxed in his mum's arms. After they decorated the table together, Tracy suggested to Eli 'How about we put on your "Softly, softly" CD and you can look at your butterfly book while I finish getting things ready?'

Why do children need adults to help them manage their emotions?

We can all feel overwhelmed at times. When this happens it is helpful to have some ways to help ourselves feel better. Over time, we get to know what situations are likely to upset us and how we can manage our emotions when these situations arise. We continue to learn about what upsets us and find new ways to handle our emotions throughout our lives.

Children also have times when they can feel overwhelmed or out of control but, because of their age, they have had less time and experiences to learn ways to manage their feelings. Adults can help them contain their intense feelings and teach them ways to manage themselves as they grow and develop.

When adults respond to children's cues and help them manage their feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, or being overwhelmed, children feel safe and trust that there is someone there to help them when they need it. Helping children manage their emotions also increases their feelings of confidence and self-worth and minimises stress. Gradually children learn to manage their emotions for themselves from their experiences with warm, responsive and trusting adults. When children feel calm and safe, they are more likely to maintain focus and attention which is central to their overall development.



By responding to children's cues, adults can build children's feelings of safety and trust.

Children who feel calm and safe are more able to maintain focus and attention.

How can parents and carers help children manage their emotions?

Carers can help children move from a negative state where they are feeling upset or distressed to a more positive one where they are feeling safe, calm and ready to interact with their world in a positive way.

Carers may calm a child using hugs or other forms of gentle touch. Smiling, reassuring nods, singing, reading and talking with the child may also be useful. Over time, carers learn what works best for a child.

For example when Eli was having difficulty containing his excitement about his birthday party, his mother responded by firstly calming herself and then using a kind voice and facial expression, offering Eli a warm, containing hug. Providing him with some calming activities helped Eli maintain a calmer state until the guests arrived. This meant that both she and Eli were more able to enjoy the party, helping to make it a positive experience for everyone.



'Be calm, Be kind, Be stronger, Be wiser.'
(From www.circleofsecurity.org)

Parents and carers can teach children to calm themselves down by:

- ▶ Helping children to slow their breathing down (e.g., by blowing bubbles or pretending to blow out birthday candles) and encouraging children to take deep breaths.
- ▶ Encouraging children to imagine they are a floppy rag doll and to give themselves a shake. This helps release tension they might be holding in their body.
- ▶ Helping children to imagine and pretend they are a favourite animal taking a nap. This encourages children to close their eyes and relax.
- ▶ Developing a strategy to use when they are feeling out of control (e.g., having a 'calm thought or picture'), taking time out (e.g., by having a parent or carer read them a calming story) or talking with someone about how they feel.
- ▶ Expressing their emotions in productive ways (e.g., by drawing, using playdough or acting their feelings out with toys).
- ▶ Increasing their 'feel good' hormones through exercise, positive social experiences, a healthy diet, and plenty of rest.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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