



GUIDING OUR CHILDREN THROUGH THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

We know that what helps the most is to encourage our children to understand their thoughts and feelings, so that they can ride the waves of struggle and not be knocked down by them.

KEY MESSAGES FOR PARENTS TO USE WITH THEIR CHILDREN

We all struggle. It is normal and it is natural. Life has ups and downs for each and every one of us.

Happiness is not our natural state. To be unhappy does not mean you are a failure or weak. Model struggle to children to help normalise the experience.

Remind children that their thoughts are mental events not facts. They keep you safe, but they can bully you too. They are not our friends and we can't defriend them on facebook or turn them off. If they are stuck on an unfriendly thought, help them to notice familiar mental stories that ping up time and time again, and get them to notice how automatic that process can become over time.

Practice mindfulness and help them to bring the focus of their awareness back to the present and not to the past or the future, neither of which they can control.

Remind children that feelings are there for a reason. They need to learn to make room for them. They will survive them and the feelings will pass. Help them explore what that feeling tells them about what matters to them in life. We can do so many things to try and avoid feelings, but they will always come back and the methods we use to get rid of them can cause us tremendous self-harm and often only serve to make the feelings bigger and stronger than before.

KEY MESSAGES FOR US AS PARENTS

- We need to let children be autonomous beings and learn to challenge their unhelpful thoughts through experiences.
- This is a time in their lives where they have almost no control over anything and opportunities for risk taking are minimal.
- Teenagers are naturally sensation seeking, novelty seeking and risk-taking people. We need to help them develop a repertoire of risks and learn that risk taking is an adaptive behaviour.
- Provide the scaffolding for this.

HOW DO WE MODERATE RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOURS?

- By spending quality time with our children.



- Not asking too many questions.
- Try “Tell me something you learnt today?” or “What great question did you ask today?” rather than the dreaded “How was your day?”
- Doing tasks together, like following a recipe.
- Remembering that time in the car is a great time for awkward conversations with your child.
- Try to stay quiet when the overriding urge is to say something, rescue or blow up. Delay for 30 seconds and see what happens.
- Try to stay with it and not fix it.
- Notice their emotions and, with compassion, let them suffer.
- If you notice that your child is retreating, suggest that they might want to talk to somebody about what is happening. Maybe a godparent, a friend, parent or a counsellor. This is not because they need fixing but because we know rumination precedes depression.
- Model that your phone and your computer are not your constant companions. Encourage them to leave their phone downstairs overnight. Sleep deprivation is a killer for adolescent mental health.

HELPING CHILDREN GET UNSTUCK

Encourage them to:

- Connect with people in real life. Shared activities, time with family, activate!
- Challenge them to learn something new.
- Give to others. Children love to be given the opportunity to be pro-social.
- Become physically active.
- Embrace the moment - Jump for joy, pay attention to something with all your senses.
- Care for themselves - Healthy diet, sleep, rewards and limit screen time.
- Own their own bodies - Encourage them to try and name their feelings and think about what really matters to them. Are they willing to have those feelings in the interests of what they truly value? What sort of son, daughter, friend, student do they want to be?