

Calm Communication. Speaking my child's language



The Power of Play!

Introduction

Hello and welcome,

As a Charity supporting children's emotional wellbeing through Play and Creative Arts Therapy, we work alongside lots of parents. We regularly have conversations with caregivers about struggles regarding behaviour management and so we want to be of help. Caregivers commonly share what they describe as 'daily battles' over everyday tasks that they feel should be easy! They also let us know that at the end of the day they're flooded with guilt and wish they had managed things differently.

Truth is, you're probably knackered. Before work you had to fish lego out of the washing machine, your children won't stop asking for snacks and now you've seen a lump of Play-doh squished into the carpet. If you relate to this, you are not alone.

In response to the common struggles we hear, we have created this resource filled with tips, tools and information that we share with the families we support. We don't by any means expect you to implement these 100% of the time. That's something that only Mary Poppins could achieve (and remember she was a nanny who had an umbrella that allowed her to fly).

These are evidence-based tools that we have supported hundreds of caregivers to implement with great success. With a bit of consistency with this approach, we can almost promise you that the situations that currently cause a lot of conflict will soon become a lot less stressful and easier to manage.

We're going to cover four key ingredients, vital to supporting behaviours calmly in the home. Those four ingredients are:



Playfulness



Headspace



Empathy



Self-
Compassion

Playfulness

To begin, let's clarify something important.

There is no such thing as a 'naughty' child

Kids are first time humans learning to navigate the world. Though they often do so in quite a noisy, messy way, and at a pace that doesn't quite work for adults with busy schedules.

Children love to play. As we grow into adults, our list of responsibilities grow and grow, and alongside this, we tend to become less playful.

Often, what happens, when we are trying to get out of the door for example, is we become stressed by the pressures of the day. We are thinking about the fact we need to get the children to school on time, and that we then have 6 hours until pick up to do whatever else is on the day's agenda (whether that be work, house work, additional childcare etc). As a result, we often adopt an authoritarian style of communication, which we were taught to believe meant children would obey.

Something to highlight, is that incredibly well behaved children who don't step a foot out of line aren't always experiencing the best mental health. They may be playing the role of the 'good girl/boy/child,' whilst repressing their emotions. This can cause difficulties in later life.

Whilst it can come with a bit of added stress from time to time, we want our children to express themselves. It just might mean that they don't always listen, that they answer back from time to time and that they come home from school with muddy hands or paint in their hair. Though it tells us that they feel safe enough to explore the world, to test out boundaries, to learn about relationships and to be brave enough to get things wrong (and that's what builds resilience).

Playfulness

Where does playfulness come into behaviour management?

When we can adopt a playful style of communication with children, and by this we mean talking to them almost as though you are telling a story, they are far more likely to remain engaged. Being playful, incorporating fun, humour and joy into our interactions with children helps to create positive interactions.

An irritated or lecturing tone creates resistance, whilst playfulness helps to diffuse the situation and supports children to communicate openly and willingly.

When we can incorporate playfulness into everyday interactions, we can reduce the likelihood of conflict because children tend to be more cooperative.

Something we'd like to highlight is that playfulness is hard to access when we feel stressed. Of course, even with our efforts to be more spontaneous and to engage more playfully with our little ones, conflicts will arise from time to time. In these moments, it can feel even harder to access our playful energy. We'll be talking about stress management on the following pages, but first, here are some top tips to support you with implementing playfulness into your daily routine

Bringing playfulness into every day

- Turn chores into challenges. Set timers to see who can get their shoes on in under one minute... and then, see if they can do it even faster the next day!
- At tidy up time, become hoovers and see who can collect the most things, or add some role play into the mix and pretend to be cleaners!
- See if your little ones can get dressed faster than you! Grab their socks and put one on your hand, pretend it is 'Simon sock monster' and he has come to tickle you if you don't get dressed!!
- At bed time, adjust the mood of the room, light a lava lamp and play some calm music. Take 5 minutes to read your little one a bedtime story and have a cuddle together.

Headspace

We can't expect ourselves to manage situations calmly if we're exhausted with little headspace. You'll have heard the analogy

'You can't pour from an empty cup.'

It's true that when we're on empty, we're going to struggle to give our energy to others and to remain in balance or regulated. Though take a moment to think about the things you're currently doing with your spare time as a form of self-care. Perhaps a scroll on social media, a Netflix binge or a trip to have your nails done. These things are great fun, and we absolutely don't need to take them away. However, they aren't necessarily replenishing our energy. When we are already exhausted, taking in more energy and more information is not what we need to replenish ourselves.

So we have a reframe for you. Instead of 'what am I doing to fill my own cup?' Try 'what am I doing to empty my cup. What am I doing to create more space?' Whilst not very glamorous, basic forms of self-care are the things that create more headspace.

A daily walk, some deep breathing, regular exercise, a bit of journalling, getting to bed an hour earlier, consuming fruits and veggies... These are the things that allow us to remain more regulated on a daily basis, reducing overall stress.

We often fill our cups with activities that allow us a chance to escape. We need to decompress after a long day and zoning out to Netflix works. Though self-care should support us to live life, not escape life.

On the next page is an exercise to support you with building more headspace.

Build a self-soothing tool kit

Grab a pen and some paper, and create a list of activities that you can include each day, or across your week, to support self-soothing and stress management. When doing this activity, it is worth building in activities that soothe all of the senses.

Sight

Incense, candles, wrist rollers, flowers, room sprays

Sound

Calming music, uplifting music, ear plugs to create some sensory deprivation

Smell

Low lighting in the evening, candles, fresh air green spaces, natural sunlight in the daytime

Touch

Soft jumpers or blankets, heavy blankets, warm baths

Taste

Crunchy foods and foods of different textures/ tastes

As well as a few additional activities such as:

- Daily connection with loved ones
- Regular movement that you enjoy... walking, running, Zumba, step, yoga, dancing, weights
- Time outdoors in green spaces -If this isn't so easy for you, try bringing the outdoors in with house plants
- Grounding and calming breathwork. We personally like the 4,7,8 technique... You can see this on the following page
- A 5-10 minute guided relaxation before bed
- Anything else that you really love that helps you to relax E.G. reading, painting, gardening etc

What's in your self-soothing tool kit?

Which activities will you practice weekly and which will you practice daily?

4-7-8 Breathing



We'd encourage this as a daily practice. You can build it in whilst the kettle boils, just before you wake the children for school, as a way to log off before going to sleep. The more we practice, the easier it will become to implement in moments of high stress.

Empathy

We're sure you'll have heard of empathy, a capacity to

'put yourself in someone else's shoes.'

You'll already know that empathy is a great way to offer others support, to help them feel heard and to help them process difficult emotions.

What you may not know is that empathy is also incredibly helpful in reducing conflict in times of stress. We have a 3-step process that you can implement to support you with this called Head, Heart, Hands. Let's break it down step by step.



HEAD

Can I think about my child without too much distraction (this is where headspace comes in handy again). Can I hold them in mind, and wonder what they might be thinking? What is going on for them right now?



HEART

Can I recognise how my child is **feeling**? Whilst acknowledging that their feeling may be different to mine?



HANDS

Can I use my actions, facial expressions or words to let my child know that I **understand** how they are feeling?

As an example, this could sound like 'You've had a tough time today hey?'

It might look like offering of a hug, stroking your child's arm, offering them a gentle squeeze of the hand and an empathic look, or simply matching their facial expression.

This step is the most important. When we can help children to know we understand their feeling, we can support them to feel soothed.

Most of us are skilled at practicing empathy when things are going well. Though when conflict arises, naturally, it becomes that bit harder. With practice this becomes much easier. So let's have a try on the next page.

Head, heart, hands



We'll start with a positive and joyful experience first, as in these moments, it's easier to access empathy.



HEAD

Let's take a moment to think about what is going on in this picture. Perhaps the children were playing a game of football, and they have won the game!

Perhaps the goal being lifted up scored several of the goals (we don't know because we aren't mind readers, but we can have a guess).



HEART

Let's dial into how they might be **feeling**. Overall, it looks like they're feeling chuffed, pleased with themselves, overjoyed. They feel celebratory!

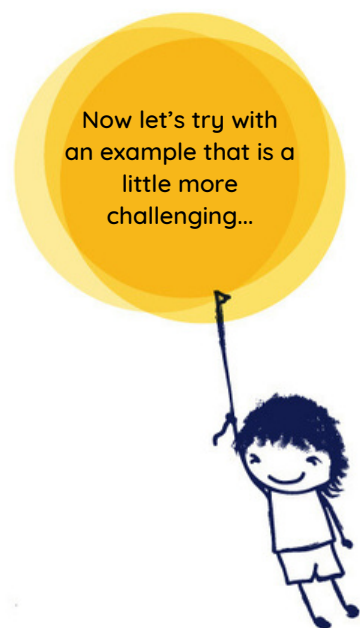


HANDS

To let them know that we **understand**, we get it, we could mirror the girl being lifted up and punch our arms into the sky. We could smile back to let them know we can see their happiness.

We could say 'Wow! You won. Look how happy you are. You look so proud!' (essentially, you 'say what you see.')

Head, heart, hands



HEAD

Let's take a moment to think about what is going on in this picture. Perhaps the child doesn't want to eat her vegetables, though her parents have made a deal, that she has to finish her vegetables if she wants to play on her Xbox after dinner. She really doesn't want to eat them today though.



HEART

Let's dial into how she might be **feeling**. She looks fed up. As though she's feeling a bit hard done by. She is perhaps feeling sad as she doesn't want to eat her veg but really wants to go on her Xbox!

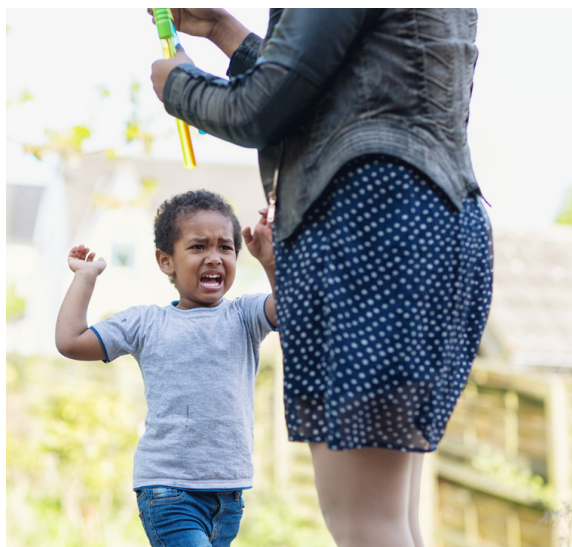


HANDS

To let her know that we **understand**, we could say 'you don't look like you want to eat your vegetables today.' (I think we can all agree that empathising with that isn't too difficult!). We could say 'it feels unfair that you have to eat your veg to play on your computer game. I'm sorry you feel that way. Vegetables are really good for you. If you can just eat one or two.'

This example helps us to see where empathy comes in helpful, whilst still maintaining boundaries. We don't have to become a disciplinarian in holding the boundary. We can remain calm, gentle and playful in nature whilst still holding the boundary we set.

Head, heart, hands



HEAD

Let's take a moment to think about what is going on in this picture. Perhaps the child was playing with the bubbles but flicked them at his sister. Mum had let them know a few times 'remember the bubbles will go away if you keep flicking them at your sister,' but the boy was having too much fun and didn't manage to stop.



HEART

Let's dial into how he might be **feeling**. He's sad, quite distraught in fact. He desperately wants his bubbles back. It's important to note that as the adult, we may feel differently in this situation, but it's still really important we maintain our calm and acknowledge the child's feeling.



HANDS

To let her know that we **understand**, we could say 'I know, you were loving playing with your bubbles, and now I'm taking them away. I'm sorry this has made you sad, and we can have them again later, but for now the bubbles are being put away.'

Something helpful to note in these more stressful situations is that children aren't often 'choosing' to act out. When they become dysregulated the part of their brain that is responsible for reasoning isn't active. Instead, the emotional part of the brain takes over reason and logic. Whilst we as the adult may be able to rationally see that if the child had stopped flicking the bubbles they could have continued playing with them, the child is in a feeling state only. As the adult, we can help them to calm down by calmly noticing their feeling, but trying to reason and logic them out of their distress won't work.

Empathy

When we practice Head, Heart, Hands, we reduce conflict because we stop fighting back. We essentially stop the back and fourth game by injecting some empathy. We maintain fair boundaries, and we do so by coming from a place of love, rather than by inducing fear.

Here's an example of what this might look like in action.

Situation: Your child thinks it's unfair that they have to clean their room. None of their friends have to. Why do they?

This conversation might usually go...

Child: It's so unfair. None of my friends have to clean their rooms.

Adult: Well in this house you have to.

Child: I don't want to

Adult: I don't care if you don't want to. You live here, you follow our rules!

Child: Well I won't!

Adult: Well then there is no TV tonight and that's that.

Child: NO! THAT'S NOT FAIR. I...

Okay, we can all see where this is going. Let's try adding in some empathy.

Child: It's so unfair. None of my friends have to clean their rooms.

Adult: None of your friends have to clean their rooms?

Child: Nope, none. Leo doesn't have to do anything. His parents are nice.

Adult: Ah, that's how it feels? It feels unkind? I'm sorry it feels that way.

Child let's out a big frustrated sigh

Adult mirrors and let's out a big frustrated sigh

Adult: It does feel unfair that your friends don't have to clean their rooms or do a whole lot to help out. In our home, we all help out, it's important. I'm sorry it feels unfair, no wonder you're mad about it. We do have our deal though, if you can get your room clean, I promise you can watch TV as we agreed. Would you like some music on to make it more enjoyable?

When we communicate with empathy, we model social, emotional and practical skills to our children, that in time, they will learn to reflect back. Remember, playful communication over authoritarian, and take a step away if you feel yourself become angry or stressed, or, take a few deeps breaths so that you can respond calmly.

Self-compassion

Whilst increasing your headspace will support you to remain more regulated, it would be unrealistic to expect anyone not to snap, get frustrated or shout from time to time. So, a positive message...

'Resilience is built in repair'

Providing we can take a moment to sit with our child, to reflect and let them know that we are sorry, we can support them to learn relationships can mend (when failures are tolerable of course). We also support them to develop their social skills.

Many of us struggle to forgive ourselves after snapping. We feel guilty, ruminate and wake up the following day still stressed as we haven't had a chance to relax. This is where self-compassion comes in.

What is self-compassion and how do we practice it?

Self-compassion gets a bit of a bad reputation. Often, people associate it with stagnation and a lack of growth. In actual fact, research tells us quite the contrary. Lack of capacity to treat ourselves with compassion following challenges is linked to conditions such as anxiety and depression. Whereas evidence tells us that people who can treat themselves with compassion tend to move through failures more easily, have lower levels of anxiety and stress and can accept situations and try again (essentially it builds resilience). What's even better, when we can model this to our children, we support them to do the same. Self-compassion has 3 components:

Common
Humanity

Self-
Kindness

Mindfulness

Self-compassion is an ability to

- Speak to and about yourself kindly, whilst refraining from harsh self-criticism (self-kindness)
- Recognise your own humanity, that we are all imperfect and we all make mistakes (common humanity)
- Assess situations without judgement (mindfulness).

Self-compassion in practice

Using self-compassion to reflect, process and move through challenges.

Here is an exercise that can support you to develop more self-compassion. You may find it easier to write this out in a journal at the end of each day. In time, it may become more natural and you may actively do it without taking additional time to reflect.

Here's an example:

The situation

I snapped at my children when really, they were just having fun with each other.

Mindfulness

I was tired and overwhelmed. It had been a busy day with a lot going on. The children were being noisy and it became too much. I let my overwhelm dictate my reaction in that moment.

Common Humanity

We all get overwhelmed and snap from time to time.

Self-Kindness

I am a good enough parent. I am trying my hardest and I show my children so much love. The important thing is repairing the situation. This one situation doesn't outweigh the love and playfulness I show from day to day. Next time I will practice taking some deep breaths to avoid reacting.

Now it's your turn, have a go at reflecting on a situation that happened recently, that you struggled to give yourself compassion in.

Top tip, if you're struggling to access self-kindness ask yourself 'what advice would I give a friend in this situation?'

Thanks for reading

You have reached the end of this document. Thank you for investing your time. Now that you have worked your way through these tools and exercises, here is a huge encouragement to keep going. This work doesn't happen overnight, but we can almost promise you that if you speak your child's language consistently, you'll start to see a reduction in conflict.

Please do stay in touch and keep your eye out for more emails from us for additional resources and tools.

If you found this resource useful, we'd love it if you could support us to keep spreading positive messages to support the emotional wellbeing of children, and of course, the adults that care for them.

Ways you can support our work

You can support us for free, by following us on social media and engaging with our posts. Our social media is dedicated to sharing positive messaging that educates professionals working with children and young people. you can find us here:



Or, if you are able to, you can say thanks by buying us a coffee! Just scan the QR code below

