

8 Helpful Approaches to Support Children's Emotional Health

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Hello & welcome!

Thank you for downloading this resource and for being part of the Raising Resilience Community! I genuinely hope this guide offers you **helpful insights and strategies to support the emotional wellbeing of the children in your life**—whether you're a parent, carer, educator, or a professional working with children.

This guide offers a gentle introduction to eight supportive approaches. It's not meant to be a one-size-fits-all solution (we're supporting wonderfully unique children, not robots!). Each approach is shared at an introductory level and doesn't include all the nuance that might apply to you and your unique child or family. Please keep that in mind as you explore and take what feels right for you.

You'll also notice that I've included real-life examples under each approach - some are applicable to the family setting and some to the school settings as I work primarily with parents *and* educators.

Supporting a child to understand their emotions and express them in healthy ways as they grow is a powerful part of **building resilience and nurturing long-term mental health**. If you have questions about this guide or would like more tailored support, please feel free to reach out—even if it's just for a chat.

Lastly, I just want you to take a moment, just ten seconds, to pat yourself on the back for being open to exploring emotions a little more (I know not everyone is a feelings-nerd like me!). As always, I hope you can offer yourself kindness and a bucket load of self-compassion when learning about supporting your child's emotional health - **it's often complex, layered and ever-evolving - you're doing your best simply by showing up**.

A note on co-regulation:

You'll see co-regulation mentioned throughout this guide as it's such a vital part of supporting children's mental health. Co-regulation is the foundation for so many of the approaches shared here. That being said, co-regulation is a big topic and it deserves more space and depth than this brief guide can allow. So while it's not included as its own section, please know that it underpins everything we do when we show up for children with empathy, attunement, and care.

Jess x



Approach 1

THE ART OF PAUSING AND LISTENING

Pausing and listening—it sounds simple, right? But when it comes to children’s emotions, it’s all too easy to jump in and try to fix, dismiss, diminish, or distract (usually with the best intentions).

What can often be most helpful when a child shares their inner world with us—whether through tears, worries or words—is to simply pause and listen. Sometimes, that’s all that’s needed to give them the space to be with their feelings in your safe presence.

Reflecting back what your child is sharing and validating their feelings (even if you don’t fully understand them) can also be powerful. It lets them know that their emotions are seen, heard, and accepted.

Real life example

Child: “I don’t have any friends at school.”

Parent: Pauses, listens, or gently asks: “Tell me more...”

Child: Cries (a healthy emotional release) or says, “It’s so hard—everyone else has friends.”

Parent: Reflects back: “Sounds like you’re finding friendships hard at the moment. They can be really tricky sometimes, love. Want a cuddle?”

Putting it into practice

Practice pausing and listening to your child when you’re tempted to speak just one time this week and observe what happens.

For some of this will come easy and for others (myself included!) it can feel challenging. With practice we make progress and pausing and resisting the urge to fix becomes easier.



Approach 2

GETTING CURIOUS ABOUT ANGER

One of my favourite quotes is: “Anger is the bodyguard for other more vulnerable emotions such as grief, sadness, or fear.”

Put simply, anger often has a “buddy emotion” or an unmet need hiding beneath the yelling, hitting, kicking, or throwing. When we remember this, we can approach a child’s anger with curiosity, gently exploring what might really be going on underneath.

Looking beyond the anger helps us understand the true feelings involved, so we can respond thoughtfully and address the root of the challenge, rather than using band-aid approaches that act as more of a short-term fix. This won’t always be easy as anger can activate our stress response, so again - go gently on yourself when navigating these big emotions.

Real life example

Child: Yelling “I hate you!”

Parent: Pauses before responding. Harnesses curiosity (either in the moment or after) and wonders if the child might be feeling jealous (the emotion) because they had to go to school the past few days while you stayed home with their sibling—and is actually feeling disconnected (the unmet need).

Putting it into practice

Think about the last time your child felt angry. Can you guess if another emotion or unmet need was present and what it might have been?

It’s important to remember that we can fully accept a child’s emotions whilst putting in boundaries for any hurtful behaviour. The ACT approach can be helpful with this:

A: Accept the emotion (It’s OK for the child to feel anger)

C: Communicate the limit / boundary around the unsafe behaviour (eg. kicking at someone is not safe).

T: Target an alternative strategy for expression (eg. squeezing slime or running outside as an alternative option for expression)



Approach 3

EMOTIONAL VACCINATION / PREPARATION

Does the name sound a bit harsh? Don't worry—it's actually a very nurturing approach. It involves anticipating when your child might have big feelings about something and giving them a gentle 'heads-up', plus helping them come up with a plan for how to express those feelings in a healthy way.

This approach discussed by child psychologist Becky Kennedy helps children build emotional resilience by preparing them for challenging feelings before they arise. I want to acknowledge that this isn't something we want to be doing all the time - that would be exhausting and impossible to constantly try and anticipate all of our children's emotions - but it can be very helpful at the right time.

In this approach, we do three things:

1. Acknowledge out loud that something might feel tricky, sad, angering, surprising in the near future for your child.
2. Make a simple plan for what they can do if this emotion does indeed arise.
3. Offer support and co-regulation.

Real life example

You have a child in your class who tends to be sensitive, and you know they might feel upset—and possibly angry—when it's time to pass on the class toy. You acknowledge how hard and sad it can feel to say goodbye to the toy and for someone else to take it home. Together, you come up with a special way for the child to say goodbye—maybe by giving the toy a big hug, drawing a picture of it, or finding a special spot for it before it's passed on.

Then, you gently plant a seed: "Sometimes sadness can come out as anger. If you feel angry when giving the toy back I will be here to support you. Maybe we could even move outdoors for some fresh air."

Putting it into practice

Can you think of an upcoming situation where you might prepare a child for big feelings ahead of time? What plan could you create together?

Please also keep in mind that if a child is crying that this is a healthy emotional release and doesn't need to be changed.



Approach 4

MODELLING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Children often do as we do, not as we say—so it's important we try our best to model emotional intelligence (which sometimes means showing the full messiness of our own emotions, too). This can look like naming our emotions as they come up, practicing healthy regulation strategies, and being honest about how tricky feelings can be. And of course, owning our mistakes and repairing when there's been a rupture in our relationship with our child—that's such a powerful part of emotional modelling.

We can also explore interoception—that sense of what's going on inside our bodies—with our children. Many of us didn't grow up learning how to tune into this, so we're learning alongside them. To give a personal example: I notice my hot cheeks and clenched jaw when I'm angry or a my tense chest and jelly-like legs and arms when I'm anxious. This is important for us to practice AND for our children to learn, so why not explore it together?

Just remember to keep it age-appropriate, and to go gently with yourself. This isn't about doing it perfectly. Many of us are learning how to feel and regulate emotions at the same time as the children we care for. It's big, brave work—so be kind to yourself.

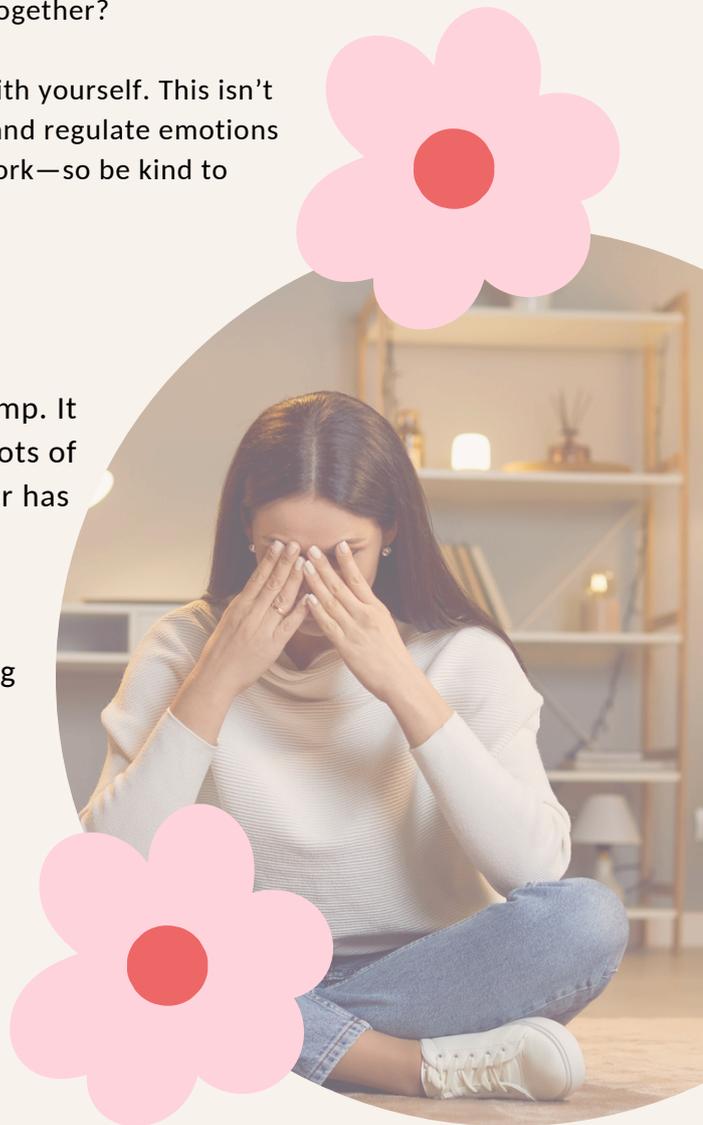
Real life example

Teacher: "I felt really nervous the first time I went on camp. It was my first time away from my family, and there were lots of unknowns. I'm wondering if anyone else feels that way or has questions about camp next week?"

Parent: "I'm feeling really sad that I'm missing out on dinner with my friends tonight because I'm sick. I'm going to journal about it and remind myself it's OK to feel this way."

Putting it into practice

What emotion have you experienced recently that you could name and share with your child or children to model emotional awareness?



Approach 5

EXPLORING BODY-BASED STRATEGIES

Research from neuroscience tells us that when a child—or an adult—is feeling overwhelmed, strategies that soothe the body (a “bottom-up” approach or body-based strategies) are often the most helpful.

It’s important to explore these strategies both for yourself and your child. Practicing them when you’re already feeling regulated helps build those beautiful neural pathways that make it easier to access these tools when you or your child is becoming overwhelmed.

Examples include:

- Giving yourself a tight self-hug
- Butterfly tapping
- Playing with something tactile like slime or playdough
- Rhythm and rocking movements
- Sharing a cuddle with someone trusted
- Pushing hands with a pillow in between
- Patting a pet and more...

It’s important to remember that new tools need time, for us and our kids, so it’s more about trialling one or two strategies for a little while, rather than using a bunch and throwing them out if they didn’t work after a day or two.

Real life example

Our children first need to feel what safety amongst big emotions can feel like to be able to grow their ability to self-regulate, and this is felt through co-regulation. If we’re looking at body-based strategies for children we can pair them with co-regulation which might look like playing together with play dough if you’re child is feeling really flat.

As an adult it might be about practicing and observing if butterfly hugs, self-massage or rhythmic movements help when you’re feeling overwhelmed. It’s all about trial and error and what works for you.

Putting it into practice

Which calming body-based strategy feels most natural for you to try with your child or family this week?



Approach 6

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S BRAIN

Understanding what's happening inside your child's brain is key to making sense of their behaviour and responding in a way that supports them both in the moment and afterward.

For example, when a child is dysregulated, the amygdala—the brain's emotional alarm system—can hijack their brain, meaning their logical thinking is 'offline' and inaccessible, so to speak. This important insight reminds us that a child who is upset or overwhelmed needs to feel safe and soothed in order to come back into balance—not reasoned with or negotiated with. At times trying to reason with a child who is dysregulated can escalate them as they may try but find it feels impossible to access their logical brain. You can learn more about this through Daniel Siegel's Hand Model of The Brain and "flipped lid" concept.

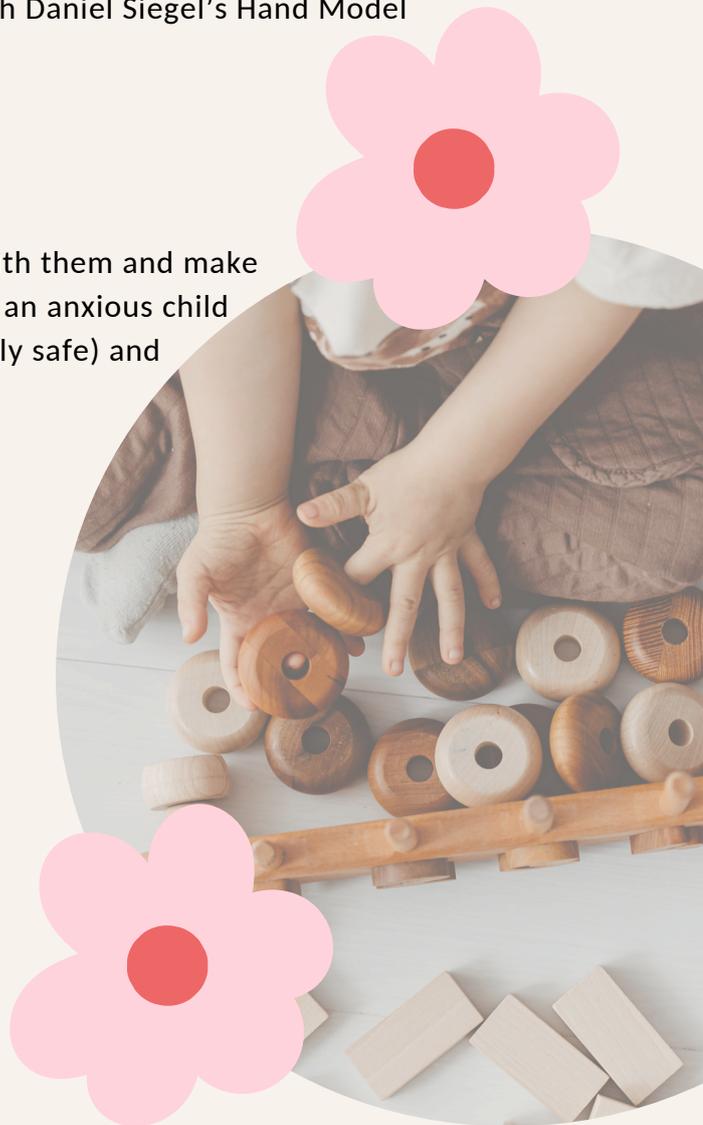
Real life example

When a child is feeling anxious we often try to reason with them and make them feel better using our words and logic when in fact, an anxious child needs to feel safe (physically, emotionally and relationally safe) and connected more than anything else.

What may be helpful, for example, is offering co-regulation through our attuned presence, leading the child to draw, move their body, play with slime or playdough or cuddle a class softie. Simply just listening and being present can do the trick in co-regulating with that child too.

Putting it into practice

How might remembering that a child's logical brain goes 'offline' when they're upset change the way you respond in difficult moments?



Approach 7

YOUR META-EMOTION PHILOSOPHY

At its core, the Meta-Emotion Philosophy is about *how we feel about feelings*. It invites us to reflect on our beliefs, thoughts, and reactions to emotions—both in ourselves and in others. Our personal Meta-Emotion Philosophy begins forming from day one and continues to evolve throughout childhood and beyond. But the good news is, it can be changed through reflection, curiosity, and growing awareness of how we relate to our own and others' emotions. A helpful question to start with may be: do I believe emotions are to be honoured or dismissed?

Real life example

A parent who, as a child, had their sadness dismissed or “bright-sided” might have learned that sadness isn't to be felt but to be distracted away from. This can lead to discomfort around sadness and a strong desire to make the emotion disappear in themselves and others.

Through exploring and becoming aware of their feelings about feelings, this person may discover a more nurturing way to respond to sadness—one that supports them as a parent, or teacher, and as a human with their own emotions.

Of course, old patterns die hard. On this journey of growing awareness, it's important to hold a tonne of self-compassion for yourself. And if you feel you need it, don't hesitate to ask for professional support to help you navigate the process. This experience often feels like two steps forward, two steps back, one step forward—and so on.

Putting it into practice

What is one belief or feeling about emotions that you've noticed in yourself? How might becoming more aware of this help you respond differently to emotions in your child or yourself?



Approach 8

PLAY AND CONNECTION

Children’s play is often misunderstood and undervalued. Yes, play is fun and that joy is so important—but it’s also so much more than that. Through play, children explore their emotional world, process difficult or scary experiences, and make sense of the environment around them. Play helps regulate the nervous system and fosters deeper self-understanding. It can also strengthen the connection between parents and their child. Whether child-led or thoughtfully guided by an adult, play is a powerful approach to supporting children’s emotional health.

Real life example

Sometimes play is as easy as simply making space for your child to have unstructured play time, led by them. At other times, we might use ideas from Attachment Play or set up some regular 1:1 Special Play Time. There isn’t one “right” way to play—it can look different day to day, child to child, and it’s important to honour that.

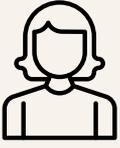
Play can help build connection and give children a deep sense of safety. In those shared moments—whether you’re being silly, building something together, playing a game or just presently observing their play with a cuppa in hand—your child learns that the world, and the people in it, can feel safe and responsive. It doesn’t need to be perfect - let’s aim for *presence* instead.

Putting it into practice

Are there moments in our days that could be opened up for your child to have more time for play? What kind of play seems to help your child and you feel most connected? Does your child need some support or structure to engage in play?



Sometimes life throws us curveballs – you don't have to navigate them alone.



About me

Hey, I'm Jess! I run Raising Resilience Mornington Peninsula. I'm a Bachelor qualified, experienced, compassionate Mental Health Educator and Parenting Consultant. I believe in taking an evidence-based approach that is often pulled from the fields of attachment, neuroscience, mindfulness and somatic based approaches. I'm also a good enough Mum to two awesome little people who truly are my greatest teachers.



Support for Parents

- 1:1 Parent Consultations (online, *worldwide*)
- Raising Resilient Families Presentation
- The Marigold Parents Project (group support)



Support for Schools

- Tailored presentations for staff and families
- Thriving Classrooms Presentation
- The Marigold Project (a group program for teachers)



Sources for this guide



Much of the information in this guide draws from the wisdom and work of many thoughtful professionals in the fields of child development, play, neuroscience, and attachment. I've woven together ideas learned through study, practice, experience and trusted voices in this space.

These include the likes of Dr. Daniel Siegel, Dr. Mona Delahooke, Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, Dr. Becky Kennedy, Deb Dana, Dr. Russ Harris, Drs. John and Julie Gottman, Dr. Daniel Goleman, and Dr. Stuart Brown, among others. I'm grateful for how their insights have helped shape more compassionate, connected approaches to parenting and child support, and for how they've impacted my work with families and teachers.

Disclaimer.



Please keep in mind that this is not a comprehensive or one-size-fits-all guide. The ideas shared are general in nature and are intended for informational and educational purposes only. They are not a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consider what feels right for your unique child, family, and situation, and seek guidance from a qualified professional if you have concerns about a child's emotional or mental health.