

# talking about...



Children's emotions,  
well-being and  
mental health

Childbase  
Partnership

An Employee Owned Company

*"When we talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary."*

FRED ROGERS, HOST AND PRODUCER OF CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED PRESCHOOL TELEVISION SERIES 'MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBOURHOOD'.



## Introduction

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At Childbase Partnership we give children a 'Sound Foundation for Life' which means giving them the skills they need to realise their full potential and prepare them for their roles and responsibilities in a much wider world.

Confident, secure and happy children make friends easily and are open to new experiences so everything we do, from introducing them to early mathematical concepts to establishing acceptable modes of behaviour, starts with recognising each child as unique and actively seeking ways to celebrate that fact.

Children who develop a strong and positive sense of identity and know that they are valued develop good self-esteem and generally do well at school, they are also less likely to fear the differences they perceive in others or have poor social interactions based on prejudice and bias.

Children are naturally curious about the differences and similarities they see everywhere so working with parents, a child's primary educator, we aim to provide answers to their questions that make sense to them and their families and help them to respect and appreciate diversity wherever they may find it.

## What do we mean when we refer to children's mental health and well-being?

Children's wellbeing can be defined by how relaxed and at ease they are in their environment, their clear sense of identity, high self-esteem, display of positive emotions, and energy levels all contributing to their general enjoyment of life.

Emotional wellbeing and good mental health is, therefore, just as important as children's physical health giving them the tools to regulate their emotions, embrace friendships and relationships and learn through play. Equally, they are better equipped to acquire the resilience needed to meet and overcome problems which helps them develop into balanced, healthy confident adults.

Mental health problems affect 1 in 10 children and young people and include depression, anxiety and conduct disorders (severe and persistent behavioural problems) which are often a direct response to what is happening in their lives.

The role of Early Years in determining and maintaining good mental health through childhood, and in later life, has never been more important particularly in the midst of a global pandemic which is impacting children in a variety of ways.

It is an uncertain world for everyone including children who are also trying to understand and adapt to the changes happening around them.



## Why is it important to talk about feelings and emotions with children?

Children's social and emotional aptitudes begin from the moment they are born as their rapidly developing brains respond to positive and negative factors and they begin the process of learning to identify, express and manage their feelings.

Firstly, they learn through the social interactions and relationships with those who are important in their young lives, such as parents/carers and grandparents, and the security, understanding and responses they provide.

This is the basis from which children develop healthy, cognitive, physical, emotional and social development.

Studies have shown that babies and young children become stressed when their physical and emotional needs are not met and this leads to the release of cortisol which affects the development of connections, necessary to successful development and learning, between brain cells.

Just like adults, children experience anger, sadness, fear, worry, frustration, happiness and embarrassment but need support in identifying, naming and processing these feelings to help them relate to others and successfully manage their own mental health later in life.

It is perfectly normal for young children at different stages of development to display negative emotions or behaviour while they are learning to deal with their feelings appropriately. Talking openly with them about how they feel and why, enables them to start recognising and effectively managing different emotions.

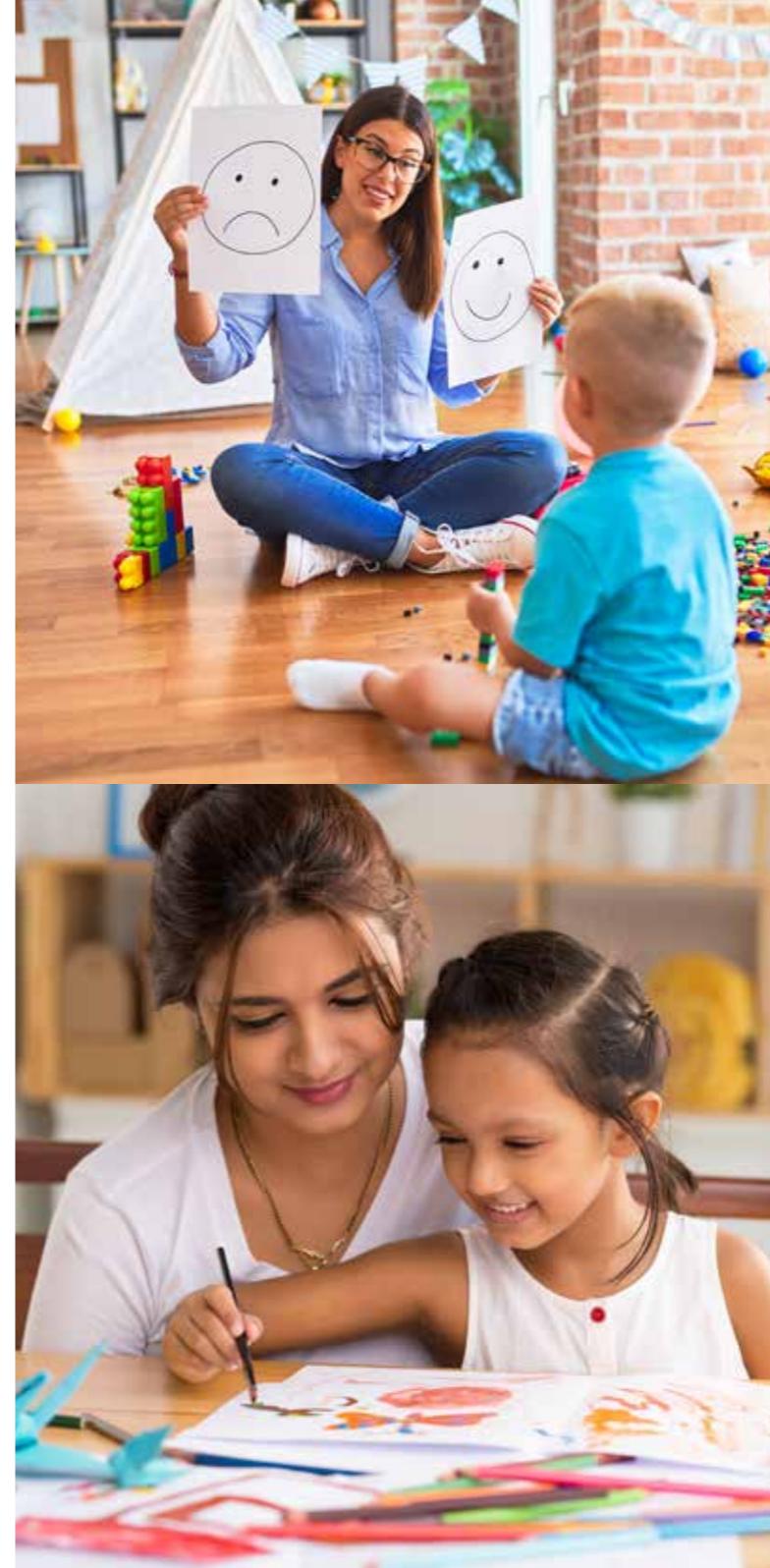
Creating a climate in which children are actively encouraged to ask questions and talk about their feelings and emotions not only positively impacts their stress levels but also stops them relying on their imaginations to address any confusion.

This is particularly important now when the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a range of emotions to the surface and raised children's levels of anxiety and confusion. They may not fully understand, if at all, the reasons why social distancing is necessary and they cannot see friends or extended family while at the same time must adapt to seeing queues outside supermarkets and shops and people wearing face masks.

Adults' overwhelming desire to protect their children can mean information, around confusing situations like these, is withheld which is usually more stressful than telling the truth in age-appropriate ways.

When children learn to manage their emotions it leads to positive attitudes and behaviours which will follow them right through their adult lives. Children who are able to express and manage their feelings are more likely to:

- Be empathetic and supportive of others.
- Have good mental health and well-being.
- Have a positive sense of self.
- Feel more confident, capable and competent.
- Develop resilience and coping mechanisms.
- Display less behaviour difficulties.
- Be more successful in their learning and development.
- Have more positive and stable relationships in adulthood.



## The Childbase Approach

Childbase Partnership is committed to providing an inclusive environment in which all children in our care can thrive and realise their full potential. We recognise that each child is unique with different gifts, talents, abilities and needs and tailor activities and support accordingly.

Supporting children's well-being and mental health is our primary focus and is fully embedded in our written policies and curriculum.

We support 'Personal, Social and Emotional development (PSED) - one of the prime areas within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) - by providing children with opportunities to experience and explore a range of different interactions and emotions within the nursery, in addition to supporting them to freely express how they are feeling.

All nursery Practitioners undergo extensive training and form close partnerships with parents and children to ensure our curriculum is continuously being enhanced to make it relevant and reflective of children's own experiences.

We recognise the impact Coronavirus has had on children and understand that new and challenging behaviours are natural responses to what is happening in the world around them and tailor support to individual wellbeing and mental health needs.

## The Nursery Experience

Our safe, secure environments enable children to freely express their emotions and feelings with an emphasis on supporting them to recognise and label how they feel.

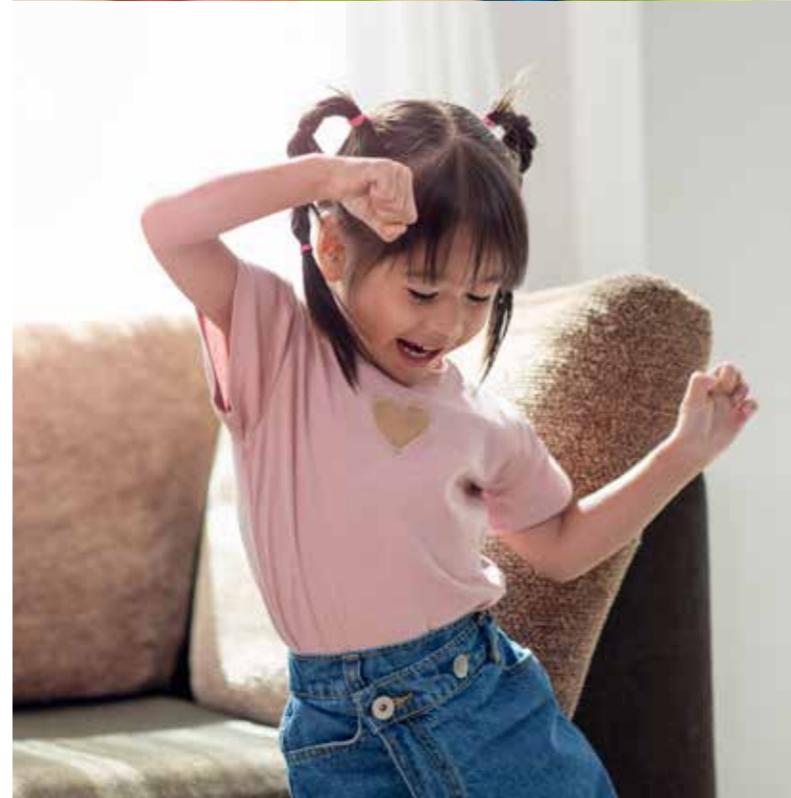
Our highly skilled Practitioners recognise that age-appropriate information is vital to eliminating confusion and fear. As a result, Practitioners develop enabling conversations which explore children's different emotions, and their physical effects, to help children identify and express how they are feeling and react positively to experiences.

Children, who are fully supported by Practitioners when they encounter an emotion, are much more likely to effectively manage their feelings and behaviours and develop coping mechanisms which build up resilience and enable self-regulation.

This is a strong foundation upon which we build for children's happy and successful futures and is underpinned by the following:

- A highly personalised admissions process where information about each family is gathered to ensure support and learning is tailored to the individual child.

- A robust 'Key Person' system which ensures children form a secure attachment with an adult in the absence of their significant family members. The Key Person is also significant in establishing a collaborative partnership with the whole family to fully support the child's wellbeing and development.
- Close partnership with parents which ensures children's well-being is always a primary focus and activities are tailored to individual interests throughout the day in nursery.
- Learning environments where Practitioners create regular opportunities to build on what the children already know by talking about the world around them beyond their immediate learning experiences.
- Acknowledgement of emotions, feelings and well-being. We encourage our children and colleagues to talk about what makes them different and similar to each other and use this as a powerful means to teach others.
- We seize teachable moments during everyday activities enabling discussions which develop into learning opportunities.



- Empowering children to understand the emotions they are feeling through the use of books, puppets and other props and resources.
- Displays of photographs and a range of tools to support children and promote health and well-being.
- A variety of open-ended, non-gender specific resources in nursery that embrace 'loose parts play' – materials which can be moved around, carried, stacked, lined up and manoeuvred in multiple ways - which inspires creativity.
- Observations taken by Practitioners which link to the wellbeing of children. These are shared with parents through ParentZone.
- Enabling children to engage in creative play. Creativity is an essential part of well-being. Children are given the space to be creative through dance, singing, mark-making and messy play.

## Support for parents

Sometimes children do not have the words to express how they feel and may act out these feelings in ways that can be challenging. They may hit or throw toys when angry or frustrated; withdraw if they are feeling sad or anxious or be very hyperactive after a busy or exciting day.

It is important children are able to express their feelings, even if they do not have the words to explain how they feel. Children can be supported in managing their emotions by:

- Taking deep breaths.
- Taking time to relax.
- Being encouraged to say how they feel instead of displaying how they feel through behaviours.
- Finding a different way to do something.
- Solving the problem through words and not actions.
- Talking to someone they trust about what is happening. They may describe how they are feeling as they feel it. This can in turn be supported by the adult talking about the emotion they are experiencing.

Parents' mental health can be impacted in the process of supporting their child's wellbeing and emotions.



It is important that you look after your own mental well-being as this will enable you to effectively support those close to you.

Recognise and acknowledge how you are feeling or if you are overwhelmed. Struggling with something or experiencing your own mental health problems does not make you a bad parent. Everyone experiences difficult times so it is completely normal to be worried, anxious and scared at times. Take time to look after yourself (Advice for parents available in Useful Websites section of this book).

### What should parents look out for?

As a child's primary educator, you know your child better than anyone. You are already developing strategies to support your child in understanding their emotions and expressing their feelings.

Below is a list of the possible indicators that children may need further support with their well-being:

- Difficulty in sleeping or sleep for longer periods than usual. A lack of sleep can impact on a child's mental health and while every child is different, the general rule is that children under three

require 12-14 hours of sleep a day (to include daytime naps) while those children aged three and five years require 11-12 hours' sleep.

- Frequent tantrums or prolonged and persistent periods of intense irritability.
- Changes in behaviour – they are upset regularly or are displaying difficult behaviours.
- Toileting – previously potty-trained children may regress and start wetting themselves during the day (and night).
- Changes to eating habits.
- Frequently talk about fears or worries.
- Complains about frequent stomach aches or headaches with no known medical cause.
- Are not interested in playing with their peer group or have difficulty making friends.
- A child appears withdrawn. They are not enjoying the things they used to like doing.

## How best to support your child with home-based activities

- Encourage your child to express how they feel. Start with the first feelings children learn about - Happy, sad, angry and scared – and use puppets or your child’s favourite cuddly toy to help with this process. The puppet might feel sad, angry, upset, happy etc.
- Use mirrors for experimenting with different facial expressions whilst playing.
- Look at books together, mentioning feelings and expressions. Talk about how the characters might be feeling.
- Avoid asking direct questions that can put pressure on your child. Use puppets/toys to ask questions and incite conversations that involve feelings.
- Create role play opportunities to explore different emotions.
- Ensure you congratulate a child when they share details about how they are feeling.
- Allow your child to ‘release’ excess energy through, for example, exercise. This is a great way to support children to feel calmer.



- When your child becomes upset it is important you support them with their breathing. Take a few deep breaths together (in through the nose and exhale through the mouth). Repeat this until the child feels calmer.
- Get creative. A creative task can be an excellent way to express feelings. Drawing, painting and colouring can all provide a way for your child to express their emotions.
- Tune into your child’s needs and stay calm. They may not use words to express an emotion but their body language may indicate how they are feeling. “I see you look sad, can you tell me why?” is a great way in responding to your observation of a child’s emotional state.
- Talk about your own feelings. Use words they will understand and explain what you mean when you introduce a ‘feeling’ word.
- Develop a regular routine at bedtime. Create a calming environment and limit distractions. The routine could consist of having a bath, reading a bedtime story and/or singing a lullaby.

## Books to support you at home

There are a number of books you can share with your child and many of these can be found within our nurseries. Rudine Sims Bishop, Children's Literature Professor states:

*"Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us. In that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading then becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books".*



## Useful websites

Well-being and mental health support for children

[www.barnardos.org.uk/see-hear-respond-support-hub](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/see-hear-respond-support-hub)

[youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline](http://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline)

[www.actionforchildren.org.uk/support-for-parents/children-s-mental-health/](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/support-for-parents/children-s-mental-health/)

[www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/childrens-mental-health/](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/childrens-mental-health/)

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing)

[learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/child-mental-health](http://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/child-mental-health)

Well-being and mental health support for adults

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/)

[www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/adults/](http://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/adults/)





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