

What to Say to Help Kids Feel Calm When the World Feels Fragile

Posted by [Karen Young](#)

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When their days come with spikes, our children will turn to us. We won't always be able to fix the breakages, but we don't need to. We don't need to do very much at all. As the important adult in their world, you have a profound capacity to soften the sharp edges and bring their world back to safe

enough. Whatever is happening around them, whether it is a natural disaster, a global crisis, or world or family trauma, your words and your presence can heal and strengthen them like nothing else.

Sometimes it's hard to know the right things to say, but even if the words don't land as you expected, you can always put things right again. What's important is creating space for the conversations to happen. Silence can be scary for our children if they are filling in the gaps themselves, or if they believe everything they see and hear, without having us to help make sense of things for them. There is no wrong way to have the conversation. Just start, and let the words come. Here are some things that might help.

How to help kids feel calm.

1. Ask them what they know, and make space for more.

Children will hear all sorts of things, that sound like the truth but which are actually blockbuster versions of something that is nothing like the truth. Even if they have heard the facts, those facts might be frightening if they aren't in context, or if they aren't softened and contained by our calm and our wisdom. Once you've found out what they know, explore how they've made sense of it.

'There's a lot of talk about what's happening. What have

you heard? What do you think it means? Is there anything you'd like to ask me? You can ask me anything at all.'

Some kids might not want to talk, and that's okay. Just let them know that you are there if they need to.

2. Anxiety will focus them on the similarities. Steer them towards the differences.

To get a sense of what it all means for them, their minds will tend to focus them on the similarities between themselves and people who have been affected. We can help them feel safe by steering them to the differences. It might be that people who have been affected live in a different place, have a less responsive health system, or are more vulnerable because of age or health factors. The big difference is that with every day that goes by, we learn more about what's happening, and how to keep people safe, so our response becomes stronger and wiser.

'We have information today that we didn't have yesterday, and every day we are learning more about how to stay safe and get through this. We are going to be okay.'

2. If you can't normalise the event, normalise how they feel about it.

Whether they feel anxious, confused, frustrated, angry, or nothing at all, it's important that their response is

normalised. Research has found that children are more likely to struggle with traumatic events if they believe their response isn't normal. This is because they tend to be more likely to interpret their response as a sign of breakage.

'What's happening is scary. There's no 'right' way to feel and different people will feel different things. It's okay to feel whatever you feel.'

4. Be their brave.

However scary the world feels, the safety of you will always feel bigger. When our own hearts are calm enough and brave enough, our [children will catch this](#). If you are uncertain or anxious yourself, try to tap into that part of you that knows they are safe *enough*. Before reassuring them though, it's important to acknowledge whatever they are feeling. When we open our hearts to what they are feeling, we can hold those feelings with strength, help them make sense, and hand them back in a way that feels more manageable.

'I know this feels scary love, and I know we will be okay. I know that with everything in me.'

3. Feel what you feel, and 'add in'.

This is not about 'not feeling', but about 'adding in' – adding in courage, strength, confidence, gratitude. To anxiety, add

courage. To uncertainty, add confidence that everything will be okay. To sadness about what's wrong, add gratitude for what's right. It's okay for them to see you feeling anxious, uncertain or frustrated, as long as this is done from a position of strength. In fact, it can be healing for them because it opens the way for their own big feelings to breathe.

'Sometimes I feel anxious about what's happening, especially when things are changing so often. I also know that we are going to be okay. I know that for certain. We are going to get through this together and we are going to be okay.'

4. Sit with them where they are, without needing it to be different for a while.

Whatever they are feeling, if you can sit with them in it for long enough for them to feel you right there, in it with them, they will be more likely to follow you into calm. The message we are sending by doing this is, *'I can see the world the way you see it, and feel it the way you feel it, and even with that, I know we will be okay.'* Our reassurance becomes more believable when we start from where they are.

5. Let them know they are held by many.

Let them feel the strength and safety of being part of

something bigger – our common humanity. With this, they can feel held by collected wisdom and the will of all the world's people to protect each other and make things better for everyone.

'There are experts who are really good at protecting us from things like this. They are working around the clock to make sure we are safe, and I trust them.'

6. Put their anxious energy to work.

Anxiety will focus them on what they can't do, which will fuel a sense of helplessness. Counter this by focusing them on what they can do. With COVID-19, this might be washing their hands, covering their coughs, and sleeping and eating well to keep their bodies strong. But there is something they are doing that is important. They are helping to keep people safe.

'By being careful with where we go and what we do, we are doing something really important. We are making sure that we keep older people, or more vulnerable people healthy and strong. That's how we all come together to make things better and you are a big part of that.'

7. Remind them, 'We've been through tough things before, and we always get through.'

You might not have been through anything like what you are

going through now, but whether it's a natural disaster or a global trauma, the world has been through tough things before, and we've got through. We will get through this one too.

8. You see, it's like seatbelts ...

During a crisis, the protective measures that are put in place can feel scary. The more extreme the protections, the more they might feel as though they are evidence that trouble is coming. Explain these as the things we do 'just in case', not confirmation that we are in trouble.

'You see, it's like seatbelts. We don't wear seatbelts because we expect something terrible to happen, but to keep us safe if something should happen. We're really lucky to have things that help keep us safe.'

Don't forget about you.

1. You don't need to look for the answer to their anxiety. You are the answer.

You might look for the right things to do or the right things to say to make things better for them, but the truth of it all is the answer has always been you. The world will always feel calmer and gentler in the space that exists because of you – because of your presence, your calm, your

courage, your words, your wisdom. Everything you need to help them feel safe enough and brave enough is in you.

2. When out there feels 'big', come home to what you know to be certain.

When times feel uncertain or your own anxiety feels big, come home to the things that make sense. Come home to each other, to stillness, to play, to rest, and conversation. Come home to listening more openly and caring more deeply, to nature, and warm baths, and being more deliberate, to fighting for what we can control, and the soft surrender to what we can't. Come home to stories, and music, and to the safety of your tribe. Come home to that part of you that is timeless, and strong, and still, and wise, and which knows that, like everything that has ever felt bigger than you for a while, you will get through this.

And finally ...

This is a time for radical tenderness – for each other and for ourselves. You were built for this. Your best will be good enough, and on the days that you are far from your best, that will be good enough too. When we are faced with unfamiliar times, the things we 'should' be doing have to fall behind what we 'need' to be doing. And what we need to do is this. We need to hold them close, and leave space for playing, and talking, and listening and sleeping. We need to

read with them, feel with them and laugh with them. And that will be enough, even on the messiest of days, or the ones that greet you when you are cranky, or exhausted, or 'over it'. Because you're human – one of the good ones – and this is what being human looks like sometimes. It looks like messy houses, and breakfast food at dinner time, and too much screen time, and yelling or crying over things that won't matter at all tomorrow.

These times are unfamiliar and all we can do is whatever we can to get through. But if through this you love them big – they'll get through this with their hearts, minds and spirits intact. And this won't be because you did what you 'should' have done, or because you were perfect, or followed the rules or the schedules. It will be because you did enough of what they needed, enough of the time, and you did it for them.

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