DIVERSE MINDS
LEARNING & LEISURE CIC

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & CARERS

Supporting big feelings

Helping your child through distress while looking after yourself too

When an ordinary moment becomes difficult

You may have tried to help, chosen your words carefully and still found yourself in another upsetting situation. This guide offers ways to understand what is happening, keep people safe and work out what support is needed.

INSIDE

Before, during and after difficult moments | Asking for help
A plan to make together | Research and further reading

UNDERSTANDING

Start with what your child is feeling

Big feelings can look different

A child may cry, shout, argue or move away. Another may go quiet, freeze or struggle to explain what is wrong. What you see does not always tell you how distressed they feel. Strong feelings can happen with or without ADHD or autism. [2,4,6]

The last thing may not be the whole reason

A changed plan or lost item may be the moment things spill over. Consider what came before: tiredness, pain, hunger, sensory discomfort, friendship difficulties or a task that felt too hard. Ask rather than deciding what the child must be feeling. [1,2,4]

Parents need to feel understood as well

Families contacting Action for Children's Parent Talk service have described feeling exhausted, blamed or unable to get support. These were accounts from families seeking help with serious difficulties, not a picture of every family. They show why advice needs to take the adult's experience seriously too. [3]

You can take a feeling seriously while keeping people safe. The aim is to understand what is difficult and help your child find safer ways through it, with support for you both.

BEFORE THINGS BUILD

Make a plan at a quieter time

Choose one or two ideas together. A child does not have to name a feeling or notice an early warning sign before they deserve help.

Notice an early change

Some children notice a tight jaw, faster heartbeat or a churning stomach. Others notice that talking or the next task feels harder. Ask what they recognise, without insisting on a particular answer. [1]

Choose a way to pause

Agree a word, gesture, picture or message that means help or a break. Decide what the adult will do when it is used. Practise only when the child is comfortable. [4,5]

Explore what feels helpful

Drawing, music, safe movement or a quieter space may help. Gentle breathing is an option, not a demand. Stop an activity if it adds pressure or discomfort. [1,2,4]

Change what is difficult

A clearer instruction, less noise, more time or help beginning a task may matter more than another calming exercise. Look at the environment as well as what the child can do. [2,6]

Make the plan fit their age

A teenager may prefer a text, privacy or a written plan. A younger child may want pictures or an adult alongside them. You can adapt the same idea without making it feel babyish.

IN THE MOMENT

When talking is not helping

1 Keep people safe

Move siblings away from danger and remove hazards if safe to do so. Give the child space. Avoid trying to hold them still or blocking a doorway. Get urgent help if there is a risk you cannot manage. [5,6,8]

2 Reduce the conversation

Use a steady voice and a short phrase such as I am here or We can talk later. Repeated questions, reasoning or demands for an explanation may add to the pressure. [2,4,6]

3 Offer support without crowding

Some children want an adult nearby; others need more personal space. Offer touch only if welcome. A calmer place should be somewhere they can feel supported, not a punishment. [2,4,6]

4 Remember your own limits

If you are close to losing control, ask a safe adult to take over where possible. Step back only when the child can remain safely supervised. Needing help in that moment is a reason to seek support, not to feel ashamed. [3,5]

You do not have to solve the whole problem now

The immediate task is safety and reducing pressure. A conversation about what happened can wait until everyone is ready. [2,4]

AFTERWARDS

Reconnect before working it out

Allow recovery time

You may both feel tired or upset. Offer rest and ordinary care before a detailed conversation. There is no fixed time by which a child should be ready to explain. [4,6]

Hear their account

When they are ready, ask what felt difficult and what might help next time. They may prefer drawing, a message or talking while doing something together. Not knowing why is an acceptable starting point. [2,4]

Words you can adapt

For your child: That was hard. I want to understand what you needed. We can think about it together.

For your own repair: I shouted earlier. That was not a helpful way to respond. I am sorry. I will ask for a pause next time.

Make the next step small

If someone was hurt or something was damaged, support a repair when the child is ready. That could mean checking on a sibling or helping put something right. Explore what needs to change next time. [2,4]

Notice what helped, even if the afternoon was still difficult. A plan may need changing several times; you do not need to turn every incident into a lesson.

GETTING SUPPORT

Trust your concern and keep asking

You do not have to wait for a crisis

Seek advice when distress is frequent, worsening, affecting everyday life or making anyone feel unsafe. A sudden change or possible pain also needs attention. Contact a GP, school or an existing care team and explain the impact on your child and family. [1,4]

If your concerns are dismissed

Keep a few examples and your child's own account where they want to contribute. Ask what support can start now, why a request was declined and what the next step is. A different picture at school does not erase what you are seeing at home. [3,7]

Ask someone to help you with the process

Enquire can explain options when concerns about support at a Scottish school remain unresolved. A friend, family member or advocate can help with a letter or meeting. Having to pause does not mean giving up on your child. [7]

Urgent support in Scotland

If anyone is in immediate danger, phone 999. For urgent mental health concerns, contact the usual team or GP when available. If you cannot access urgent help through them, phone NHS 24 on 111 and choose the mental health option. [8]

Trusting your gut means taking a concern seriously while staying open to what might explain it. You deserve help with finding an answer.

COMPLETE TOGETHER

My plan for difficult moments

Write, draw or ask someone to record your words. Leave any question blank. This plan should make support easier, not add another demand.

Name or initials: _____ Date: _____

When things start to feel too much

Anything I notice, or anything an adult might notice. It is okay if I am not sure.

How I can ask for help

My word, gesture, picture or message, and the person who will respond.

What I want adults to do or avoid

Space, company, fewer words, a different task or something else.

Afterwards, and our next step

How we can reconnect, one change to try and when we will review it.

For the adult: who can support me, and what help will I ask for?

This is an original planning sheet, not an assessment or a substitute for an individual safety plan. Agree what may be shared and with whom. Seek professional help if safety is a concern.

FURTHER READING

Sources and support

Information and links checked 29 October 2026. Numbers refer to the sources below. Suggested wording and the worksheet are original examples to adapt.

1. NHS: helping your child with anger

Early signs, shared strategies and seeking further help.

Read the NHS guide

2. Action for Children: difficult emotions

Parent Talk practice guidance on feelings, communication and safer responses.

Supporting difficult feelings

3. Action for Children: Parent Talk, 2025

Family accounts from a service report on serious behaviour concerns; not all-family estimates.

Read the family experiences report

4. YoungMinds: anger

Parent guidance, young people's views, repair and getting help.

Read the YoungMinds guide

5. Action for Children: staying calm

Practical support for adults during disagreement and distress.

Support for parents' own feelings

6. Just One Norfolk NHS

Distressed behaviour, safety and recovery.

Read the NHS advice

7. Enquire: solving problems with school

Scottish advice on written requests, follow-up and advocacy.

Getting heard at school

8. NHS inform: urgent mental health help

Routes to urgent help for children and adults in Scotland.

Find urgent support