

A short guide to

# Talking with children & young people



Lifeworlds  
Learning

## What is this?

This short guide shares some ideas about how to effectively relate to children and young people when addressing issues that might be a source of concern, confusion, stress, or even anxiety. Recent reports claim that children and young people are more likely to experience feelings such as these as they engage with, and grow up in, an increasingly complex and uncertain world. These feelings may not only be felt by children and young people. When faced with such feelings, adults can also be affected, both as themselves and as those with responsibilities for the well-being and learning of children and young people in their care.



The animation *Learning to Thrive*, for which this guide has been produced, raises issues that could be a cause of concern for you and the young people in your care. The ideas we share here are intended to support engagement with the animation and the wider themes it raises, including the ways in which it relates to the experiences, hopes and concerns of children and young people. You do not need to be a teacher or educationalist to use these ideas, but if you are then you might also use them to reflect on your current practice.

## Why focus on talk?

As adults we relate with children and young people through talk all the time. When, how, and why we talk with children may not be something we take time to think about. When it comes to issues that may cause them to feel confused or concerned, even angry or anxious, the ways in which we relate to children and young people can make a significant difference.

The choices we make about how we talk with children and young people can help them to normalise their feelings and find ways to express their thoughts and ideas, but our choices could equally alienate them and amplify any distress or upset that they may be experiencing. These choices extend beyond words. The tone and body language that we use when talking to children and young people can be even more important than the words we choose to use.

The ideas we share here are not prescriptive, but rather prompts for reflection. They are based on practice-led experience and evidence by those working, thinking, and researching in this area. We present them as a series of accessible ideas for you to engage with in a way that works for you and the children and young people you relate to.

Each idea is presented on the following page as a **talk prompt** with a brief explanation of what it means in terms of talking with children and young people. The pages that follow this go into a more detailed discussion of each of the prompts should you wish to engage with the ideas more deeply.

# Talk prompts

## Age relevance

Do not avoid talking with children because they are too young or need protecting. Find age-appropriate ways to relate to children through dialogue.

## Active listening

Resist the temptation to answer or reassure and instead support a deeper dialogue through active listening with children and young people.

## What is known?

Start with what children and young people know (or think they know) and reflect on your own knowledge and understanding. Embrace feelings as a form of knowing.

## Keep learning

Model learning as a way to support dialogue and learn together to provide solidarity and shared opportunities for mutual enrichment.

## Make time

Be honest about time commitments and if you don't have time in the moment then agree dedicated time for talking and remove distractions.

## Authentic honesty

Don't hide the truth from children and young people, but try to balance this with positive outcomes even where there are not obvious answers or solutions.

## Find connections

Connect issues to the localities and lives of children and young people to help them ground their concerns and emotions and to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed.

## Hope and action

The act of hoping alone is sometimes not sufficient. To thrive and improve well-being try to connect hope with actions that move positively towards an intended difference or change.

# Notes on the 'talk prompts'

Below are notes and explanations for each of the talk prompts. They share ideas in a little more detail including examples where relevant.

## Age relevance

As soon as they develop language capability, children (even very young ones) can start connecting to issues that concern them in their wider world. It can be tempting to protect younger children from issues that we might perceive to be emotional or sensitive, but the earlier they are supported to safely talk about things that concern them, the more emotionally resilient children and young people are likely to become. As children develop their cognitive and emotional abilities, they will be able to increase the scale and depth of how they engage with issues. There are no hard and fast rules for this, but practice suggests that children begin with noticing patterns in the early years before moving on by around 7 years of age to identify connections and processes of cause and effect. By around 10 years of age their engagement is likely to extend into responsibilities and agency (actions) in relation to an issue. As adults we can try to pitch our dialogue with children and young people appropriately, but also follow the leads that children and young people give us if they expand the depth or scale.

## Active listening

As adults we can become accustomed to feeling we need to answer questions or reassuringly address concerns that children and young people raise. Although this is well intentioned it risks closing down listening and may reduce the chances of children communicating further. A more effective approach can be to open the listening space through generative and invitational questions or prompts such as *"Can you tell me more about that?"* or *"I sense that you have some feelings about this. Are you able to share those?"* This more active listening can provide the gentle encouragement children and young people may need to dig deeper into their thoughts and feelings as well as help us as adults to better understand where they are coming from. In turn this can help us consider how to best respond.

Active listening empowers children and young people to be the narrators of their thoughts and enables the relationship with adults to be one of mutual learning and understanding. Clinical psychologist, Daniel Masler who co-founded the organisation 'Talk Climate' suggests that:

***"Talk leads to understandings and understandings lead to action."***

Another aspect of active listening is what we sense and see in children and young people (and also in ourselves). Embodied actions (mood, body language, tone, energy levels etc.) are all forms of communication that can also be listened to. They can sometimes tell us important things such as when it might be time to take a break. Children and young people often like to engage, disengage, and re-engage as part of their processing so prompts such as *"would you like to stop talking about this for a while?"* can be useful to support this whilst making clear that you are open to picking up the conversation when they want to. Here are some key practice-based tips to support active listening:

**Ideal conditions** - if you can, consider the best environment and time of day to talk.

**Be present** - remove distractions and try to shut down your internal dialogue.

**Body language** - make eye contact and think about open, relaxed and positive body language.

**Embrace silence** - even 5 seconds can seem an age, but learn to *'suffer the silence'*.

**Open curiosity** - ask open questions that broaden dialogue and inquiry. Avoid judgment.

**Reflect and review** - help to reflect on key points and review your talk (e.g. *"So I heard you say..."* or *"I understand that you feel..."*).

## What is known?

When talking with children and young people about issues it is important to start by finding out what they already know (or think they know\*). This is especially true when they have raised the issue. Their reaction/s and need to talk about it must have come from somewhere. Active listening (see above) can be a great way to find out what children and young people already know. Even if what they are telling you is not accurate or true, it is important to value their understanding and any feelings that might be associated with it. Shutting down their understanding can be received as rejection or belittling and can quickly close down spaces for further dialogue.

As adults there may be issues that children and young people raise where we are unsure of our own knowledge on this matter. When you can, it is a good idea to check your own understanding about an issue, including where your understanding has come from, before talking with children and young people about it. Open language that models that there are different perspectives on issues can also be very helpful with phrases such as *“my understanding about ... is that ...”* or *“that’s interesting because it is different to how I understand ...”*.

Not knowing is also good to model and is better than pretending to know about a situation so that you can offer a response. Saying *“I don’t know”* or *“I’m not sure”* are valid responses because trust is an essential part of talk with children and young people. If they sense you are lying to them or saying something to appease them that they later find out is not true then trust can be damaged and close down future dialogue.

Another aspect of knowing is our feelings. It can be easy to think of knowing in only cognitive terms - what we are taught and learn, but we can also know things through our emotions and in embodied feelings. We can know that something does not feel right for example, but may not be able to pin down exactly what that is in a concrete, cognitive way. When talking with children and young people, and when reflecting on our own knowing, it can be beneficial to be mindful of these more affective (emotional) ways of knowing.

\*Many of the issues that might raise concerns for young people are also at risk of misrepresentation, stereotyping, or even complete fabrication. Unfortunately, this has become even more likely in our social media era with its pitfalls of fake news and polarising viewpoints.

## Keep learning

Realising that you lack knowledge about an issue that concerns children and young people in your care can be a great opportunity for learning, as can gaps, one-sided perspectives, or hearsay that have become part of their understanding. You can of course make the effort to learn about things for yourself, but learning together with children and young people can be a great way to open up dialogue, build trust, and model important life skills such as critical thinking and media literacy.

Learning together can be especially effective if children and young people are exhibiting emotional responses to a particular issue as it clearly signals that their feelings and concerns are being taken seriously. It can provide them with a sense of solidarity that can, reduce negative or limiting emotions that they are experiencing.



## Make time

It can be challenging in the busyness of life to always make time to discuss issues that children and young people raise. This may be especially true in the moment as there is no certainty as to when they might bring concerns to light. If you are not able to give them the time they need to talk in the moment then it is better to be honest about this and to agree that you will revisit the issue at a more appropriate time. You could use phrases such as *"I can tell this is important to you but I'm struggling to give you the attention I'd like to right now. I'd like to come back to it later with you"* or *"I want to talk about this and I can see you do to. Can you write down your thoughts so that you don't forget them and we can pick it up when we both have more time ..."*

When you do make time try to ensure it is uninterrupted and try to remove distractions (i.e. phones and screens). There is evidence to suggest that movement can aid the process of thinking and so you might like to suggest going for a walking talk. Walking in nature is especially thought to lower stress levels and to create the conditions for more creative and positive thinking. If walking does not work for you or the children or young people in your care, then try and agree a place that you both feel at ease so that you can concentrate on the conversation.

For some issues and in some situations, children and young people (as well as adults) might benefit from multiple conversations over time. This can give time for ideas to sink in and for personal reflection. It can sometimes help to 'step back' from the moment to see it in different ways.

## Authentic honesty

The issues that children and young people are concerned about can raise difficult topics or conversations that might make us uneasy. As adults it can be easy to slip into a natural protective role and try to shield them from the truth. This can backfire however as Caroline Hickman, researcher in the Dept of Social and Policy Sciences (University of Bath) discovered when interviewing young people about climate change conversations with adults:

***"...adults have got to tell children the truth about the climate crisis, because if you don't tell me the truth, then that means you are lying to me, and if you lie to me I won't be able to trust you, and if I can't trust you then I can't talk with you about things that worry me."***

(12 year old girl in interview with Caroline Hickman)

In telling truth to children and young people it is important to be mindful of their age and ability to handle not just the facts about a situation, but also the emotions that they may have. Sarah Lazarovic, a visual journalist and environmental activist, proposes one way to manage this balance is to *'answer straightforwardly when they ask ... tough questions, but try to highlight the pathways to a positive outcome, which are real.'* The positive outcomes do not always have to be answers or solutions. Finding out that others are also concerned can help children and young people to feel less isolated. Learning that others are acting to try and improve or change things can reduce feelings of helplessness. Activist and Buddhist philosopher Joanna Macy promotes the active honouring of the pain we might feel in the world as part of an 'Active Hope' approach. Through honouring feelings we give them the importance they deserve (they are real feelings after all), but having done that we can then move on to find realistic and meaningful ways to respond.

## Find connections

Research and practice with children and young people suggests that identifying connections between issues and everyday lives can help to meaningfully ground their concerns and feelings. When issues of concern are global in scale (ie climate change, biodiversity loss, migration,

inequality) it can be easy to become 'overwhelmed' by their scale. This can lead to feelings of despair, helplessness or apathy that are not helpful for our well-being or thriving. A growing number of reports suggest that children and young people are just as vulnerable to these feelings, and sometimes from a very young age.

Supporting children to find meaningful local connections with the wider issues can help them to see them at a more manageable and accessible scale. Finding these connections through talk and learning can open new and purposeful forms of action in relation to an issue. If your child is concerned about people not having enough food to eat for example, then finding out about local programmes such as food banks that support people could help them to move from feeling overwhelmed to feeling that something can be done to change and improve things.

## Hope and action

Talking with children and young people about issues can amplify any concern or feelings that they are experiencing, but talk can also reframe and redirect their attention in a more positive direction. In doing so, it is important not to dismiss concerns, feelings or the seriousness of the issues that may lie behind these. Reframing and redirecting is more about providing an alternative perspective but in a way that does not devalue felt experiences. Caroline Hickman for example, talks about how reframing eco-anxiety as eco-empathy or eco-compassion can shift mindsets from a deficit mode (seeing all the negatives) to an appreciative mode (seeing the positives), without dishonouring the original feelings of concern about the state of the environment. If children (and adults) are able to relate their feelings to those of empathy and compassion rather than anxiety and fear, then this more 'generative' mindset can help them to better identify coping strategies and actions.

Joanna Macy promotes a process of 'Active Hope' in which you honour the pain you are feeling in the world (ie about the issue), but then try to see the world through new eyes by trying to identify something that inspires you. From that point Macy encourages you to 'go forth' by identifying something you'd like to do to make a difference, and once identified to decide on a step that you can take to move towards that difference in the next seven days. Macy sees active hope as a choice, but argues that the active part is important and that hope alone is not always successful in reducing our concern or distress. Active hope is not about ignoring concerns or feelings, but about finding ways to live with the discomfort and uncertainty that they may create by taking what local steps you are able to do and that are meaningful for you.

## ...and finally

Talk with children and young people is the same as talk with any human. Sometimes we can judge it just right and have a productive and meaningful exchange, but as we all know, this is not always the case! We are not going to get it right every time and we need to be kind to ourselves if we react too quickly to what children and young people are saying to us or inadvertently shut them down. Listening and communicating are skills that require practice. The more consciously we practice the skills, the more experienced and comfortable we become.