

## Part 1: Trauma Responsive Parenting

June 2022

This Quick Bytes is contributed by: Monica M. Fitzgerald (Ph.D.), Kimberly Shipman (Ph.D.), Clinical Psychologists & Developers of Let's Connect®



**LET'S  
CONNECT®**

Children and youth who have experienced stress and traumatic events that exceed their capacity to cope and thrive need the adults in their lives to respond with understanding, warmth, compassion, and support. Traumatic experiences often undermine a child's or youth's sense of safety, stability, and attachment. However, each child or youth responds differently to trauma and needs the adults around them to be attuned and responsive to their *unique* social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual needs and strengths. **A relationship with a supportive safe adult is one of the top resilience factors for children and youth.** Research shows that **just one** supportive adult in a child's life can make an immediate and long-lasting positive impact on children and youth health and resilience, even in the face of adversity, trauma, war, and disaster. Parents and caregivers can learn and practice specific skills and strategies that will build and strengthen their relationship with their child and their child's ability to understand, accept, and regulate emotions.



**Open, supportive communication between adults, and children and youth is the cornerstone of a safe supportive relationship.** It increases the likelihood children and youth will seek help from adults in times of need and increases their safety. Parents benefit from tools to talk with children and youth about everyday life experiences (e.g., friends, school, hobbies), especially the challenges and difficult topics that arise in the family (e.g., divorce, incarceration, separation, loss, sudden family moves or changes) or community (e.g., violence, racial/religious tensions, household fires). These are the topics that parents often tiptoe around, avoid, and dismiss because they cause the parents themselves discomfort. They have uncertainty of how and what to say with children and youth and how to connect.



When talking about the tough stuff, don't avoid it, don't minimise it, don't silver-line it. The following are skills and strategies that come from a trauma-responsive parenting program called Let's Connect®, that can be helpful for parents when talking with their children:

Before talking about a difficult topic, first **tune into you, your feelings** and needs so you can be most effective, grounded, open and focused on your child's experience.

### CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF, FIRST

Before talking with a youth, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during the conversation. Just as youth have feelings about these experiences, so do adults. You might feel scared, worried, overwhelmed, angry, helpless, sad, and/or concerned. You might feel distracted, scattered, confused, or even numb. These feelings, in both adults and youth, are completely normal following a traumatic experience.



A helpful first step may be to simply acknowledge the feelings you are having.

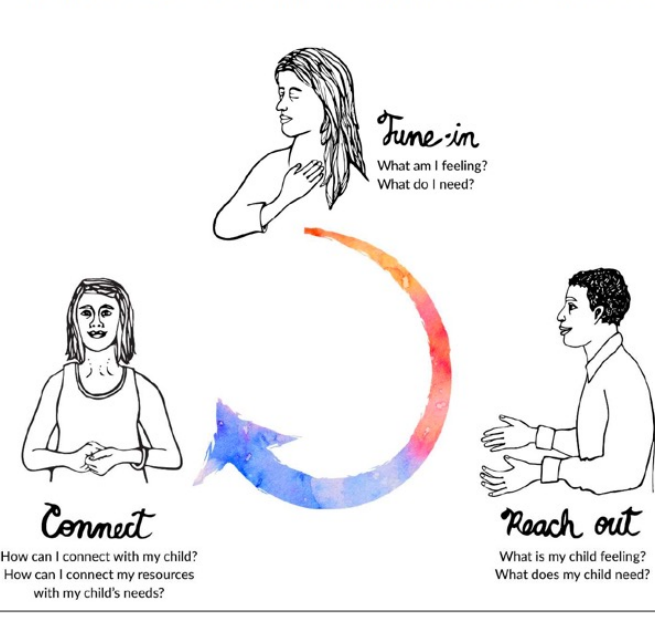
The simple act of labeling emotions promotes a sense of calm. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. You can also take a few deep breaths, a short walk, talk to a friend, or do anything that helps you feel calm or more grounded. This will help prepare you to talk with youth in a way that communicates safety, protection, and openness to talking about their feelings and experience. Checking in with yourself first will also help you to be ready to address any questions youth might have. It's okay not to have all the answers.



Your warm, open presence is the most important thing.

One great strategy to help you be ready to talk with your child about the tough stuff is what we call in **Let's Connect® Hand-to-Heart 3 steps**. This will help you tune into yourself, identify your own feelings and needs, and then be ready to reach out to your child to understand their feelings, perspectives, needs and experience. Each of the *Hand-to-Heart 3 steps* is paired with a physical gesture and breath. Here is how to try it:

#### HAND-TO-HEART THREE-STEP MODEL



1. **Tune In** (*placing hand to heart*) and silently ask "What am I feeling?", "What do I need?" Take a few breaths here and tune in. This is a gesture of self-compassion and nurturance.

2. **Reach Out** (*holding hands out with palms up*) and silently ask self, "How is my child feeling?" "What is their experience and perspective?" "What are their needs?"

3. **Connect** (*placing hands together*) and silently ask self, "How does it feel when we are in connection?" "How can I meet my own needs and my child's needs?", "How can I connect and build our relationship?"

Next, apply these other skills and strategies from the Let's Connect® programme described below, when talking to your child.

### CLARIFY YOUR GOAL



As you approach the conversation, it can be helpful to start with a goal in mind. An overall goal is to create a safe space for youth to share their feelings, questions, reactions, and experience about the scary/sad thing and to feel your support. You might ask yourself, "How might I help my child feel safe? Is there some important information for them to know? Is there any misinformation to correct? What might my child already know or think about the situation?"



Keep coming back to messages of safety, support, and willingness to keep talking.

### PROVIDE INFORMATION



Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how adults and/or community systems may have stepped forward to help and create safety. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of the youth. Ask open-ended questions about what they may have already heard and correct any misinformation. Keep this part of the discussion brief, simple, and clear. Multiple short conversations can often be more powerful than a single long conversation.



Remember to share child-size information and keep checking in.

### REFLECT



Reflection involves simply repeating back the youth's words verbatim or summarizing what the youth said. Reflection lets youth know you are listening and tracking what they are sharing. When you reflect, it is important to use their own words as much as possible.



Reflection communicates that you are listening and what they are saying is important.

### GO SLOW, PAUSE, AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE



Young people need a little time to respond after adults ask them questions. This is valuable time for processing emotions and coordinating thinking, especially as it relates to complex emotional situations. Make sure your body language conveys patience, openness and care.



When you pause and allow time, you communicate "I have time for you," and "you are important".

### LABEL EMOTIONS



Just as it is helpful for us as adults to label emotions, it is also helpful for youth to label how they are feeling. Sometimes they need support to do this. You can help youth to label emotions by reflecting back any feeling words they say, naming feelings you notice, and taking a guess at what they are feeling. When you do this, check in with the young person to see if you got it right.



Labeling emotions supports emotion awareness and regulation.

### VALIDATE AND NORMALIZE



Step into their shoes and let the youth know that you understand what they are feeling and it makes sense to feel or think that way. You might say, "that makes sense," "I get it," "I understand," "other people feel that way too," and "you are not alone".



Validating and normalizing helps youth feel understood and trust their own perspectives and feelings.

### ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS



Ask helpful questions to learn more about the young person's thoughts, feelings, perspective, and needs. The goal is to gain an understanding of the young person's experience and NOT one of "fact finding," or learning about specific details of a situation. The questions we ask should be open-ended and focused on their experience, emotion and perspective. ("What was that like for you?", "How are you feeling?," "What are you thinking/wondering about?," "Do you have any questions or worries?").



Helpful questions encourage open sharing and help you learn more about a youth's feelings and needs.

These tips are helpful for all interactions we have with children and youth but particularly important when we are talking about the tough stuff – topics that are often not addressed due to parents' discomfort, not knowing what to say, or being afraid that bringing them up will be hard for the child. What we know is that children are thinking about these things whether we bring them up or not. When we are open to talking about difficult things, children feel supported and comfortable sharing other challenges as they come up throughout their life. Practice the skills above around less difficult topics to increase your comfort and readiness to talk about challenging children and youth, and family topics.

Remember that the most important thing you can do is share your supportive presence with your child. If you get stuck and are not sure what to say, just reflect their experience, thank them for sharing, and let them know how much you love them. If a conversation doesn't go well, that is ok. You can always back to them and revisit the conversation when you are both ready. When adults circle back to reconnect, take responsibility, and apologise for their missteps (e.g., minimisation, criticism, jumping to problem solving), they model the healthy relationship skill of safe and restorative conflict resolution/repair. We hope it is now clear how emotion-focused, supportive communication skills are critical to trauma-responsive parenting.

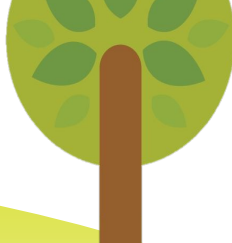
For more information about Trauma-Responsive parenting and Let's Connect® visit our websites: [Let'sConnect.org](https://www.letsconnect.org) [Center for Resilience + Well-Being](https://www.centerforresilience.org) [Let's Connect-CRW](https://www.letsconnect-crw.org)



Look out for our next article on how parents can create supportive environments for children.



**Trauma Network  
for Children**



The Trauma Network for Children (TNC) programme is a joint collaboration between KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) and Temasek Foundation. It aims to enhance the capability of the Singapore community in providing psychosocial support to children, youth and their families after crises or traumatic events.