

My Child's Connections

Protecting relationships, support and belonging



Children develop a sense of who they are through relationships and shared experiences. Parents and caregivers, siblings, grandparents, extended family, friends, teachers and community members may offer affection, practical help, familiar routines, cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Different connections can meet different needs as children grow.

As families and circumstances change, relationships may become closer, more distant or more complicated. A child can enjoy someone's company and still feel hurt or disappointed by them; they may miss someone they rarely see or need distance from a relationship that has felt unsafe. Listen to what the child has experienced before interpreting what a change in contact or affection means.

How other people's feelings can affect a child

From early childhood, children notice how familiar adults respond to people and events. Someone may influence a child to feel the same way they do, or to feel a certain way about another person, through comments, repeated questions, expressions of approval or disappointment, or the way experiences are discussed afterwards. Influence does not explain every change in a child's view: their own experiences and safety needs must also be understood.

Children can have their own experiences and feelings while being affected by others' interpretations. Adults can support independent thinking by welcoming questions, differences of opinion and mixed feelings without requiring the child to agree.

Using the resource

- Pages 2–4 and 7 support parents or caregivers to reflect on relationships, responses and practical support, preferably with a counsellor where needed.
- Pages 5–6 are optional activities for a young person to complete separately with a counsellor or another suitable, trusted professional. Drawing, writing, symbols and declining are all acceptable.
- Do not compare parent and young-person responses as a test of truth. Explain privacy and its safety limits beforehand; do not coach answers, seek disclosures or share completed activities without an appropriate basis.

Child's name (optional): _____ Date (optional): _____

The people in my child's world

Adult worksheet | Understanding who contributes to belonging

Think about people who have contributed to your child's life over time, including people they enjoy seeing, ask about or have not seen recently. Consider what each relationship has offered, how your child may experience it now and whether practical or safety arrangements affect contact. Avoid assuming that every past connection should continue unchanged.

Person or relationship	What has this connection offered my child?	How is it experienced or maintained now?
	Care, affection, shared activities, stories, culture, guidance...	

Looking beyond the immediate family

A child's sense of belonging may also be shaped by siblings and cousins, school friendships, neighbours, coaches, mentors, pets, community groups, country, language and cultural traditions. Consider what your child has gained from these connections and whether they have opportunities to continue them.

What has remained important?	What has changed, if anything?
Friendships and shared activities	
Family, cultural or community connections	
Trusted adults and familiar places	

Some relationships may need clear boundaries or different arrangements for safety. A meaningful connection does not automatically mean that contact is appropriate.

Understanding changing relationships

Adult guidance | Feelings, experiences and influence

Children form views through direct experiences, memory, conversation and the responses of people around them. They may adopt someone's interpretation, disagree, or feel unsure. Repeated interactions can teach a child which topics seem welcome, and which invite difficult reactions. A change in their words or behaviour cannot, by itself, tell us why their feelings have changed.

Everyday situations children may encounter

A situation	What a child might experience
Someone frequently expresses a strong view about another person.	The child may adopt the view, disagree privately or hesitate to offer a different perspective.
A child sees an adult become upset when a particular person is mentioned.	The child may hesitate to talk about memories or enjoyable experiences to avoid upsetting them.
An adult repeatedly asks for details after the child spends time elsewhere.	The child may begin selecting what to share or treating an ordinary visit as something to explain.
A child hears different explanations of the same event.	They may be confused, curious, certain, distressed or unsure whom to ask.
A child has less contact with familiar people or activities.	They may experience relief, sadness, frustration, longing or several feelings together.

Making room for mixed feelings

Affection, anger, relief, sadness and disappointment can coexist. Children may also change their views as they learn more. Some keep feelings private to avoid an argument, protect an adult from distress or avoid being misunderstood. Give children permission to describe experiences in their own words, including feelings you do not share.

Adult reflection: Can my child disagree with me, enjoy time with someone I find difficult or speak about an upsetting event without feeling responsible for my reaction? Take direct experiences, disclosures and safeguarding concerns seriously.

Supporting my child's emotional needs

Adult guidance | Listening, reassurance and practical help

Children benefit when adults listen with curiosity, respond to mixed feelings and keep adult responsibilities with adults. A child should not have to provide information about another household, manage someone else's distress or decide how adults should resolve a disagreement. Questions can invite conversation without demanding an explanation.

Helpful ways to respond

When a child says...	An adult might respond...
"I had a good time, but I don't want to talk about it."	"That's okay. You can tell me as much or as little as you want."
"I miss them, but I'm angry too."	"You can miss someone and feel angry with them. Both feelings can be real."
"Someone said I should feel differently."	"People sometimes feel differently about the same thing. What has it been like for you?"
"I don't know what to believe."	"You don't have to work everything out today. We can find someone safe to help with your questions."

Practical support adults can provide

- Ask open questions, allow pauses and accept "I don't know" without pressing for details.
- Acknowledge feelings and allow different views without rewarding agreement or disputing the child's experience.
- Keep adult disagreements, decisions, messages and arrangements with adults, not the child.
- Support safe friendships, sibling relationships, familiar routines, interests, cultural connections and trusted adults.
- Respect boundaries, respond to safety concerns and seek qualified help when needs exceed your role.

Children learn from what adults repeatedly do, not only what they say. Reassurance is strengthened when curiosity, respectful boundaries and practical support are consistent with the words used.

My connections at home

Child worksheet | People, feelings and everyday support

Different people and places can mean different things to you. You can draw, write, use symbols or leave spaces empty. You can also change your mind about what you want to share. The person working with you can explain what stays private and when they might need to get help to keep someone safe.

People I enjoy spending time with	Someone I can talk to when I need help

People who help me feel cared for	People I think about or miss

Things I like doing with other people	What helps me feel comfortable asking questions?

For the counsellor: introduce prompts neutrally, do not offer names or interpretations, and never treat inclusion or omission as evidence. Follow the young person's pace and explore safety concerns through appropriate professional processes.

My connections at school and beyond

Child worksheet | Friends, activities and trusted people

Think about school, friendships, hobbies, culture and places you spend time. You may draw, write or skip any prompt. Different people and places may bring up more than one feeling, and you do not have to decide what a relationship should look like today.

People I like spending time with	An adult I could ask for help

Activities and places I enjoy	People who help me take part

Someone I have questions about (optional)	What I would like adults to understand

People I can contact if I need help

Name or service	How I can safely contact them

Kids Helpline (Australia): 1800 55 1800 | Immediate danger: 000

Headspace (Australia): 1800 650 890

Beyond Blue (Australia): 1300 22 4636

13YARN (Australia): 13 92 76

EMMM resources for young people: emmm.org.au/young-people

Nurturing connections over time

Adult reflection | Making practical support possible

Children's support needs and relationships change with age and circumstances. The aim is not to keep every relationship unchanged, but to understand what each connection means to the child, protect safe sources of belonging and respond thoughtfully to difficulties. Small, practical steps, sustained over time, can make trusted support more accessible.

Questions for adult reflection

Consider	What could help?
Who can my child turn to when they need comfort, guidance or practical help?	
Does my child have room to disagree, change their mind or express mixed feelings?	
Are friendships, interests, family traditions and cultural connections being supported?	
What obstacles affect contact or participation, including distance, cost, transport or safety?	
Who could help my child if I am unavailable, unwell or uncertain how to respond?	

When a relationship has become difficult

A child may need reassurance, boundaries, time, practical assistance, safety measures or independent professional support. A substantial deterioration in a previously close and safe parent-child relationship warrants careful exploration of the child's direct experiences, changes over time and possible influences, without presuming a cause. A worksheet cannot determine why a relationship has changed.

For counsellors: use adult and young-person worksheets in separate conversations where appropriate. Establish confidentiality and its limits, seek consent for any sharing, remain attentive to safety, and avoid using either worksheet to verify allegations or obtain agreement about contact. The child should not become a messenger, confidant or decision-maker in adult disputes.

About this resource

This psychoeducational resource supports reflection and conversations about relationships. It is not an assessment, diagnostic or investigative instrument. Participation is voluntary and should not be used to test statements, establish influence or persuade anyone towards a predetermined relationship outcome.

Further EMMM resources

For parents and caregivers: **Supporting Your Child's Emotional and Relational Freedom After Separation: A Reflective Guide for Parents and Caregivers** (Sillars, 2026), available at emmm.org.au/downloads.