



Helping Children Cope with Emotional Distress: A Guide for Caretakers



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Note to administrators

The children living under your care may have experienced difficult or traumatizing situations in their pasts, which may affect them emotionally on a day to day basis. This booklet includes information about common behaviors, and suggestions about how you can help. These suggestions have been collected from other children's home administrators, and include ideas that have helped them in their own experiences working with children.

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Handling Emotional Distress among Children

Distress is when a person feels extreme anxiety or sadness. Emotional distress can have many causes. In some cases, the children you work with have difficult pasts that may cause them emotional distress. It is very difficult for children to share their negative emotions or thoughts.

Some dos and don'ts while interacting with children who are experiencing emotional distress:

- ❖ **Emotional distress is never a child's fault; most of the time children are not in a position to control their feelings. Make sure the child knows that what he feels is okay, and that he is not to be blamed for anything he is feeling.**
- ❖ **If and when you decide to talk to a child about his emotions, make sure that:**
 - ✓ You are someone he trusts.
 - ✓ If not, is there someone he does trust? In a new situation, it may take time for a child to trust his new caretakers.
 - ✓ You and the child are in a private location so you can speak freely.
 - ✓ You and the child are in a safe place without distractions or interruptions.
 - ✓ You give the child time and many chances to speak, but do not interrupt the child.
 - ✓ When the child is speaking, **do not be judgmental.**



Insight into How Children's Home Administrators Help Their Children

World's Children home administrators have shared what they do to help children live happier lives after coming to an orphanage. The following points illustrate how some of the difficult emotional situations in a child's life are addressed by home administrators:

When a child first arrives at the home:

❖ Show love and affection

- ✓ Children respond well to love and affection. Petting, hugging, smiling, and giving extra attention and encouragement when needed, all helps them to feel wanted and at home.

❖ Older peer mentors

- ✓ When new children first arrive, administrators introduce each child to an older child who will be their mentor until they get adjusted totally to the home atmosphere. The older children take responsibility by introducing them to other children, showing them around, playing with them, and offering guidance and advice.

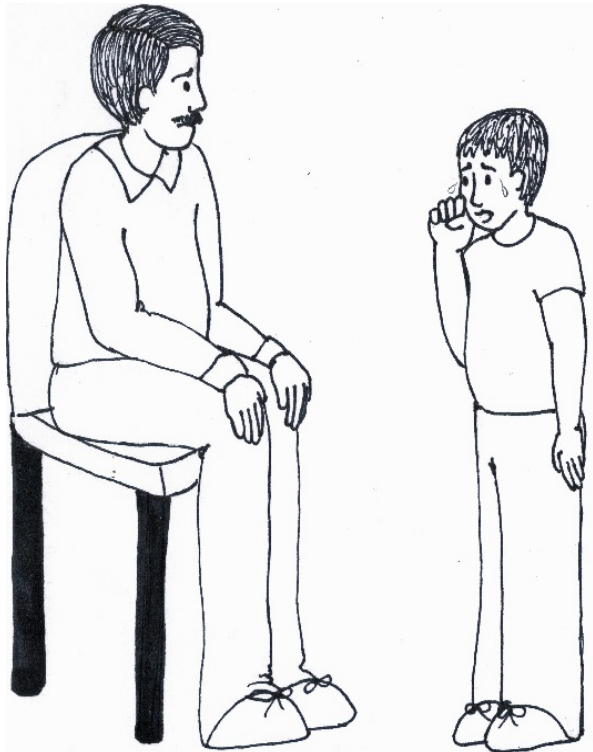


❖ **Welcome gathering**

- ✓ Have an informal gathering where children welcome the new child by clapping hands and beaming with smiles, a gesture that says, “you are welcome to stay with us.” While introducing the new child as a new family member, encourage others to take care of them. Some homes have a practice of making the children play together so that the new child feels comfortable with other children.

❖ **Private talk**

- ✓ After the child has settled down in the home, some administrators have found it helpful to have a private conversation with the child about their family, their past, and their thoughts on being in a new place.



When a child has been in the home for a while, but continues to show emotional distress:

❖ **Constant counseling is required in order to:**

- ✓ Make sure the child feels happy and comfortable at the home.
- ✓ Keep track of his day-to-day activities in order to find out whether he is getting along with other children, being rebellious, fighting, or bullying others.

- ✓ Be aware if the child is sad or aloof, is not participating in any of the activities of the home, or is not playing with others. These are clear signs of emotional unrest going on in a child's mind and they need to be addressed immediately. The best way is to have a one-to-one counseling in order to gain the child's confidence.

- ❖ **Family visits**
 - ✓ If possible, consider inviting parents or relatives to visit once a month at a designated time. Family members may bring the child treats or gifts, and are allowed to visit as long as everyone stays at the home.

- ❖ **Write a life story**
 - ✓ Suggest that the child write out her life history. Ask the child to write down a story about her life before living at the home, then have her read it to you. Talk about the story together, focusing on emotions the child is feeling, and why.
 - ✓ When children have been seriously upset, they may not remember things accurately – so try not to push them. Allow them to share their memories even if they don't make sense to you.

- ❖ **Talent programs**
 - ✓ Have children prepare a song, dance, drawing, or other talent they can share in a monthly talent show. This will give the child self-confidence and allow children to praise each other.
 - ✓ Keep in mind:
 - ✧ If a child does not want to participate, that is okay.
 - ✧ If a child is nervous or scared to perform, suggest that they perform with a friend or a group.

- ❖ **Weekly games**
 - ✓ Allow children to vote on a weekly tournament or game that everyone can participate in during leisure time. Allowing children to choose gives them confidence and helps them feel in control.

- ✓ Working together in teams may help the children connect to one another.
- ✓ Try to choose games that are fun no matter if you win or lose.



General strategies administrators are using to make the home a happy place

❖ Important tasks

- ✓ Give children important tasks to do around the home. This builds their confidence, teaches them responsibility, and allows them to feel a part of something.

❖ Goal setting

- ✓ Have the children make weekly goals, monthly goals, educational goals, and even career goals. Have them write down how they can achieve those goals. Hang the goals by the child's bed. Discuss them often. When people write down their goals and look at them often, they are more likely to reach those goals.
- ✓ Make sure children do this activity with a trusted adult.
- ✓ If a child reaches his weekly or monthly goal, reward him. Some ideas for rewards are: extra time spent with a special person, praise, or being first in line for a meal or activity.

❖ **Monthly birthday celebrations**

- ✓ At the end of each month, some homes have a special birthday dinner. Every child that had a birthday that month gets acknowledged and celebrated. Let the children help plan the meal and celebration.
- ✓ Birthday celebrations may be difficult for a child who is still getting used to being separated from their loved ones.

❖ **Field trips**

- ✓ Take the children on a field trip outside the home to visit historical sites, special events, or festivals. Have the children help plan a picnic lunch outside the home.

❖ **Yoga, meditation, and prayer**

- ✓ Lead guided yoga, meditation, or prayer sessions with the children regularly.

❖ **Using the right language**

- ✓ Refer to the children as “our children” rather than “the children.” By saying “our children,” it shows that the children have a place they belong and makes them feel loved.

Disciplining Children

Children sometimes behave poorly, but they are not doing this because they are bad children. Sometimes children are acting out due to their difficult pasts. Here are some helpful strategies for disciplining children without causing them distress. **It is never okay to hit a child.**

Use time-outs

❖ **Identify the problem behavior.**

❖ **Remove the child from the current environment and have her sit alone quietly in a “time-out.”**

❖ **The time-out should last one minute for each year of the child's life.**

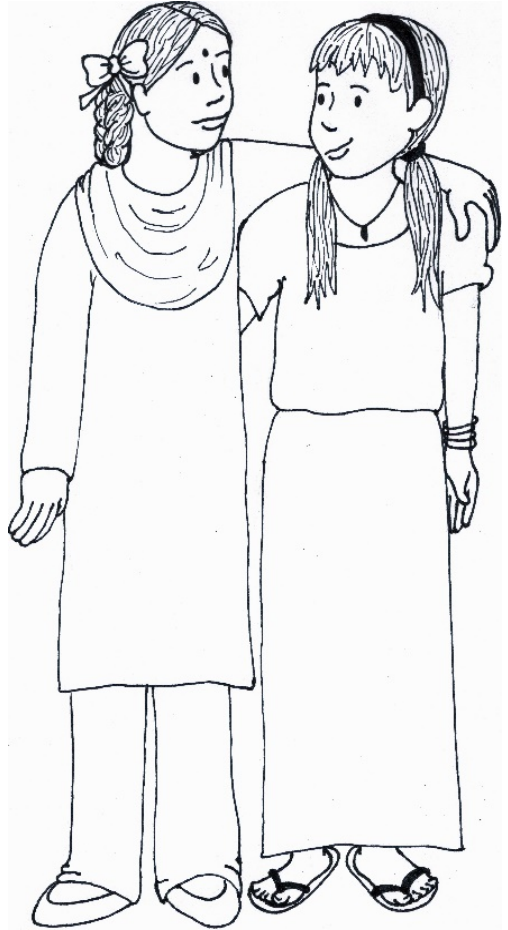
✓ Example: A 10-year-old child should have a 10-minute time-out

❖ **Do not shame a child in time-out, or permit other children to do so.**

❖ **After time is up, sit with the child and ask the following questions:**

✓ *When you did [problem behavior], what do you think caused you to do that?*

✓ *If they describe a feeling: How can we use words, instead of actions, to express that feeling?*



Letter of repair

❖ **This is a good activity for older children.**

❖ **Have the child write down what happened. Then, ask her to write what she thinks she could have done differently in that situation.**

❖ **Make sure the letter includes an apology to the appropriate person.**

“Done differently” conversation

- ❖ **Sit with the child privately and ask:**
 - ✓ *How could you have handled the situation better?*
 - ✓ If a child cannot think of anything, give them some examples of what is acceptable behavior.

If two or more children are fighting

- ❖ **Have the two children do a task together**
 - ✓ They need to work together equally; one cannot be in charge of the other or tell the other what to do.
 - ✓ This is not a helpful strategy if one child is much older than the other; in this case, try the Letter of repair.

Use word statements

- ❖ **When disciplining a child, ask him to share his feelings and why he is feeling that way**
 - ✓ Encourage use of an “I” statement that expresses his feelings.
 - ◇ Example: *I did [the behavior] because I felt angry.*
 - ✓ Stay away from “you” statements that blame others.
 - ◇ Example: *I did [the behavior] because he hit me.*

Helping a Child Adjust to a New Home

As you know, arriving at the home for the first time can be difficult for a child. Here are some strategies to help the child adjust.

Let the child talk about her feelings

- ❖ **Tell the child what she is feeling is normal and it is okay to feel that way**
 - ✓ If a child is scared, say: *I understand that you are scared, a lot just changed for you, and it is okay that you are scared.*

Be patient with them

- ❖ **Be patient with a child's sadness, fears, and even naughty behavior.**
- ❖ **This experience is all new to him**
 - ✓ He may be scared and act out or cry because he is in an unfamiliar place



Feelings and behaviors are okay and normal

- ❖ **Talk to the child about following the new rules and ask how you can help him**
 - ✓ Explain why rules are in place and talk about how it may be different from his previous home
 - ✓ It will take some time for the child to feel at home. If the child is misbehaving, it is not on purpose; it is part of his adjustment.

Normalize their behaviors and feelings

- ❖ **Listen to the child and be supportive**
 - ✓ If a child is crying often, spending time alone, or acting differently than others, make sure to tell her it is okay and it is normal.
 - ✓ Children need to work through their feelings in different ways

Give her a special object

- ❖ **Give the child a special object and tell them:**
 - ✓ *This is what you will hold when you feel scared. It will help you feel brave.*
 - ✓ It could be an object the child already has. Help the child pick out their special object.

Grief

Dealing with grief can be especially difficult for children. When children arrive at the home, they may be grieving the loss of a parent or relative. On rare occasions, other children in the homes also unexpectedly pass away. Grief can look very different in different people; it can be shown through sadness, anger, keeping busy, anxiety, spending time alone, or being extra clingy. However the child expresses grief, it is important to tell him that it is okay to feel that way.



Helping with nightmares and bad dreams

- ❖ **Nightmares are very common when a child is grieving; this is because the child feels scared and helpless. If a child is experiencing nightmares, take some time to talk to them.**
- ❖ **Ask:**
 - ✓ *If you had a magic wand and could go back into that dream, what would you do to feel like a hero?*
 - ✓ Try to talk to the child to give the nightmare a happy ending

Art therapy

- ❖ **Give the child some drawing supplies.**
 - ✓ Have them draw anything they would like. It does not have to be about their grief.
 - ✓ Sit with the child and let them tell you about their picture.
 - ✓ Make sure to tell the child that what they are feeling is okay and normal.

Death of a friend

- ❖ **When another child inside the home dies, this can be very difficult for children.**
- ❖ **This can cause children to be afraid of their own death.**
- ❖ **Children can also become more clingy than usual—this is because they fear death could happen again.**
- ❖ **Children can feel survivor guilt**
 - ✓ Children may be thinking or asking:
 - ❖ *Why did it happen to them and not me?*
 - ❖ *Is there something I could have done to prevent it?*
- ❖ **How to help:**
 - ✓ Talk with the children often and tell them that you will try your very best to make them feel safe and that no matter what, you will be there for them
 - ✓ Do not make promises you cannot keep
 - ✓ Ask the children to share their own fears

Responding to a Traumatic Event in a Child's Life

Children coming to your home have most likely experienced some terrible events in their life. They may have trouble trusting others, or they may feel unsafe. Here is how you can help the child.

Private conversation

- ❖ **When talking with the child privately, it is very important that you give him time and space to tell you about the trauma he experienced.**

- ✓ Even if it does not make sense to you, let him tell his story and try not to interrupt.
- ❖ **It is important to remember NOT to make promises you cannot keep.**
 - ✓ Do not say: *You are going to feel okay*
 - ✓ Instead say: *It will take some time to feel better and that is okay*
 - ✓ Do not say: *Nothing bad will ever happen to you again*
 - ✓ Instead say: *We are going to do our best to make you feel safe here, and we are always here for you*

Art therapy

As with handling grief, art therapy can also be helpful during traumatic events.

- ❖ **Give the child some drawing supplies.**
 - ✓ Have them draw anything they would like. It does not have to be about the traumatic event.
 - ✓ Sit with the child and let them tell you about their picture.
 - ✓ Make sure to tell the child that what they are feeling is okay and normal.



Anxiety

Anxiety is when someone feels a loss of control in their life. The child may feel like something bad is going to happen to her, even when it is not. Because the children you work with often have come from a difficult past, it is very normal for them to feel this way. Here is how you can help.

❖ Private conversation

- ✓ Ask the child what he or she is feeling
 - ❖ *What bad thing do you think is going to happen?*
 - ❖ *What can we do for you if this bad thing were to happen to you?*
 - ❖ *What can you do if this bad thing does happen?*
 - ❖ *Who would you like to talk to when you feel this way?*
 - ❖ *What helps you feel better when you feel this way?*

❖ Go on a walk with the child

- ✓ Sometimes when children are dealing with anxiety, it is difficult for them to sit still. Going on a walk can help them manage their feelings.
- ✓ As you are walking with them, ask the same questions you would during a private conversation.

❖ Art therapy may also be helpful when handling anxiety.

Taking Care of Yourself

As an administrator, you and your staff have a very fulfilling, yet difficult job. It can also cause you to have emotional distress. It is important to take care of yourself and your own mental well-being.

Consider the following:

❖ **Talk with colleagues and co-workers**

- ✓ Talk about what you are feeling and how your work impacts your life.

❖ **Validate**

- ✓ Remind yourself, and your fellow workers, that what you do is extremely important, but very difficult.
- ✓ It is okay to feel sad, angry, or frustrated sometimes.

❖ **Private time**

- ✓ Have private time for yourself and do things that you enjoy, such as prayer, yoga, meditation, exercise, gardening, playing an instrument, drawing, reading a book, or watching a film.

❖ **Remind yourself**

- ✓ Remind yourself that you are doing good work.
- ✓ Ask yourself, what makes you feel good about the work you are doing?



World's Children is a humanitarian organization that works with carefully screened orphanages and children's homes to provide a loving and nurturing environment where children with traumatic backgrounds can start a new life. We serve children of all backgrounds, and welcome all to join us in bettering the lives of children in need.



World's Children

Every child is our child

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