

For Elementary Parents/Caregivers

# As children grow, they are making sense of the world around them and discovering how it all relates to themselves.

That part hasn't changed. However, the world is quickly changing, and caring adults are frantically seeking ways to meet the demands of their developing kids in an everchanging world.

During the elementary phase, kids are developing socialemotional skills that will help them to better relate to their peers and adults, navigate friendships, and regulate their attention and emotions. The frequent roller coaster of emotions we see in preschoolers, such as the intense crying when separating from mom and dad or the striking of their sibling when frustrated, will (thankfully) decrease in the elementary phase. Empathy is developing as elementary schoolers are better able to identify their emotions and the emotions of others.

While elementary schoolers are learning how to recognize stress, they may have a tough time with how to cope with highly stressful events. When faced with a challenging or unexpected event, they may struggle to express their thoughts and emotions in a healthy way—and these struggles may present behaviorally.

Kids will need support to enable them to feel safe and to make sense of the experience.

This worksheet is intended to help you reflect and create a plan ahead of time for how you want to respond if you discover something you never expected. Spend as much time as you need thinking through your responses. They are not for anyone other than you (unless you choose to discuss this with your spouse, co-parent, grandparent, another caregiver or health professional).

In a perfect world, every parent who discovers something they weren't expecting would do so after a good night's sleep, feeling rested, confident, and at peace with themselves and the world around them. That's seldom the case. That's why it's best to create a response plan when you are clear and thoughtful. So, take a few, deep breaths. Find a place where you feel safe and comfortable. If you need to walk away and come back to this at a later time, that's okay, too.

## What do we mean by "the unexpected"?

This is an open-ended idea because our kids are growing up in a world with a vast number of unexpected scenarios. So, in one sense, we can't predict what we can't predict.

However, according to leaders who work with kids, and research provided by U.S. census data, the CDC, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, here are a few scenarios that can be a part of a kid's world that parents frequently fail to anticipate →

Pet loss

Parental separation or divorce

Moving or changing schools

Sudden illness/death in the family

School or community violence

Physical abuse

Sexual abuse

Generalized Anxiety/Phobias

Separation Anxiety

Depression

Cutting/self-harm

Suicidal thoughts

## ② React now so you can prepare for later.

| Consider your own past. Do any of those possible cenarios above trigger additional thoughts or levels of |
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| motion in you due to your own personal life experienc  |
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An elementary school-aged child's response to a crisis will vary, common reactions include:

- → Feeling more fearful: may startle easily, have more nightmares, and not seem to be easily reassured
- → Feeling more hesitant to be apart from caregivers
- Appearing more restless, tired, and agitated
- → Increased physical complaints, such as tummy aches or headaches.
- → New or increased clingy behavior
- → Difficulty with sleeping, eating, toileting—they may seem behaviorally younger (regressed)
- → Declining grades



## Find your words.

#### Imagine that you discover one of the scenarios listed.

What is the very first thing you would hope to say or do for your child?

Here are a few things to remember as you write:

- ① Remain calm. Calmness decreases your kid's "alarm reaction" (fight-flight-freeze) and allows them to feel safe enough to think rationally. Consider calmly saying: "I love you and we will get through this together."
- ② Acknowledge and validate your kid's big feelings and concerns. Encourage emotional expression via talking or drawing.
- 3 Spend undistracted time together. Dance, play, make art, or cook. Engage in at least one relaxing or fun activity daily, even if it's only for a few minutes.
- 4 Reassure them by sharing what you and others are doing to help keep them safe. You may have to reassure them repeatedly.
- (5) Teach and practice simple coping skills like box breathing: Breathe in for four seconds. Hold for four seconds. Slowly exhale for four seconds.



### ④ Practice your delivery.

Read what you have written three times out loud. Try to use the tone and body language you would want to have if you were saying this to your kid.

Here are a few things to remember as you read:

- → It's normal to feel a strong, emotional response—but it may be helpful to freak out on the inside and remain calm on the outside.
- → Most of our communication happens through our facial expressions and the tone of our voice. You might even practice reading your response in front of a mirror to see what you are communicating nonverbally.

Now, imagine that you discover one of the scenarios listed after you have had a particularly horrible day.

Despite our best intentions, conversations with our kids can veer in the wrong direction. Think about some of your least ideal go-to reactions.

What might you do to help yourself have the best reaction? (For example, pause, take three deep breaths, and/or reframe the purpose of the conversation from lecturing to learning.)

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# **5** Rate your equipment-level.

| Take the list of items previously listed and add any additional scenarios you can think of. Now, rate each one based on how equipped you feel to handle the scenario. |  |
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| If you feel well-equipped, write the number 10 next to that possible situation. If you feel unequipped, write the number 1 next to that possible situation.           |  |
| Car accidents   |  |
| Sudden illness or death in the family   |  |
| Pet loss  |  |
| Moving or changing schools  |  |
| Parental separation or divorce  |  |
| School or community violence  |  |
| Physical abuse  |  |
| Sexual abuse  |  |
| Generalized Anxiety/Phobias   |  |
| Separation Anxiety  |  |
| Depression  |  |
| Cutting/self-harm   |  |
| Suicidal thoughts   |  |
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| For the scenarios for which you feel least equipped, where  |  |
| might you go as a first step to get help?   |  |

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### Mame your community.

Every parent has what it takes to navigate challenges with their kids, but none of us can carry the weight alone. If you were to discover something you weren't expecting in your kid's life, who would you be able to call?

Think of someone with whom you feel safe enough to be completely honest about what is happening and what you are feeling.

Every kid who is navigating challenging situations needs their parent's involvement. But a parent may not be the only influence they need. If you were to discover something you weren't expecting, who else in your kid's life could you count on to walk with them through this experience?

Think of someone who shares your values with whom your kid feels safe enough to be completely honest about what is happening.

Your responses to the questions in this resource may be one of the most important things to keep in front of you as a parent. Consider returning to what you have written every year to revise and repeat your response so that you can remember it quickly if you ever need to use it.

#### **Professional Support**

If you are concerned about how your child is coping or if you are not coping so well yourself, seek out professional support. Your child's pediatrician or your primary care doctor can assist you with next steps.

#### **Mental Health Emergencies**

For mental health emergencies, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. They have trained people that can help you and your child 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

To learn more about the phase your kid is in right now, download the Parent Cue app and check out our phase-specific cues every week with a monthly subscription.





More Resources at ParentCue.org

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