

Creating a Safe Emotional Space

Your child's lived experiences prior to coming to your family may have been very complex, confusing, traumatic or painful; far beyond what the emotional and cognitive capacity of a child can comprehend or deal with. Your child may have many unanswered questions, memories and emotions and an unconscious need to make sense of their past and inner life. As your child's feelings of security and safety grow, they will begin to open up more and 'test the waters' to determine if it is okay to discuss some of the burning questions or confusing experiences. This is a positive sign of healing; however it can open up flood gates of emotions such as grief, loss, confusion, shame and rage, which can be very confronting and painful to deal with: for both you and your child!

'Holding the Space'

One of the most loving and supportive things you can do for your child when they have connected with a source of pain and are expressing deep feelings or memories, is to simply 'hold the space'. This can be described as the ability to remain calm and focused whilst creating a safe and contained emotional space in which another person can undergo their own process of emotional release or self-inquiry. For you as the parent it means being fully present for your child, letting them know that they are safe and that you can handle their strong emotions; that you will honour what they have to say; that you can be their 'harbour in the storm'. Remember that they may be touching on memories, feelings, experiences that have previously been too painful or overwhelming to bring out into the open. The challenge for you can be hearing strong emotions such as sadness, anger and grief, and accepting that you do not have to try to 'fix it'.

How to really listen

Give full attention: how you do this will depend on where the conversation is taking place. This can be challenging if your child has raised this topic while engaged in a joint activity or when you are driving, but find ways to give your child priority attention.

Use minimal encouragers: these are the things we do in everyday conversations when we want to show that we are listening without interrupting the flow of the conversation – nodding our head, using short encouragers, "Mmmm..." , "Ah-ha", "OK" "Yes" to keep them talking.

Use non-verbal behaviour: match your child's non-verbal behaviour; maintain physical closeness; often sitting side by side assures the child, but gives them a greater level of openness because there is limited eye contact. Driving in the car can be a useful time. Whether to use physical touch in times of extreme emotional expression is something that is dependent on your child's past experiences, their age, which emotions are being expressed.

Let your child talk, at their own pace, in their own time: you can communicate to your child that it is safe and okay to talk about this topic by giving gentle encouragement "this seems very important to you ... tell me more".

Allow the silences: your child may need time to absorb what is happening, or to find words.

Do not try to 'fix it' or change the subject: this is a precious opportunity for your child, just listen and hold the space.



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What do you say?

Knowing how to respond when your child is sharing painful and difficult emotions can be challenging. Research suggests that the response style that best demonstrates acceptance, non-judgement and respect is called the 'understanding & reflecting response' in which you reflect back to your child what they said (content), as well as the feelings being expressed - "You seem so sad, and you've been talking lots about your birth mother...", "It sounds like that is really confusing for you". This response demonstrates empathy as it lets your child know that you are really hearing and understanding them, and actually encourages them to keep sharing. It can also serve as a way to help your child identify and 'name' their feelings. Overall, be honest in your responses; encourage your child to ask questions; and send the message that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

Emotional impact on you as the parent

Being present to your child's pain and hurt, hearing the experiences that they have been, and are currently going through, can be challenging for you. It can bring up feelings of sadness exacerbated by feelings of powerlessness to undo their suffering. It might also connect you with other deep feelings, some of which you may not have realised were there: your own grief or experiences of loss; other painful experiences from your life; guilt and shame about past events in your extended family. Finding safe and supportive avenues to face your own feelings and past experiences can be a very helpful strategy for you, which will also benefit your child. Contrary to popular opinion it can be an empowering process which increases your capacity to empathise and to strengthen relationships. The experience of really being listened to and having their thoughts and feelings validated is a powerful gift to give to any child. By creating a safe emotional space for your child you reassure them that there is a way through the emotional storm, and at the same time it strengthens your child's capacity for emotional connection, healthy communication and trust.

Other References and links

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma Loss & Grief Network

<http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/>

Hirst, M. 2005, Loving and living with traumatised children- Reflections by adoptive parents, BAAF Adoption & Fostering