



## COMFORT GESTURE

To comfort is a gesture of making others feel safe and secure and can greatly help children experiencing [traumatic stress](#).

Studies show that adults who provide consistent emotional and physical support can buffer the “fight or flight” stress response in children. Teaching them how to manage their emotions and calm themselves down, helping them connect their words to feelings, and practicing relaxation and emotional regulation skills can also help.

When comforting children, practice active listening and provide support at all times, even during seemingly small stressors or bigger issues. Show compassion, provide reassurance and demonstrate a commitment to being there for them. Creating a safe environment is one of the most valuable elements of the Comfort gesture that help children re-establish a sense of security and stability.

Sometimes it can be difficult to stay calm and supportive when children are exhibiting signs of toxic stress. Remember to take a deep breath and use the information in this section and in the [Taking Care of Yourself](#) document to comfort the children in your life as well as yourself.

See the [short films](#) inspired by real stories. One student is uplifted and comforted by his mentor who showed that he would be there for him and was proud of him.

### **Age-Related Tips**

Children at different ages may need different considerations when you are comforting them.

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#### **Infants & Toddlers**

Infants and toddlers cannot always communicate their needs and emotions. Pay close attention to their feelings and unspoken needs expressed through body language to comfort and respond as needed.

##### **Nurture**

Foster a deep, nurturing connection. Babies learn to soothe themselves in times of distress by being soothed by their caregivers.

- Offer physical and emotional affection to create a feeling of safety.
- Calm down infants by swaddling, shushing and rocking them.
- Help children feel safe enough to feel emotions, even while limiting their actions. For example, "You can be as mad as you want, but I won't let you hit."
- Provide young children with comforting objects such as special stuffed animals or soft blankets.

##### **Be Patient and Remain Calm**

- Supporting babies even at their most difficult moments lets them know they can trust and rely on you.
- Provide children with acceptable, non-violent ways to share strong feelings. For example, toddlers can rip paper, stomp their feet, or throw a foam ball when they're very mad.



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- Stay calm in stressful situations as infants take their emotional cues from their caregivers. When children are clingy, whiny, or aggressive, they need you to help them regain control and feel safe.

### **Respond Appropriately**

Gauge your response to your child's cry for attention, comfort and reassure them based on what they need.

- Pay close attention to children's feelings, and validate them.
- Help children identify their feelings by naming them. For example, you might say, "I can see that you feel really angry at him for knocking over your blocks."
- Very young children work through frightening events by reenacting them through play. So try not to discourage the way they play, even if you find it disturbing. Comfort children who seem distressed by their play, and gently redirect them to other activities.

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### **Elementary/Middle School**

Adults can help comfort, console, or guide children at this age to a resolution when conflict or issues emerge.

#### **Nurture**

- Help children feel like they can trust you by only making promises you can keep.
- Offer them safe ways to express feelings, such as drawing, pretend play, or telling stories.
- Help a child empathize and take others' perspectives by labeling other children's emotions.
- Teach children positive self-talk to help them deal with everyday frustrations.

#### **Be Patient and Remain Calm**

- Use a calm approach to help children regain a sense of safety and control. Children that are often perceived as disruptive are generally feeling out of control and may not be able to express themselves in other ways.
- Practice relaxation techniques when children are not under stress — such as counting to ten, deep breathing, meditation, or positive self-talk. Repetition will make them more likely to use these techniques when they're upset.

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### **Teens**

Teens often need encouragement to share their frustrations and concerns.

#### **Nurture**

- Be present and pay attention to changes in behaviors.
- Offer validating and reflecting statements to help them label their own emotions when in distress.

#### **When they are not under stress:**

- Practice relaxation techniques such as counting to ten, deep breathing, meditation, or positive self-talk.
- Help them identify strategies to manage stress and control their impulses.



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- Inquire about their friend networks and help them identify friends that make them feel happy and confident.

## **Environment-Related Tips**

Comforting children in the school, community, health care setting, or home may require first assessing what is bothering them and what is needed to calm them.

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### **At School**

Create a safe and cozy space in your classroom where kids who are upset can go to calm themselves down.

#### **Identify Triggers**

- When you notice that a child might be having a difficult time, ask yourself, “What’s happening here?” rather than “What’s wrong with this child?”
- **Respond in a kind, compassionate way when a child is going into survival mode.**
- When you notice a child’s triggers, proactively develop strategies to help resolve the issues.

#### **Engage Them**

- **Engage students in activities and assignments such as yoga, meditation, breathing games, and affirmations to help them learn emotional regulation, social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, and anger management.**
  - **Create predictable routines and transitions for children so they know what to expect.** Try playing music or ringing a meditation bell to signal that it’s time to transition.
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### **In the Community**

Help children identify early warning signs of anger, sadness, and fear, and develop strategies that they can use to calm down in the moment.

- Help children expand their network of consistently caring adults.
  - Take children’s concerns seriously, and offer validating statements. Refer to further assessments or services as needed.
  - Praise children’s efforts to regulate their emotions, and offer healthy, non-violent ways to express negative feelings.
  - Don’t make promises you can’t keep. Set clear, consistent boundaries and limits with children.
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### **In Health Care Settings**

Talk to children about strategies to calm themselves down when they’re feeling upset, angry, or afraid.

#### **Provide Information**

- Explain in detail what you are going to do to help children know what to expect.



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- Introduce adolescents to relevant meditation or deep breathing videos or apps.
- If a procedure will be painful or scary, offer coping or relaxation strategies such as deep breathing, blowing bubbles, or singing together.
- Answer children's questions honestly but age appropriately. Allow a child to participate in some **making** choices when appropriate.

## **Recognize Their Concerns**

- Take children's concerns seriously and offer validating statements.
- Discuss what they notice about their bodies when they have these feelings (e.g. heart beating faster, stomach feeling funny).
- Encourage caregivers or parents to offer emotional and physical support during visits. Prompt them to prepare children ahead of time
- Respect children's privacy. In some instances, you may want to talk to them without their caregivers being present.

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## ***At Home***

Help children identify early warning signs of anger, sadness, and fear, and help them develop strategies to calm down in the moment.

### **Engage Them**

- Play games, read stories and engage children in activities that help them recognize and regulate their emotions.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. Help them expand the words they use to describe emotions.
- Talk about your own feelings and use language to describe your emotions. For example, "I feel sad that my favorite necklace broke and that I can't wear it anymore."

### **Pay Attention To Their Needs**

- Take care of children's everyday needs. Make sure they are getting their sleep, meals, snacks, baths, and playtime.
- Be patient. Accept and validate children's feelings, and remember that negative behavior is often a result of feeling out of control, not a deliberate attempt to upset you.
- Bond physically with children. Simple things like eye contact, kisses, and hugging will help them feel safe and secure.
- Provide as much consistency and stability as possible. Help children know what to expect by developing routines and creating a safe, welcoming home environment.
- Praise children's efforts to regulate their emotions, and offer healthy, non-violent ways to express negative feelings.

## **Why it Works**

Providing comfort to children can make the difference between fear and security, and builds the foundation for resiliency to adversity.



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Caring adults create a buffer to traumatic stress. Through comfort and support, you can help reverse the effects of toxic stress in children by assisting them in making sense of their experiences and regaining a feeling of safety.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, your everyday support and conversations with children builds their emotional intelligence, which will help them differentiate between their thoughts, emotions, and feelings.<sup>2</sup>

When children are able to recognize and regulate their emotions, such as anger and sadness, they are better able to sustain relationships, focus on tasks, and succeed socially and academically. Skills, including self-soothing, are increasingly recognized as important to overall well-being and resilience.

As a caring adult, you can be a role model of healthy emotional expression and behaviors. You and your peers can help provide the supportive guidance children need. We invite you to share the importance of the Comfort gesture recommendations:

1. When comforting and calming children, remember to be patient and calm yourself <hyperlink to "Taking Care of Yourself">.
2. Determine the problem or concern so that you can respond effectively and appropriately.
3. Listen attentively to what they are saying.
4. Validate their emotions.
5. Help them identify and practice coping mechanisms and provide tools to comfort themselves and regain control during troubling situations.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup>InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development. (n.d.) Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. Retrieved from: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>.

<sup>2</sup>Pool, C.R. (1997). Up with emotional health. Social and Emotional Learning. Educational Leadership 54(8): 12- 14.

[Activate Your Community](#)

[Taking Care of Yourself](#)