A story of emotional trust for kids

by

Curtis Brown

and MSH

(Mandie Safe Haven)

MANDIE SAFE HAVEN

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www.mandiesafehaven.com
email: mandiesafehaven@gmail.com
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The purpose of this story is to identify what we can do as parents to help our children who suffer from anxiety and PYSD.

Remember healing isn’t linear, it will take time, the exercises can help adults who have suffered from trauma as well.

This based o a true story, albeit the names have been changed...

Nurturing Emotional Understanding:

Helping Children Ages 3-10 Feel

Safe and Express Their Feelings

As parents and caregivers, one of our most important roles is helping children navigate the complex world of emotions. Between the ages of 3 and 10, children experience a whirlwind of feelings they often don't yet have the words to express. By creating emotionally safe environments and teaching children to understand their feelings, we equip them with essential life skills that will serve them well into adulthood.

Why Emotional Understanding Matters

Children who understand their emotions are better equipped to handle life's challenges. They develop stronger relationships, perform better academically, and show greater resilience when facing difficulties. When children can identify what they're feeling and express it appropriately, they're less likely to act out through tantrums, aggression, or withdrawal. Instead, they learn healthy coping mechanisms that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Emotional awareness also plays a crucial role in keeping children safe. When children can articulate their feelings, they're more likely to tell trusted adults when something feels wrong or uncomfortable. This open communication becomes a protective factor in their overall wellbeing.

Building an Emotionally Safe Foundation

Before children can explore their feelings, they need to know it's safe to do so. Creating an emotionally safe environment means

establishing a space where all feelings are acknowledged and accepted, even if all behaviors are not.

Start by modeling emotional openness yourself. When you're frustrated, sad, or excited, name those feelings aloud. You might say, "I'm feeling frustrated because the store was out of what we needed," or "I'm so excited about our weekend plans!" This demonstrates that feelings are normal and can be talked about.

Make it clear that there are no "bad" feelings. A child who feels angry isn't bad; they're simply experiencing a natural human emotion. What matters is how we respond to those feelings. This distinction helps children feel safe bringing any emotion to you without fear of judgment or dismissal.

Create regular opportunities for emotional check-ins. This might be during dinner, bedtime, or car rides. Ask open-ended questions like "What made you happy today?" or "Did anything worry you?" These conversations normalize talking about feelings and help children develop the habit of emotional reflection.

Teaching Emotional Vocabulary

Young children often lack the words to describe what they're experiencing internally. A three-year-old might throw a toy not because they're misbehaving, but because they don't know how to express disappointment or frustration. Our job is to give them the language they need.

Start with basic emotions: happy, sad, angry, scared, and excited. Use these words frequently when reading books together, watching shows, or observing others. Point out facial expressions and body language: "Look at that character's face. Their eyebrows are scrunched up and their fists are tight. I think they might be feeling angry."

As children grow, expand their emotional vocabulary. Introduce words like frustrated, disappointed, worried, proud, embarrassed, jealous, and content. The more specific their vocabulary, the better they can identify and communicate their internal experiences.

Emotion charts or feeling wheels can be wonderful tools, especially for visual learners. These resources display various emotions with corresponding facial expressions, helping children match what they're feeling inside with the appropriate term.

Helping Children Identify Their Own Emotions

Teaching children to recognize their emotions involves helping them tune into their body's signals. Emotions create physical sensations, and young children need guidance connecting these dots.

When your child seems upset, help them notice what's happening in their body. "When you're angry, where do you feel it? Does your tummy feel tight? Do your hands want to squeeze into fists?" This body awareness helps children recognize emotions as they arise, giving them a chance to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

Practice emotion identification during calm moments too. After reading a story, ask your child how they would feel in the character's situation. Use hypothetical scenarios: "If someone took your toy without asking, how might you feel?" These low-stakes practice opportunities build emotional intelligence without the intensity of real-time situations.

For children ages 7-10, introduce the concept that we can feel multiple emotions simultaneously. They might feel excited about a birthday party but also nervous about being the center of attention. Validating these complex emotional experiences helps children understand their internal landscape more fully.

Validating and Responding to Emotions

How we respond when children express emotions shapes their willingness to continue sharing. Validation doesn't mean agreeing with everything or allowing all behaviors; it means acknowledging that their feelings are real and understandable.

Instead of dismissing feelings with phrases like "You're fine" or "Don't cry," try responses that validate: "I can see you're really upset right now," or "It makes sense that you'd feel disappointed." This simple acknowledgment can be incredibly powerful.

After validating, help your child problem-solve when appropriate. "You're angry that your brother knocked down your blocks. What could we do about that?" This approach teaches children that feelings are valid and that they have agency in addressing situations.

Remember that sometimes children just need their feelings heard without immediate solutions. Sitting with discomfort and offering comfort can be exactly what they need.

Teaching Healthy Emotional Expression

While all feelings are acceptable, not all expressions of those feelings are. A child can feel angry without hitting, or sad without breaking things. Teaching appropriate emotional expression is crucial for their social development and safety.

Introduce coping strategies for big emotions. Deep breathing, counting to ten, squeezing a stress ball, drawing feelings, or taking space in a calm-down corner are all healthy outlets. Practice these techniques during peaceful times so they're accessible during emotional moments.

For physical children, movement can be essential. Jumping jacks, running outside, or dancing can help discharge intense emotional energy safely. Create a toolkit of strategies that match your child's personality and preferences.

The Long-Term Impact

When we prioritize emotional understanding, we're not just managing today's tantrum or worry. We're building a foundation of emotional intelligence that will serve children throughout their lives. They learn that feelings are temporary, manageable, and informative. They develop self-awareness, empathy, and resilience.

Most importantly, children who grow up in emotionally safe environments learn that they can trust the adults in their lives with their biggest feelings. This trust becomes a protective factor, keeping them safe not just emotionally, but in all aspects of their wellbeing.

By investing time in helping children understand and express their emotions, we give them one of life's most valuable gifts: the ability to know themselves and navigate the world with confidence and emotional wisdom.

Finding Safety Again:

Maya's Journey Through PTSD and Anxiety

Maya was nine years old when her grandmother noticed she hadn't laughed in months. The bright, curious girl who once loved gymnastics and sleepover parties now spent most evenings curled on the couch, her body tense, her eyes darting toward every unexpected sound.

Two years earlier, Maya had been in a serious car accident. Though her physical injuries had healed, the emotional wounds ran deep. She had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety, conditions that made the world feel unsafe and unpredictable.

When the World Feels Dangerous

For Maya, ordinary moments could trigger intense fear. The screech of brakes outside sent her heart racing. Loud noises made her freeze or run. At school, she struggled to concentrate, always on edge, waiting for something terrible to happen. Nightmares interrupted her sleep several nights a week, leaving her exhausted and irritable.

Her parents, Anna and David, felt helpless watching their daughter struggle. They wanted to protect her from everything, to make her feel safe again, but they didn't know how. That's when they connected with Dr. Chen, a child psychologist who specialized in trauma.

"Maya doesn't feel safe in her own body right now," Dr. Chen explained during their first meeting. "Her nervous system is stuck in survival mode. Our job is to help her learn that she's safe now, and give her tools to manage the anxiety when it comes."

Building the Foundation of Safety

Dr. Chen's first priority was helping Maya's family create an environment where she could begin to feel secure. This meant establishing predictable routines, being honest about plans, and never dismissing Maya's fears, no matter how irrational they seemed.

Anna and David learned to validate Maya's feelings without reinforcing the fear. When Maya panicked at the sound of sirens, instead of saying "You're fine, there's nothing to worry about," Anna would say, "I hear that siren too. It startled you. Your body is remembering the accident. But right now, we're safe at home together."

This acknowledgment made an enormous difference. Maya began to understand that her reactions were normal responses to what she'd experienced, not signs that something was wrong with her.

They created a "safe space" in Maya's room—a cozy corner with soft pillows, her favorite stuffed animals, and a basket of sensory items: a smooth stone to hold, a soft blanket, lavender-scented play dough, and a small hourglass filled with glittery liquid she could watch settle.

Learning the Language of Emotions

One of Maya's biggest challenges was that she couldn't always identify what she was feeling. Sometimes anxiety felt like anger. Sometimes fear felt like sadness. Her emotions came in overwhelming waves that she couldn't name or control.

Dr. Chen introduced Maya to an emotion wheel—a colorful chart showing different feelings and their intensities. Together, they practiced identifying emotions during their sessions. "When you think about going to school tomorrow, where would you point on this wheel?" Dr. Chen would ask.

At first, Maya could only identify "scared" or "bad." But over time, her vocabulary grew. She learned words like "overwhelmed," "worried," "frustrated," and "nervous." This language gave her power. Instead of

drowning in nameless feelings, she could say, "I'm feeling overwhelmed and I need a break."

Her parents started doing daily "emotion check-ins" at dinner. Each family member would share their high point, low point, and how they were feeling. Hearing her parents talk about their own worries and frustrations normalized the experience of having difficult emotions.

Understanding the Body's Signals

Dr. Chen taught Maya about the connection between her body and emotions. They explored how her body responded to stress: racing heart, tight chest, shallow breathing, clenched fists, upset stomach.

"Your body is trying to protect you," Dr. Chen explained. "When it senses danger, it prepares you to run or fight. That's why your heart beats fast and your muscles get tight. The problem is, your alarm system is going off even when you're actually safe."

Understanding this helped Maya feel less frightened of her own reactions. She learned to notice early warning signs—the first flutter of anxiety in her chest, the slight tension in her shoulders—before they escalated into full panic.

Tools for Regulation

With this awareness came practical tools. Dr. Chen introduced Maya to grounding techniques that could pull her back to the present moment when memories or anxiety took over.

The "5-4-3-2-1" technique became Maya's favorite: identify five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. This sensory exercise interrupted the panic spiral and reminded her brain that she was here, now, not back in that frightening moment two years ago.

Deep breathing exercises were challenging at first—Maya's chest felt too tight to breathe deeply. So they started with "bubble breathing": pretending to blow bubbles slowly and gently. As she practiced, her breathing naturally deepened, activating her body's calming response.

For physical release, Maya's parents enrolled her in a gentle yoga class designed for children with anxiety. The combination of movement, breathing, and body awareness helped Maya feel more at home in her own skin. Her teacher taught her that she could make herself feel safer just by changing how she breathed and moved.

Processing the Trauma

While emotional regulation tools helped Maya manage daily anxiety, she also needed to process the traumatic memories themselves. Dr. Chen used trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, carefully helping Maya revisit the accident in small, manageable pieces.

This wasn't about forcing Maya to relive the trauma. Instead, it was about helping her brain file the memory away properly. Right now, her brain treated the accident as if it were still happening—every car ride, every loud noise was a reminder that triggered the same fear response.

Through art therapy, Maya drew pictures of the accident and its aftermath. Through play therapy with toy cars and figurines, she acted out scenarios where she had control. Slowly, Maya's nervous system began to understand: that was then, this is now.

Her parents learned to help her create a narrative about what happened. They read books together about children who'd overcome scary experiences. They talked about how brave Maya was, how strong her body had been to heal, and how her brain was learning to feel safe again.

Small Victories

Progress wasn't linear. Some weeks were harder than others. But gradually, Anna and David noticed changes. Maya started sleeping through the night more often. She agreed to ride in the car to visit a friend. She joined her classmates for recess instead of staying inside with the teacher.

One afternoon, six months into therapy, a truck backfired on their street. Maya jumped and her breathing quickened, but instead of running away or freezing, she looked at her mother and said, "I'm feeling scared. That sound reminded me of the accident. Can we do bubble breathing together?"

Anna's eyes filled with tears. Her daughter had identified her emotion, understood its source, and asked for what she needed. This was healing in action.

The Ongoing Journey

Maya's story doesn't have a neat ending because healing from trauma and managing anxiety is an ongoing process, not a destination. At ten years old, she still has hard days. Certain triggers still catch her off guard. But she has a toolkit now, and more importantly, she has the understanding that her feelings make sense and that she has the power to help herself feel better.

She knows that anxiety doesn't mean she's broken—it means her brain is trying to keep her safe. She knows that big feelings pass, that she can ride the wave of panic and come out the other side. She knows she's not alone.

Her parents continue to create an emotionally safe home where all feelings are welcome. They celebrate her courage—not just the big moments like getting back into a car, but the small ones too, like telling them when she's worried or asking for help.

Dr. Chen recently asked Maya what advice she'd give to other kids struggling with anxiety and PTSD. Maya thought for a moment, then said, "Tell them their feelings are real, but feelings aren't facts. Just because you feel scared doesn't mean you're in danger. And tell them it gets better if you practice the tools and talk about it. It really does get better."

What Maya's Story Teaches Us

Maya's journey illustrates several crucial principles for supporting children with PTSD and anxiety:

Safety first: Children need to feel physically and emotionally safe before healing can begin. This means creating predictable environments and validating their experiences.

Education is empowering: Understanding why their body and brain react the way they do helps children feel less frightened of their own responses.

Tools provide control: Grounding techniques, breathing exercises, and sensory strategies give children agency when they feel powerless.

Patience and consistency matter: Healing takes time, and progress isn't always visible. Consistent support and understanding create the foundation for recovery.

Professional help is essential: While parental support is crucial, children with PTSD and significant anxiety need professional guidance to process trauma and develop coping strategies.

Connection heals: Perhaps most importantly, Maya's recovery wasn't something she did alone. It happened in the context of relationships with people who believed in her, validated her feelings, and stood beside her through the hard moments.

For any child struggling with PTSD and anxiety, the message is this: healing is possible. With the right support, tools, and understanding,

children can learn to feel safe in the world again. Their feelings are real and valid, and with nurturing care, they can build lives not defined by their trauma, but strengthened by their resilience.

Curtis Brown – Author, Strategist, Creator

Curtis Brown is a versatile writer and strategist who has worked with everyone from Fortune 500 giants to small, family-run businesses. With a background in marketing, research, and content creation, Curtis is passionate about helping individuals and entrepreneurs create lasting change from the inside out.

As co-founder of **Mandie's Safe Haven**, Curtis partners with his wife, Mandie Brown, to provide resources and tools for emotional healing, personal transformation, and sustainable business growth.

Curtis writes across genres—including business, self-help, fantasy, and personal development—with a focus on mindset, mastery, and purpose-driven action. His mission is to simplify powerful ideas and deliver them in a practical, inspiring way for readers who are ready to elevate their lives.

"Knowledge is not power... unless manifested."
~ Curtis Brown

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