Big Feelings, Safe Conversations

A caregiver guide for helping children put feelings into words.

01 Make room before asking questions

Choose a calm moment. Children may express feelings through play, behavior, or silence rather than direct explanations.

- [ ] Get on the child's level and keep your tone steady.
- [ ] Offer options: talking, drawing, writing, playing, or sitting quietly.
- [ ] Reflect before problem-solving: "That sounds really hard."
- [ ] Avoid "You're fine," comparisons, or forcing a disclosure.

02 Try a gentle opening

"I noticed ____. I care about you. Want to tell me what is going on?"

Words, drawings, or behaviors the child used to communicate

03 Validate without assuming

A response that names a feeling without deciding what the child feels

Adapt words to the child's age, language, and communication needs. Do not require a child to speak before they feel ready.

From Feelings to Support

Create a simple plan with your child and their support network.

04 Build a small comfort menu

- [ ] A quiet break or a familiar comfort item
- [ ] Movement, drawing, music, reading, or play
- [ ] Time with a trusted adult
- [ ] An age-appropriate way to ask for help

What helps this child feel safer or more connected?

05 Identify trusted helpers

Home / school / community adults the child can approach

What we will try, and when we will check back

06 When extra support is needed

Consider a pediatrician or qualified mental health professional if distress is persistent, worsening, or affecting sleep, school, relationships, or everyday functioning. Take mentions of self-harm or suicide seriously and seek prompt help.

If the child is in immediate danger, call emergency services. In the U.S., 988 offers crisis support. Follow local safeguarding rules for suspected abuse or neglect.