

Using helpful self-talk to cope

The following examples are for parents and carers to use at home. They are most suitable for older primary aged children. The methods described can also be adapted by teaching staff to help children cope with fears and worries at school.

What we say to ourselves affects how we feel. Thinking that a situation is too scary can make it so. Unhelpful self-talk increases children's anxious feelings and can make it more difficult for them to manage fears and worries. Self-talk includes all the things children say to themselves silently, as well as the things they sometimes say out loud. By contrast, when the things children say to themselves are helpful and encouraging, they support good coping skills and self-confidence.

The following example shows how unhelpful self-talk has increased 12 year old Adam's fears about going to high school the following year.

| Situation | What Adam says to himself: | How he feels: |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| School orientation visit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know anyone here. There are too many new faces. They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me. What if I don't make any friends? What if the teachers are mean? They expect you to do a lot of work. What if I can't keep up? It's too hard. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alone Overwhelmed by strangers Panicky Lacks confidence |
| At home | What Adam says to his mother | How he tries to cope |
| Tells mother | "I don't want to go." | Wants to avoid the feared situation |

Adam's unhelpful self-talk has made his original problem much bigger. It has convinced him that he won't be able to cope at high school. For Adam to learn to manage his fears, he needs to learn to replace his unhelpful self-talk with helpful thinking. Parents and carers can help him to practice thinking in ways that are more helpful. Asking Adam why he doesn't want to go to high school and helping him look more realistically at his fears, might be a good place to start.

| Adam's unhelpful thinking: | How to support helpful thinking: | Better ways to look at it: |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know anyone here. There are too many new faces. They all seem to know one another, but they're ignoring me. What if I don't make any friends? What if the teachers are mean? They expect you to do a lot of work. What if I can't keep up? It's too hard. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Empathise:</i> I can see you are worried about going to high school. There are lots of new things for you and for everybody else. <i>Challenge:</i> What makes you so sure they're not looking for a new friend? <i>Suggest:</i> You can use your friendship skills to get to know them. <i>Remind:</i> What have you done before when you've had a problem to deal with? Why not see this as a new adventure? <i>Emphasise the positives:</i> There are a lot more freedoms for high schoolers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know anyone because I am new. I'm not the only one. There will be lots of other new kids. I am good at making friends. I will soon get to know people. The teacher I met didn't seem too bad. There's no point worrying about something that may not be a problem. Lots of other kids will be in the same boat. I just have to remember to ask for help if I need it. It sounds like they have some good programs. |

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au