

Resilience

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IN THIS TRANSCRIPT

1. How can I help my child feel safe in an uncertain world?
2. Should I talk to my child about difficult things happening in the world?
3. What if my child sees something upsetting online or on the news?
4. My child is anxious or fixated on scary news, what should I do?
5. Why does my autistic or ADHD child react so strongly to news or change?
6. How do I prepare my child for hard things without creating fear?

1. How can I help my child feel safe in an uncertain world?

Kia ora, I'm Catherine Gallagher and I'm a clinical psychologist by trade and I work at an organisation in Otatahi called START and that supports children, youth and adults who have experienced sexual harm. So I'm really happy to be here today. Nice, and I'm Melanie and I work for Mana Ake, so I do one-to-one support for children in primary schools and I'm very excited to talk to you today about resilience. So shall we dive in? Absolutely. So in a world where there is so much going on and sometimes it feels like we don't have any control, how can I as a parent help children feel safe? Look, it's such a good question and I think the interesting answer is going to be that we don't start with the kids, we start with us.

So I think that if we are able to do things that help us feel safe, then our nervous systems beautifully talk to each other and so if our babies can be in the presence of a settled nervous system, and that doesn't mean a perfectly calm one, because I don't think that exists, but if they can be in the presence of a calm and settled nervous system then that makes everything feel better and our brains work better and we think and we feel better. So in terms of fundamentally, what we need to be doing is taking care of ourselves and reminding ourselves that we are enough, because our kids are looking to us and whatever they have to go through, if they have the experience of going through it with someone who cares for them and has their back, then everything is experienced in a more settled and safe way.

Right... And then, so how can I build confidence and resilience in myself to cope with life's challenges that arise as an adult? Well, I mean the interesting thing is that it's going to be relevant for you and it's also going to be relevant for your baby too, your child because I think that the fundamental way in which we learn stuff is to practice. And I think, you know, again, as a parent or as an adult in our own right, I think we can get trapped in that idea of if I'm protected or if I protect them then I'm doing a good job as a parent.

Or if I'm protected from stress then I'm doing a good job of you know sorting that out for myself um the reality is that life's got some hard bits in it and I wish it didn't but it does and so both for ourselves and for our young people um one of the ways in which we build our resilience um is to have exposure to tough stuff with support and I think that's the challenge right, is those two things can coexist we can be going through a tough time and we can be supportive while going through it and I think in terms of building confidence you

know hopefully by the time you're an adult you've got to the other side of tough experiences and have a bit more of a sense that I can do this.

For our young people they haven't had as much life as us and so they probably haven't come up against challenges and got to the other side of them, so they haven't got a felt sense of hey I can do this. So again as a parent um you know either for ourselves or for our young people it's how do we get through experiences and then reflect back and go well you know what helped me through that, um who was in that with me, um what did I do well, what do I need to keep learning from, because fundamentally our brains really what drives our brains is a desire for for knowing what happens next so prediction is a really big part of every part of our functioning so from a cellular level from a you know a muscular level from a neuro system, you know nervous system level where all our brain is always trying to work out what happens next.

True. So it can develop the resources or identify the resources or bring about the resources so it can deal with what it thinks is going to happen next and how it's going to work out and so if we are going in blind, we're looking to other people to know "how do I handle this situation" so as little people we're looking to our grown-ups to first of all kind of help give us clues as to how we might handle it and then over time we're handling it more and more ourselves so we build up our own predictive templates to know hey I might not know how to deal with this situation but I know how to deal with tough situations I know how to feel messy but then actually know how I can reach out for support and be able to get to the other side of this so it's really just about that practice so that we build up some accurate templates okay so we can say karma ish.

yes so it's drawing on previous experience and being able to say I was brave before or I got through a tough situation and that means I should be able to handle this new tough situation yeah absolutely and we need reminding of that sometimes right because the way our brains operate is you know one of the most fundamental or basic predictive systems is our survival one so if we feel frightened or the situation we're exposed to is really unsettling yeah yeah then we can sometimes go to those basics like the whole fight flight freeze which means that we're not thinking too much right and so again um that idea of of how do i um calm down enough or feel safe enough this would be the grown-up step in right is to go if it is a really scary situation how do we create enough safety around that young person so that they can start thinking rather than just reacting um and then that means they're able to start um developing some other ways of responding in situations that are a bit more nuanced and aren't just about punching someone to get out of the room, or um freezing it's actually about hey maybe i need to use my words or maybe i need to take a deep breath here to be able to calm myself down.

yeah so just taking a step back for a moment how would you define resilience what does it mean?

Look as someone who you know has lived through the Christchurch earthquakes and various other challenges that we've had here in otatahi i think resilience is a bit of a its an interesting word well i have an interesting relationship with it because i think when we've gone through tough times there was almost a sense i don't know if people remember that resilience was something you had or you didn't have and if you weren't coping it was kind of like almost like you didn't have enough resilience and i think i'd like to challenge that idea because obviously resilience is about bouncing back you know and you know going through a tough time and and resourcing yourself to get through but actually some stuff is really hard and so not coping with it or needing some help is a bit of a challenge i think that's a really interesting word well i have an interesting help, and support is not not having enough resilience.

Resilience is part of recognizing that we need some help and support. I love that. So I think that that idea of going, I have it or I don't, it's kind of a whole package really. So for me, resilience is, yes, it's bouncing back, but bouncing back means sometimes we need someone to hold us while we're bouncing. And sometimes we're bouncing as a rubber ball. And sometimes we're bouncing like a glass thats in risk of crashing and shattering. So we need a bit more support at times than other times. Yes. Oh, that's a beautiful definition. I really appreciate that. Because I have heard in the past, like you said, resilience is either you are a resilient person or you're not. But we all can have some sense of resilience.

But if we've got some support around us, it makes the bouncing a little bit easier. Yeah, absolutely. And of course, you know, we're going to have different levels of that at different times, because it might be that if everything else is equal, and I'm feeling relatively settled and supported, I can cope with some pretty serious stuff. But there might be other times when my resources are limited. And in fact, just someone looking at me the wrong way, has me in floods of tears or has me kind of really struggling with where I see I fit. So it's a changeable feast.

2. Should I talk to my child about difficult things happening in the world?

Okay, let's talk about talking about difficult topics. Should I tell my children about things that are happening in the world? We turn on the news, on the TV, see all manner of things. We've got young people that are on social media. They're seeing all sorts of weird and wonderful things happening around the world. So should I tell my kids about what is actually going on? Again, really good question because I think that in a way your question answered it because they already know, but they probably know bits. And I think that's the

bit where we can kind of cross our fingers and say, right, well, if I'm going to tell my child something challenging, it'll be a perfect time and it'll be a blank slate and I'll be calm and they'll be interested and then I'll have this tough conversation.

That's not kind of how it rolls, right, is that they might come home having already heard a bit of it. Or they might come home and be upset about something that we don't even know about. Or it might be that we're watching television and something comes up that kind of gives us both a bit of a fright. Or we get a phone call that we weren't expecting and suddenly I'm really upset. So, in fact, often these conversations can happen at times when we weren't expecting them. So my first, I suppose, invitation to parents would be don't wait for conversations to be the big ones. That as you grow in confidence about being a parent, you know, that we're having conversations with our kids all of the time, you know, about everything.

You know, we're wanting to encourage them to listen and to learn and to ask questions so that when there are tough things that come up, that foundation has already been kind of established a little bit. And I think also having conversations about how you might hear stuff at school that puzzles you or is a bit confusing. And this door is always open, you know, even if you've learned about it in a way that probably was meaning you weren't supposed to be watching social media while you were at school. You know, even if you've learnt about it in a way that maybe you were worried that your mum might be upset or dad might get angry, you know, or vice versa. Actually, we've got a policy that if you're sitting with something that's worrying you, you can always come through this door.

So coming back to your question of should we talk about it? Absolutely. And I think it's about, again, taking that really big, deep breath and know that whatever's going to come next out of your mouth will come out more smoothly if you're more regulated, right? And so it's not about telling your child to take a breath. It's about you taking that breath. And having a think. And even saying to kids, that's such a good question. Can I just take a moment? You know, I just want to think about that. Or actually, I don't know the answer to that question. So I might go and do some thinking about that or to go and do some finding out. Or I know who I could ask about that. And then we can talk about this thing together.

I think if there's big things happening in the world, we also don't want to protect our kids from the fact that bad things happen. Now, that doesn't mean that we're exposing them to it and kind of overexposing them. And we can talk a little bit more about that in a second. But what it means is if there's stuff that's real for them in their world and it's going to impact on them, then taking a moment to go, how do I lean into that and give them a frame that's kind of developmentally appropriate, maybe child appropriate, because we're going to have some kids who are really curious and some kids who won't be, some kids who love talking, some kids who might want to learn about things in different ways.

So knowing your child, leaning into these conversations, and giving that message that this is a bit of a drop and run and we can have do-overs. So actually, I don't have one chance to talk about this issue with you. That if a scary thing's going on in the world, you know, the political scene, there's wars, there's petrol prices, that actually, yeah, there's some stressful stuff. First of all, we're going to be okay. And, you know, we're together. You've got me. We're going to be okay. But yeah, there's some tough stuff. And do you have any questions for me? Which is a great thing, because they might be sitting with some burning ones that they haven't kind of, that we haven't thought of or covered.

But also, how do we give them enough to satisfy them and to help make sense of all those other bits of information they might have gathered over time? But not too much that we're wanting to kind of, in a way, put a full stop at the end of it. This is an ongoing conversation. Okay. So creating a safe space that our kids can actually ask us questions. And having conversations regularly. Just about every ordinary, everyday things. And saying, you know, the world can be a tricky place, but please, if you've got questions, come to me. I might not have all the answers, but perhaps we can figure it out together. Or I can go away and I can come back to you. Absolutely. And so for some of your kids, for example, if they aren't, if they're going to sit there and grunt at that, you know, that doesn't mean we don't still put some ideas out there.

You know, you might have kids who, as I said, love talking. You might have others who go, whatever, Mum. You know. But those are the ones you go, yeah, I get it. But I just need to kind of plant the seed with you. And you know the door's open. And you might be sitting there waiting for that seed to grow. It might never grow with you. It might never grow, you know, and hopefully it grows with someone. They know at least talking about tough stuff is normal and natural and good for them. Right. And I think you said also about age-appropriate information. Maybe not giving too much. Too soon. Yeah, it's really important because, you know, remember what I said about our brains, you know, being predictive little beings, is that actually if we're exposed to lots and lots of big information and scary information, then that does impact on us in terms of, or it can impact on us in terms of the safety in our world.

So I think for a little person to know there are wars happening, they might not necessarily need to know the details of that. But what they might need to know is that grown-ups don't always make good decisions. You know, and people in power sometimes have to be reminded that there are people who are vulnerable that need to be taken care of. Or what is the thing that we can do? So, you know, there might be a collection that's happening at your local organisation or in church or whatever it is that you're going to. And we could be involved with that. So it's that idea of, yes, things happen, but what's our agency in this? You know, can we do something to help

even if it's in a small scale, or even just, you know, having those people in our minds because they're going through a really tough time and they weren't able to go to school, you know, because their school no longer exists.

And so actually let's be thankful for our school. So how do we remind kids of what their agency is and what they've got some control over? And if our young people are asking us questions that we just don't know the answers to, where do we go from there? Well, I think you've just described my parenting, really. I think, you know, often, I mean, because that's the other thing, too, is I've got, you know, older boys now, but, you know, they've also got questions that I've never thought of or they might have opinions that are different from mine. This is the beauty and discomfort of adolescence especially where they might start to develop their own opinions about things. I think in general it's okay for your kids to see you as imperfect.

So I think when they're little, they look at you and you're the sun, moon and stars, and that can be quite a nice feeling but quite a bit of pressure, right? You know, and as they get a bit older and they're asking questions, for you to actually model, you know, I don't know, or, man, it's such a good question, it's quite unsettling, isn't it, not to know? Let's talk about what do you think about this? Because some of those questions might be factual. Actually, let's Google it together. But some of them might be values-based. You know, some of them might be about beliefs about things. And I might not actually have given that too much thought, or I might have an immediate response. But then actually when that seed's been planted in me, I might go away and think about it and go, oh, that's a really good question.

I might come back to it and say, you know how you raised that the other day? I've been giving it some thought, or your dad and I were talking about it, or, you know, maybe that's something you could talk about at school. You know, that idea of we're not wanting to necessarily, well, again, developmentally, when they're little, they probably just want to know. Is it going to be okay? Yes, it's going to be okay. Sweet. Mm. But when they get a bit older, we're wanting to potentially teach them or continue to support them to be critical evaluators of the information that's coming in. So those more curious questions or, you know, setting a platform for discussion is probably the thing that they're able to deal with in terms of their cognitive abilities or their ways of thinking in the world.

Yeah. And it can be dissatisfying as a parent because you think, I'd just like them to accept what I've got to say, tie it up in a bow, and we're all sorted on that issue, and away we go. Yes. But that's not often how it rolls, right? Yes. Is that it'll come back in another way. Yes. And so I think the parenting skill at that moment is to create a safe enough space to have those kinds of conversations as opposed to instilling in them kind of the right answer, if that makes sense. Yeah. And I think it's one thing to talk about what we've seen on the news, wars overseas, etc. But what about when we come to some of those big topics? And our young people are asking us questions about things that are, like you said, that are values-based like racism, gender, violence, climate change.

How do we handle some of those big topics? I think you can ask adults for ourselves in our conversations with the other. We don't really necessarily know how to handle those big topics. So I think it's, again, it's a good question. I think the thing we want to instill in our kids is an awareness that actually there is, there is unfairness in the world, that there are things that actually need to be aware of. And I think the balancing act is that those things exist and also, you know, that they can be okay as well. Does that make sense? Because if we put too much emphasis on everything that's kind of unfair and not okay in the world and not enough emphasis that you have some control and some agency around those things, then kids can start to get stuck in that place of feeling guilty or not wanting to look at it because it's just too big.

So if we enter into those conversations about racism or about gender inequality, then it's about going, what does that feel for you when we talk about this stuff? And what bits do you have control over? How could you influence? If you notice someone saying something that was racist, gosh, how hard would that be to step up and actually be an active bystander who goes, hey, I don't talk like that. Or having an awareness, for example, of how colonialism has impacted on people's access to things. Again, that's a big adult concept. But as a little person, it might be about going, hey, everybody's experience of the world is different. And you happen to have this colour face and this gender, and that might mean you have this experience, but others might have a very different experience.

So you're starting just to kind of, I suppose, give some ideas or some themes that are normalising the fact that people have different experiences and how do we be curious and humble in the presence of other people's experiences? And so, again, when they're at school and they're learning about different cultures, how do we not make that token? How do we actually go, well, that's great. How about you teach us? Could we say, you know, at the beginning of our meal, could we say a karakia or could you teach me that? Because I actually don't know how to pronounce that very well. So how do we normalise those things and turn them into some of the teachers for us and make space for those discussions?

Which might be very different. It's very different from, you know, maybe our parents or their parents not coming from a place of curiosity and a place of humbleness, sort of we're adults, we are the big people, we have all the answers. But what I'm hearing from you is we need to humble ourselves as adults and also come from a place of curiosity that we can learn from our children or learn together. Absolutely. That's lovely. And I think it is that balancing act of going, you know, especially if you've got a bit of an anxious

pants, that we're not saying nothing is certain. What we're saying is that, yeah, there's a lot of things that aren't okay or that feel unfair and there are some things that you have some control over.

And so, you know, life's about working out that balance, hey, and I'm here to help you work that out. Yeah. Nice.

3. What if my child sees something upsetting online or on the news?

Okay, social media and big world events. Like you said, they might be seeing it at school, they might have snuck onto social media and found out something that they shouldn't. Do you think children should even be watching the news? Look, I have memories of growing up and watching the 6 o'clock news with my dad or kind of that being in the background and things. And I think that we were probably safer back then because they didn't get their cameras into so many places because the reality is that the accessibility of information was so much more limited. I think it comes down to, again, that idea of how do you titrate exposure? So again, they are going to have access to this stuff. So how do you teach them to be responsible with that?

How do you have good firm boundaries around use of social media or their online presence? How do you teach them to be responsible with regard to that? And obviously, the littler they are, the more control you have over that. But I think, again, as they get older, it's about how do you negotiate and help them start to pick up, well, when do I... They've still got to need the controls, of course. They still need the internet potentially turned off at a certain time because it's hard to self-manage something that we're really interested in and curious about. But how do we teach them to be those critical evaluators? And I think the other part... Part of this is continuing to be curious about your child and pay attention.

Now, as I say this, I'm really aware to say that lots of our kids and us are pretty good actors and we can have some stuff going on and no one would ever know. So this isn't about parents beating themselves up if their kids have been going through a hard time and actually they haven't had an awareness of that. But it's also an invitation to say, you know, how do we slow down enough in our busy lives and be curious and notice changes and notice if they're a bit quieter, or notice if they're hiding away in their room a little bit more? And again, that doesn't mean there's a problem necessarily, but it means that we might create some space to check in about that.

You know, if they're showing an opinion towards something or a reaction to something, how do we slow down? Or again, if you are aware that obviously there's some things going on in the world, even to, again, open that conversation up to go, look, I'm aware that I can get a bit freaked out by the stuff I see. Has anyone else... Have you had that experience? Yeah. And reinforcing as we said before that message that there's nothing you can tell me that we can't work through together, even if how you got access to it was breaking some rules. Let's deal with what's actually worrying you and then we'll deal with the rule breaking. Yeah. And we'll find a way through that stuff. But that's how you build that platform for those open conversations.

Yeah. So you've got that foundation of them feeling safe to come to you. So you've got a child and you notice, like you said, maybe they're... They're not going away in their room or they seem quiet or they seem troubled about something because they've heard something at school that's disturbing or they've seen it online before they've heard it from us at home. How do we deal with that? Well, I think all of the above, right? Because then they might tell us about it, you know, or if we notice that change, we're going to check in with them. And, you know, again, there's no guarantee that if we check in with them, they're going to tell us. So sometimes it might just be that, you know, you're joining a few imaginary dots and saying, hey, look, I noticed you've been a bit quieter.

You know, anything going on? I know this stuff's happening over here. Yeah. You know, you can tell me that stuff, hey? So that you're kind of, you know, throwing out some options there. And sometimes kids won't ever tell us. But that still doesn't mean as a parent that we're powerless. What we can then do is just go, you know, we do hear things or see things that can be unsettling and our brain can get a bit of a fright and doesn't quite know what to do. Right. What to do with it. And so if we can kind of take a breath and if you feel brave enough to talk about it or not, you know, just notice your brain's going to take a wee bit of time to run that through to make sense of it a little bit. Yeah.

And then it'll probably settle. But if it doesn't, you know, you can come and talk to me about it. Yeah, that's great. And if it's not you, then there might be other people in their world that they can talk to. So having that conversation about who are some other safe people that they might feel more comfortable saying this stuff in front of because I don't want to worry you or upset you. Yes. Now, what about TikTok and YouTube? Because we know there's that term, you know, misinformation and disinformation. So it's one thing that maybe they've seen something online or they've seen it on the news, but they've seen something on TikTok or YouTube and maybe it's a bit of a skewed vision of what's actually going on.

And our child has become upset because of what they've seen. What next? Well, I think, again, part of it is how do we get access to what's upset them, you know? And so hopefully if they're telling us, that's half the battle, right? Because then you have a chance to kind of, you know, I think it depends on the reaction because you've said upset. So if they're upset by it, then in a way you've got a kind of a natural in because they're kind of going, oh, I'm upset. And so you kind of can be curious, you can offer support, you can kind of

get them to talk it through and give space. One of the other challenges can be is if they're not upset, and they actually agree with it. Because that can be another challenge, right?

Is that they go, well, actually, I'm totally leaning into this way because this is my favourite influencer, I'm probably showing my age by saying influencer. You know, this person said this and that must be true and you don't know what you're talking about, mum. That can be another whole big challenge for us, right? And what I've learned through not doing this myself is sometimes meeting it head on doesn't get us very far. But again, even having different opinions with our kids, you know, if we've done the groundwork, or are doing the groundwork, shall I say, having ruptures where we disagree or have moments where we're not on the same page is actually normal and natural. And it's how do we stay calm enough to know this is actually part of development and we can kind of regroup and come back to it.

I mean, I think the interesting thing about TikTok is that we can, or, you know, those other options, is that we can take an opinion as a parent that, talk to the hand, you know, actually, you know, it's just silly, it's wrong. Mm-hmm. And a lot of it, potentially, is, but actually, you know, my son's come to me a few times and has a little quip from TikTok, and it's like, man, can I write that down? You know, because there's actually some really good stuff on there as well. So I think like anything, as a parent, you know, it's being curious about your child's world. And so if we're curious about our child's world, then if they are watching TikTok, it's getting alongside them and saying, well, which are the ones you're looking at?

Like, you laughed at that. That just seems ridiculous. Like, tell me what was funny about that. And so that we're not potentially, sometimes it might be that's just inappropriate and you've lost your phone privileges because that's not cool. But, you know, how do I be curious? How do I get alongside them? How do I understand, you know, why they laughed or what that situation was so that they can invite you in? And if they aren't being responsible, then it's about how do you kind of shorten the leash a little bit and go actually, you know, that freedom you were having, you know, actually, I'm not so comfortable with that. So we need to actually create some greater restrictions because some of that content can be unsafe.

Yes. So your biggest clue is going to be their conduct, really, and how they're functioning.

4. My child is anxious or fixated on scary news, what should I do?

So you've created this safe space. You can come and talk to me about anything. If you're upset, you've seen something. But my child's seen something and now is incredibly anxious about everything, thinking about all these things that are going on in the world. Would it be best for me to say, okay, we're just going to avoid the news. We're not going to watch the news because it makes you too anxious. I think that can be a really appropriate strategy. Because, again, I think the challenge is to work out, is this actually a realistic response to a really scary situation? And I think at the moment it's probably pretty realistic because there's a lot of scary stuff that we have no control over. And alongside that, it's going, who's my child?

And if my child is a bit of an anxious pants, then, in fact, for them in particular, it might be that another child might be like, oh, that freaks me out. But I can kind of move on to something else. Whereas for my child, it's like, no, that, I suppose, leans into my other beliefs about the world not being particularly safe or actually, you know, there's going to be problems ahead and what will I do and what if this happens and what if that happens? And so if your child's anxious, then that, in a way, becomes the problem we want to address. So, you know, then it might be about boundary and exposure. But it might also be talking to them about, actually, that worry brain of yours seems to grab hold of stuff and run with them.

So how do we support you about your worry brain? So not how do we fix the world, but how do we actually give something we can kind of bring back to basics a little bit and help you support yourself with that worry brain and how it functions? Yeah, that makes so much sense. So we're noticing that the child has seen something. The child is anxious. And you talk about the worry brain. But what if the child becomes fixated? On this particular thing, of this thing that is really taking hold and has caused so much anxiety in them? Well, I think it's, again, if we're taking that frame of worry being the problem or anxiety being the problem as opposed to, you know, the thing that's out there. And again, of course, I'm not saying those things are minor.

But if they've become fixated, then sometimes the challenge is to go, actually, you know, we need to take quite a firm response to this, which is actually... It's the same as if they were washing their hands 50 times or if they were refusing to go to bed or if they were refusing to go to school, that actually their worry brain, their need for reassurance, them going over and over this thing, has actually started to get them stuck. So, you know, we want to acknowledge that. We want to validate the fact that their worry brains can be really upsetting. And actually, then we want to put some boundaries around this because maybe their fixation has resulted in them asking lots of questions and they're wanting your reassurance.

So we might have to pull that back and go, look, you know, I get it, your worry brain is really, you know, kicking off at the moment. But actually, if we give our worry brains too much attention, then in fact, they tend to get bossier and noisier and more stroppy. So actually,

I'm going to give your worry brain five worry questions a day. Choose them wisely or we're going to pick a worry time, you know. So there are some specific anxiety management strategies that can be helpful and boundary exposure to scary stuff can be. And your child's not going to go, thanks very much, mum. They're going to go... They're going to go, what? You know, I've kind of made the conclusion or come to the conclusion that your reassurance is exactly what I need.

And that's where, as parents, sometimes we have to pull up our big girl pants or big boy pants and go, that's what your worry brain is demanding. But in actual fact, if I keep giving you reassurance, it's actually making the worry brain more stropky. So I'm deciding what we talk about at the dinner table, you know, and actually worry brain doesn't get a say here. Does that make sense? Yeah. So it's that balance of, it's kind of being that warm rock, you know, that we want to be compassionate, we want to acknowledge the tough stuff, but we actually also want to go, that's enough now. Yeah. This worry brain's like a bully. It's moved in and it's getting a lot of say. And we want to shrink it down to size.

How do we differentiate between the worry brain that's sort of fixated on this particular topic or a child that is just curious about something that might be a little bit odd? Or, yeah, look, you know, there's probably, there's crossover there, hey? I think the clue would probably be the distress the child was under or the kind of rigidity or the inflexibility of the child. So if a child's curious, they can probably be light with it, if that makes sense. And they can probably be shifted from it or distracted from it, you know, if that makes sense. Or something else comes up and it's another new shiny toy over here. Like, look over there. And again, the types of questions might be interesting because they might be a bit more, you know, broad or a bit more curious about, you know, other aspects of this issue.

Whereas probably a worry brain is going to be focused on threat, you know, and it's going to keep coming back to that threat. Am I okay? Are we safe? There's going to be some rigidity with which the themes they come back to. And you might also notice that the more rigid they get, the more obsessive they get about things, probably their lives get a little bit smaller and they get a little bit more unhappy and they get a little bit more unsettled. So you're probably going to see some evidence and there are other aspects of functioning. Yeah. Now you use the word obsessed thinking about what about just a general obsession with scary topics? So whether it started with something that they've seen on the news that was a bit unsettling, but then it kind of snowballs into this intense interest in all things scary.

How might we handle that as a parent or caregiver? Yeah. Good question. Because I think, you know, temperamentally, like I personally am someone who hates scary movies and, you know, growing up, had friends, you know, my husband, you know, loves scary movie, you know, and so there can be a temperamental difference for people who like a fright, you know, who like a bit of, you know, yeah, the unexpected and they can giggle at it or, you know, those kinds of things. And so, you know, it may well be, that's what we're talking about. You've got a child who likes to, Oh, I like a horror or I like something like that. And, and of course, if we're thinking about a five-year-old, we're not exposing them to horror movies, but, you know, if they're a 15-year-old and they like a good horror because they like being frightened, then, you know, in a way, not my cup of tea.

And of course you want to look at, you know, what the impacts of that are on the child. Because if they know they can't sleep, then we might think, okay, you might've liked it, but not so good for you. But I think, you know, if we're thinking about that behavior starting when they, just after they'd had a tough experience, you could, you could then be curious about the fact that, you know, they, this is part of their brain trying to work it out. So if I've had a scary experience and I'm sitting with threat, then actually my brain might be in this revved up state. And in fact, especially if I've had lots of lifetime experiences of being in this revved up state, it might become my normal. And so danger might almost, or threat might almost organize my nervous system or feel very familiar to my nervous system.

Interesting. So kids might, might seek it out, not necessarily consciously, but calm might actually feel a little bit unsettling because they think, wait a minute, when's the next scary thing going to happen? So I might as well keep myself in this, not consciously, of course, but this revved up state. And so again, that's almost the other extreme. So if trauma has been part of the picture, then you might have kids seeking out those kinds of experiences. But you might also have someone, if it's a more short term kind of, you know, preoccupation. Then again, it's been curious with them about it. It's kind of saying, Hey, look, I noticed that you keep going. I mean, it's like when the earthquakes happened, you know, the news was on and people kind of keep going back and seeking it out.

And it's like, I think we might just turn that off now because I'm noticing again, the impact is it's unsettling you. And we now know what's going on and that's enough. Now let's, let's think and talk about something else. Now, if they easily move away, great. If they keep going back to it, then you might have to be more firm with the boundaries you set around that. Okay. What about the child who is completely unfazed? So the opposite end of the spectrum, not the nervous pants, but the child who's just, there's all, you know, all weird and wonderful things happening that other children might be quite upset about. My child's completely unbothered. Should I be concerned about that? Look, there are very few psychopaths, so, so in a way, no, you don't even like, you know, the reality is we can worry about, are they morally bankrupt?

Do they not have a sort of a social compass? Or a moral compass? You know, the reality is little people are pretty egocentric and so it's pretty normal for them to go, well, yeah, what about me or, you know, Oh, what's over there? You know, that's actually, you know, can be absolutely fine in terms of people not necessarily bothered by things. And it might actually be quite a healthy response. Um, I think that, you know, again, that doesn't mean that as a, as a parent, you don't get them to acknowledge or you acknowledge with them to say, Hey, I know this hasn't affected us, but there are people who are, who are really hurt. Hmm. And so sometimes with a child like that, it might be about going like, imagine if your favorite toy, you know, got broken and how would that make you feel?

So we can have some conversations about how to support empathy and compassion for people who might be, you know, um, going through a tough, tough time. And if there are opportunities to support a child who's going through, um, those kinds of challenges, then that can be great. But in a way, if a child's kind of going, Oh yeah, I, I feel really sorry for them. But actually I'm not in the head space to kind of spend too much time thinking about that. You know, I don't see that as being a big, a big issue unless of course it means their lack of empathy means that they are showing a lack of care or in fact they, their social behaviors aren't showing reciprocity around the idea that actually my, my behavior impacts on other people.

5. Why does my autistic or ADHD child react so strongly to news or change?

Let's talk about some of our young people who maybe are a little bit different. For example, autistic or ADHD. So thinking about my child that is either autistic or ADHD or auDHD, reacting so strongly to something that they've seen on the news or something that impacts them or something that creates change. How can we support our young people that are neurodiverse? Look, again, really important to think about this stuff because to some extent everything that we've been talking about is still highly relevant. I think that often what can go along with neurodiversity is just that increased sensitivity. And also that increased load, like the world can feel like a bit of a tougher place because there's more incoming that my nervous system doesn't quite know what to do with.

So my revs are just generally higher. So I think, you know, sometimes the rigidity with regard to neurodiversity can be explained or partly explained by the fact that if there's so much kind of internal chaos or incoming, then one of the ways I might handle it is just to lock down and go, well, I can feel OK because I know what's happening next. It's almost like that predictive stuff on steroids, right? My brain has predicted what's happening next. So everything is OK in the world. So then if you try and give me an orange cup as opposed to the pink one that I was expecting. Suddenly it's all gone to hell in a handbasket. So that kind of rigid, explosive stuff can be sometimes their attempt to try and manage, you know, the uncertainty or the feelings of kind of discomfort or anxiety that's happening on the inside.

So I think, you know, again, knowing your child or knowing the child you're working with is really important. Being aware of what the stresses that child might be experiencing are. And again. As I said at the very beginning, kids need exposure to stress, but it might be that for your child, the exposure needs to be in smaller bite sized chunks. They might need greater scaffolding and they might need that scaffolding in place for a little bit longer or even permanently in place in some cases, because in fact, their revs, you know, are so much more vulnerable to being kicked off. Yeah. But I think, again, seeking support. Knowing your child and looking at the bigger picture, the bigger context, as well as what's happening right now can give you some clues.

And if I'm doing all that and my child keeps asking me the same question repeatedly because perhaps there's a hyper fixation there or an intense interest, how do I handle that? Firmly but gently. Well, like that. Firmly but gently, right? I think that, again, we can be curious about what's behind it. And it might be that you utilize some of those worry questions again, or you might have some quite, you know, clear behavioral kind of expectations around those kinds of things. But, you know, again, the proof's in the pudding. So if this is just, if this fixation is something that is bringing them pleasure, you know, they're interested in Thomas the Tank or whatever it might be, and they want to ask about it or the particular game that they're into, then, you know, you might manage that certainly by putting some boundaries around it.

But it might be slightly different from one that they're fixated on and getting really distressed and worried about. So the boundaries are still important. We're still validating, hey, I can see you love this, or I can see this is really worrying you, but the boundaries are still really, really important because, you know, if we are, in a way, continuing to answer those questions, then we're kind of giving that reassurance a big high five. And sometimes, ironically, if we give our worry questions more airtime, we're kind of feeding them in a way. So we sometimes have to counterintuitively be quite firm. And the presence of that stuff. Now, again, if someone has a neurodiversity, then that firmness might be in, again, little bite-sized chunks.

It might be with a whole lot of support alongside that firmness. But ultimately, our young ones need to know that this is my nervous system. This is what works for me. And how does that, you know, interact with the world around me? And how do I be realistic? Because I think if we're setting, we don't want to set up our kids to go into day that they're hoping they're going to have, if that makes sense. So, you know, this is the kind of day that works well for me. Great. Good if we know that. But if that's not the day I'm going to

have, then how do I not then spend a lot of my day feeling frustrated, angry, let down, and, you know, all those sort of less than comfortable emotions. So one of our roles as parents is to go, you know, who has to help our kids see themselves as they are actually.

And go, well, what's the kind of day I'm likely to have? You know, who am I actually? What are the things I find hard? And if I find things hard, when do I need a bit more scaffolding? And actually, when can you let me fly a little bit? So how do I plan for the day I'm actually going to have? Can be a good way to help us feel a bit more settled in the world.

6. How do I prepare my child for hard things without creating fear?

And thinking about, you said, preparing our children for the day that they're likely to have. And I guess being honest with our young people that things aren't always going to go the way we want them to. We might be hopeful for the day that we want, but it might not go that way. So how can we, I guess, prepare our children without creating fear? Well, I think in that idea of preparing for the day that you're likely to have, you know, sometimes part of that work is to go and, you know, that game you want to play at lunchtime that you've got really clear rules for, others might not have those same rules. Does that make sense? Or, you know, that party that you want to get invited to, actually, you might not.

And so what's that going to feel like? So some of that preparatory work you can do can help our kids have more realistic expectations about the world as it is. It's a tough one because I think that, you know, if you actually want to know, how the world really is, it's probably quite good to ask a depressed person, right? Because, you know, it's a bit shitty. Am I allowed to say that? It's a bit shitty sometimes. The world has tough stuff in it. And I think that, you know, most of us walk around in this delusional bubble that says, if I'm a good person, good stuff's going to happen to me. And that's actually a healthy place to be, right? A little bit of healthy delusion. But when we've had tough things, it's almost like that delusional bubble can get popped a bit.

And we're then confronted. We're then confronted by the reality that actually really good people have horrible things that happen to them. And actually these things can take some time to heal from. And we will heal. But, you know, some tough things can happen. So I think our challenge is to support people to go, you know, yes, tough things happen. And we might not have control. But what do we have control over? And interestingly enough, with time, what you notice happens is that even if we've been exposed to some really tough things, our little delusional bubble, is fighting to get reasserted, you know, and that idea of going, actually, you know, we kind of, in a way, can stay in that raw state of, gosh, it's life, it's death, it's these big themes.

And actually then over time, slowly but surely, we get back to worrying about what's in my lunchbox, you know. And that's a healthy, protective place that our brain kind of takes us to. So how do we balance those two things out? So do you think that children can become too protected then? Absolutely. Absolutely. Because I think that, you know, how else are they going to deal with life if, in fact, they're not getting those little bite-sized chunks or just exposure to what's happening around them? And I'm not saying we go, hey, kid, you know, look at the political system. You know, there's wars over there. As we've just been saying, see them in front of the telly and go, really, we've got no chance here.

You know, we don't want to give that message. But we also don't want to give the message that actually, first of all, you know, you're never going to be exposed to hard stuff because that's actually not accurate. And also the inadvertent message we can give as the parent, we're always running interference, is that you can't cope with it unless I'm here to protect you. So coming back to that very first question you asked about how do you build confidence, actually we build confidence by being alongside our kids. You know, obviously when they're little, little, we're in front, you know. But over time we're moving to the side and we're with them while they're going through hard stuff.

I mean, as I said, you know, I work in a service where people have experienced sexual harm. And you could imagine, you know, that could be the worst thing that someone could experience. But actually what we notice is that what even makes it worse is when people have the experience of going through that alone. So as a parent, if you're going through something with your young person, you may not have been able to protect them from stuff because, again, life happens. Yeah. But don't ever underestimate the power of going through it with them because we know that that has so much power to influence your child's healing journey or their journey through accepting these things. So love and support, but just be a bit cautious about the protection.

Okay. So I'm loving, I'm supporting, I'm being cautious about the protection that I'm offering. How do I avoid making their anxiety worse? I think, you know, again, possibly managing our own anxiety because I think if kids, remember what I said about our nervous systems talking to each other? So, you know, if you notice yourself feeling anxious about stuff, that's probably where you need to put your energy, is to go, how do I manage my own anxiety? How do I take care of myself? Because, you know, I say this like I don't do it, right? But as a parent, you know, if I think about a lot of my parenting, it will have been motivated by my own anxiety. My reassurance questions. You know, and here I am busy saying about how you should support your child around theirs.

As parents, we've got ours too, right? Yeah. So, you know, how do we take care of ourselves? How do we notice lots of stuff? Because that'll influence this stuff. Again, if a child's kind of going, oh, I'm fine. But you think, oh, there's a tone. You know, sometimes it's about asking, but if they don't want to tell us, it's about going, okay, well, you know, I'm here if you need me. So that we're not kind of in a way making a big hoo-ha about this.

We're just kind of, the support's available. And it's present. And we're present. But we don't have to kind of spend too much time emphasizing or talking about it because certainly doing too much talking especially if what we're focusing in on is worries, like problem solving, great. Okay. They're present, they're real, we can do something about them but if we're spending two hours a night talking about worries, the what-ifs, the things that haven't even happened yet, then actually we're giving that a lot of attention and that's not so helpful. Okay. So we don't want to feed into the anxiety. We don't want to give it too much air time but how can we prepare our young people for unexpected events especially like how can I prepare my child for an unexpected event when I'm not with them?

I think the good news is that everything we've been talking about is that preparation. So you know if you've had the conversations with kids, if you've modeled to them you know, getting it right but also getting it wrong and then getting it right. You know, like the rupture and repair stuff. Um if we've you know taught them about taking a deep breath when we're feeling worried, if we've talked to them about having realistic expectations around the world, all of this stuff is the foundations and so when they are then confronted by a scary situation, actually letting them know of course they're going to be scared.

That's actually a normal natural response. That's their body fighting to protect them. And if they've actually had um an attachment or a kind of relationship with you where they've reached out and got support, they're probably very likely to do that if you're not around. Because they will have had a predictive model where other people help me. Yeah, reaching out makes me feel better. The other thing is you know give yourself some credit because you're probably not going to put them around too many adults that are unsafe right? So unless that we don't know about that but you know at school the school you choose, the early childhood education system you choose, that the friends that you're around.

Again of course harm can still happen, but the likelihood is if you've had conversations where safe relationships have been supported, and you're involved in that child's life, then even if they're not with you, they're likely to be with people that you trust. Again, not always fool proof, but it reduces the likelihood of harm. And what we know about internal working models, which is a fancy word for saying that we've had enough experiences externally, with support, we tend to internalize those, and again those predictive models, which means that we kind of have even if you're not with me, I have a felt sense of you with me.

So that if I'm feeling I'm safe I know what it feels like to be held, and supported by you, and that doesn't disappear even if you're not in my presence. So just know the groundwork you're doing, matters. And what if my child asks me "am I safe?" When we're factoring in all these things that we're seeing around the world or things that are happening in the playground, things that they're hearing, and my child says to me, "in this big wide world, am I safe?" How do I answer that? Well I'd be curious about, I mean this sounds like a politician's answer, or a psychologist's answer, which is like what's behind that question?

You know? Like I'd be curious about the context, You know? Like if it comes out of the blue, you know what's brought that up hey? you know so be curious about what's behind the question but fundamentally um you know again I think you could say yes because what you're saying is that you know you we've we've got your back so because what is safety safety is about going that whatever you're going to go through you've got people around you who are with you in this and so you're loved, and you're safe. Yeah. Um and so again of course a worry brain is going to go, but what if this? And what if that?

And what if the other thing that's the moment where you go hey actually um there's a lovely um quip from um you know cartoon from Charlie Brown and Snoopy and I think Charlie Brown says you know but Snoopy you know one day we're all going to die um and Snoopy goes yes but on all the other days we're not. You know? And so I think it's about that idea of we're not wanting to kind of um go no we're not going to talk about that we're wanting to acknowledge it, we're wanting to kind of you know go back to where we came from but we also don't want to feed into that idea that if we spend lots of time talking about it, that that's good for them.

But also that that it makes that reality any more real in fact there's a whole lot of days that that you are going to be safe and if on occasion there's some scary things that happen we can create some safety even in the midst of an earthquake or other scary things that happen um and that's in our control. So good thank you so much for this conversation Catherine. Pleasure. for this heaps yeah I think it'll be great for our families that are watching so thank you. My absolute pleasure.