



Holding Hearts in Times of Conflict:



An Age-Based Guide

Infants & Toddlers

Check in with yourself: while our first job as adults is to take care of our own feelings, our emotions can sometimes spill over when the world feels overwhelming, and that is okay so long as we are keeping ourselves and the young people we care for safe. Signs that indicate adult stress may be affecting infants and toddlers include: being fussier or harder to soothe, experiencing changes in their sleeping or eating patterns, or seeming withdrawn.

Hold, hum, sway: Holding your child is inherently soothing for both child and adult. Humming soothes the nervous system, and gentle, rhythmic movement like swaying is deeply regulating. Plant your feet and root into your toes as you hold your child against your chest, hum a song they love, and gently sway. Try making this a regular routine, such as before bedtime, to structure soothing into your day.

Recognize their feelings: Infants and toddlers are unique beings who experience a full spectrum of emotion and are highly attuned to the emotional state of their caregivers. Babies can sense if their emotional needs are recognized and responded to, which is harder to do when the caregiver is distracted by their own worries or fears. Seek out extra support if needed so that you can care for your own emotional well-being as an investment in your ability to attune to and support your child throughout their emotional ups and downs.

Focus on play: Get down on your child's level and give them your full attention for just 20 minutes – set a timer if you need to. For infants, this might look like tummy time, playing peekaboo, or mirroring their sounds and movements to foster attunement. For toddlers, let them take the lead with their activity of choice, such as pretend play, dress-up, exploring outdoors, or art.

Preschool-Aged Children

Lean on routines, rules, and boundaries: Routines, rules, and boundaries provide emotional safety and containment that are vital for children to feel Secure & Calm. Predictability and stability are key for rebuilding feelings of trust and safety after a distressing exposure or event. Children need to know that their caregivers are in charge, in control, and will keep them safe. Having consistent rules and boundaries helps communicate that. Routines provide predictability, which also enhances feelings of safety.

Play with dolls: Doll play encourages children to talk about other's thoughts and emotions. Doing so can help them develop empathy in a way that differentiates self from others and motivates helping – which cultivates Compassionate & Kind. Join them in their doll play and let them take the lead – listen to what types of thoughts and feelings they are assigning their dolls, and mirror their ideas and language as you meet them in their play scenes.

