

# LET IT GO

## Helping young children open up about eczema

**Claire Moulds** offers advice on helping pre-school children talk about their eczema and how it makes them feel.

A huge part of the challenge of caring for young children with eczema is that they don't fully understand what's going on, why they might seem different to their friends, and how to communicate and manage all the different feelings they're experiencing.

At times, this might result in tantrums, pushing boundaries, yelling and lashing out because it's the only way they can express themselves.

While it's important not to bottle things up, it's also important that children feel able to open up to an adult before they reach this stage.

So, how can you establish an open, positive, ongoing dialogue about eczema with your young child?

**Explain eczema in a way that makes sense to them**

While all children will be able to understand that their skin is poorly, different ages and different abilities will need a tailored approach when talking about eczema.

It's important, though, that eczema is explained. Not understanding what's wrong with them only exacerbates the confusion, frustration and distress that children can feel.

For very young children, a 'tell, show, do, review' approach can be very effective:

- **Tell** 'Because your skin doesn't work properly, we have to give it a helping hand'
- **Show** 'So we apply these special creams to help it to feel better' (apply emollient at the same time)
- **Do** Encourage your child to copy what you're doing and to tell you why they're doing it to confirm they've understood what you're trying to tell/show them
- **Review** Be plentiful with praise to encourage them on their eczema discovery journey.

Other children might benefit from using a favourite book or cartoon to explain the complicated concept of having a dysfunctional skin barrier.

For example, in 'the three little pigs', a brick house keeps the little pigs safe and sound because it's strong compared to the ones made of straw or sticks. You can explain that skin is our body's wall and that their wall isn't as

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strong as it needs to be, which is why we apply emollients.

Other children might appreciate the example of a 'force field' that protects the spaceship and its crew from harm: emollient offers the same protection for our skin.

As children get older, you can revisit the explanation and these metaphors, tailoring them to reflect their ability.

### Help children identify their feelings

The experience of having eczema can produce a lot of feelings for a small child to handle – let alone to find the right words to convey. Initially, they may need help to identify different emotions.



Eczema makes me feel...

angry

different

anxious

upset

overwhelmed

scared

irritable

self-conscious

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Keep giving children the opportunity to explain how they're feeling throughout the day, so it doesn't become too much for them. Ask them how they are. If they seem angry or upset or sad, say, 'It looks like you're feeling sad. Do you want to talk to me about what's made you feel that way?'

Share your own emotions (good and bad) throughout the day too. This helps children understand that sharing feelings is a good thing, as it means we aren't alone and we can help each other.

If the feelings do become overwhelming, help your child to calm down before you talk things through. That might mean taking deep breaths, counting to 10, doing star jumps or having a cuddle.

Reassure them it's okay to have these feelings and that they're normal. After all, anyone would be irritable if their skin was sore and itchy, because it's an uncomfortable feeling: you can't relax in your own body.

Tell them again that you're always there for them, whenever they want to talk, about anything at all. Having eczema feels like being on an emotional rollercoaster and knowing you'll always be there will help them to navigate all the ups and downs.

### When words aren't enough

It might help to create your own eczema language for when the words aren't there.

Small children might find taking on a character a helpful way to get across how they're feeling – for example:



- They might become an **octopus** when the itch is so bad and so widespread that they don't have enough arms to deal with it.
- They might become a **dragon** when their skin is burning and hot.
- They might become a **porcupine** when they feel spiky and annoyed and don't want to be touched or to talk.

If they are struggling to talk about their emotions, encourage them to draw or paint them. Physical activity is another way to let out emotions and reduce stress. Ask if you can do activities together so you're there if they feel like opening up.

### 'Ask me anything'

It can be daunting inviting your child to ask you anything they want about their eczema. But it's not about having all the answers. It's about understanding what's worrying them and how you can help. Common questions include:

#### Why do I have it?

If atopic conditions run in your family, you might say, 'Sometimes, lots of people in a family have eczema or conditions linked to eczema. Your auntie and grandad both have eczema, your uncle has asthma and your dad and I both have hay fever. The doctors think that's why you have eczema.'

If there is no family history, you might say, 'We don't always know why people get eczema but lots and lots of children do and the doctors are trying very hard to find out why.'

#### It's not fair. Why do I have it but none of my friends do?

The injustice of being the only one at playgroup with sore, itchy, bleeding skin will sting for a small child. Validate that feeling by saying, 'No, it isn't fair. Nobody should be uncomfortable in their own skin.'

#### Did I do something wrong? Is that why I have eczema?

We teach children that there are consequences to their actions. So it's only natural that they will wonder if they have eczema because they did something wrong. The response in this instance should be a firm and immediate 'Nothing you did caused this.'



#### When will it go away?

This is the question every parent dreads. Some children do grow out of their eczema. Some grow out of it only for it to return when they are older. And some never grow out of it.

When you want to make everything better for your child, it's easy to focus on the fact that 'some children grow out of it'. It's important to remember, though, that by doing so, you are raising your child's hopes that they will be one of the lucky ones and, if that doesn't happen, they won't be prepared for a very different reality.

A lot of adults say they wish their parents had told them that even if their eczema does go away, it could come back, as they felt completely unprepared when it returned.

Our advice would always be to take a balanced approach and to say, 'Eczema is different for everybody, so we don't know what might happen in the future. What matters is that we look after your skin every single day to give it the best chance of getting better.'

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