

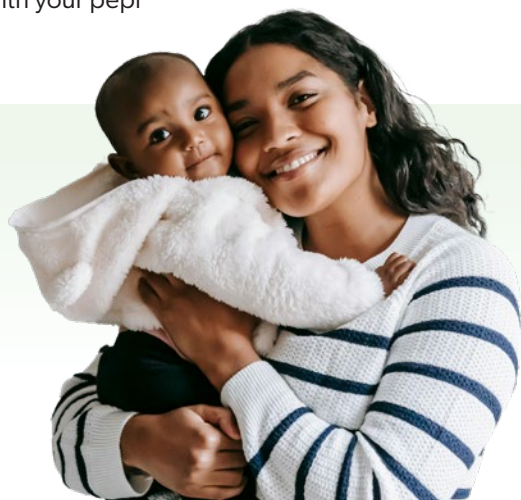


Connecting with your pēpi when you're experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges



When a parent is facing mental health and/or substance use challenges, pēpi can often sense their mood and behaviour. This resource is designed to support you in connecting with your pēpi during these times, helping them feel secure, loved, and nurtured. It covers:

- Recognising your feelings and behaviours
- Awareness of what your pēpi notices and experiences
- Helpful tips to communicate, and connecting with your pēpi



Recognising your feelings and behaviours

When you recognise your mental health and/or substance use challenges, you may be more familiar with how they influence your emotions, behaviour, and moods. This can then help you develop an understanding of the impact on you and your pēpi.

Emotions, behaviour, and moods influence how you view yourself and how others might view you. They may also influence your relationships with others, including your pēpi. An important first step in preparing to think about your mental health is to reflect on how it affects you, the behaviours that your pēpi sees and hears, and how these might influence how your pēpi feels. You can do this with a partner, a friend, a health professional – or on your own.

"I never really thought about the fact that he could pick up what was going on with me. I thought he was just too little to understand that anything was wrong."

Sarah, parent.

As a parent it can be incredibly challenging to think about how your pēpi might view what is happening. It might be useful to talk with your health professional or another support person about the impact of your mental health and/or substance use on your role as a parent.

A reflective moment

Try this activity on a day you are feeling well.

Reflect on the thoughts and feelings you experience, as well as the behaviours your pēpi may observe.

Consider how these may impact them and tick the symptoms and behaviours from the list below that align with your experience.

- ☐ Talking and moving slowly
 - ☐ Struggling to concentrate
 - ☐ Feeling numb
 - ☐ Worrying a lot
 - ☐ Seeing or hearing things
 - ☐ Very tired
 - ☐ Suspicious thoughts
 - ☐ Low motivation
 - ☐ Sleeping a lot
 - ☐ Traumatic flashbacks
 - ☐ Not mixing with others
 - ☐ Irritable, short-tempered
 - ☐ Sad or teary
 - ☐ Anxious
 - ☐ Angry outbursts
 - ☐ Over-sensitive
 - ☐ Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs
 - ☐ Suicidal thoughts
 - ☐ Self-harm
 - ☐ Restless

Are there any additional experiences you would like to add? Please list them below:

Select the five items from the list above that worry you most as a parent and write them underneath the heading 'My feelings and behaviour' below. Then, reflect on what your pēpi might see, hear, and feel when observing you, and write your thoughts below 'What does my pēpi see, hear and feel?'.

My feelings and behaviour:

What does my pēpi see, hear, and feel?

My feelings and behaviour:

What does my pēpi see, hear, and feel?

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What does my pēpi see,
hear, and feel?

Awareness of what your pēpi notices and experiences

Pēpi might not understand everything you say, but they are overly sensitive and responsive to your emotions and your tone of voice. You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions your pēpi's responses may also change. **What would help them to feel connected with you when you are not feeling well?**

Take time to listen and watch your pēpi's way of communicating with you. If you are having difficulty reading or understanding their signals, seek advice from your midwife, well pēpi nurse or general practice team. You might find information on the [Raising Children Network website](https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/connecting-communicating) helpful (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/connecting-communicating>).

Pēpi: Pēpi cry, and sometimes it can be hard to understand their distress. However, crying is one of the primary ways your pēpi communicates their needs. Your pēpi will be looking for you to respond to their cues and provide comfort.

Parents: As a parent, it can be stressful when your pēpi is distressed or crying. In those moments, try to take a deep breath and manage your own feelings before comforting pēpi. Try using a calm, reassuring voice, and gently moving closer might connect you with pēpi and offer the support they need.

Parents may sometimes feel they cannot understand their pēpi's needs. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the needs of your pēpi, set a time when you can find someone to be with them while you take a break. You can then use this time to relax or to call the Parent Helpline, talk to a pēpi maternal health nurse, or your doctor.



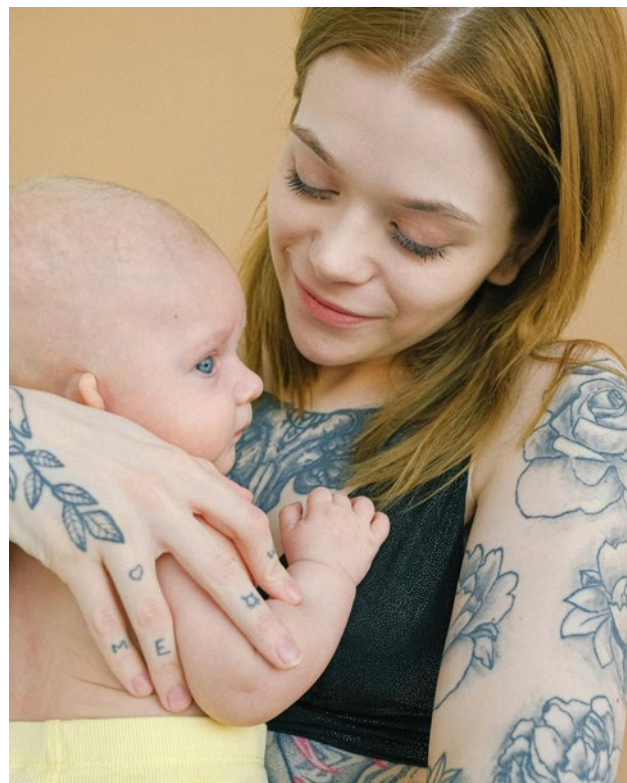
Helpful tips for communicating and connecting with your pēpi

You do not need to explain your mental health and/or substance use challenges to your pēpi, but when you are stressed or not well, it is important to find ways to connect with them to help them feel nurtured and secure.

Here are some tips:

- Hold your pēpi close and cuddle them.
- Give your pēpi a massage.
- Smile when you look at your pēpi.
- Maintain eye contact with your pēpi until they look away.
- Gently rock your pēpi and talk in a soothing voice when they are upset.
- Use a warm, calm, singsong voice when you speak to your pēpi.
- Smile and nod when your pēpi makes sounds.
- Encourage your pēpi to make noises by repeating their sounds. This creates your own two-way conversation.

Use the reflective exercise to help you start conversations with your pēpi (use the earlier list to get started).



For more information on managing mental health during pregnancy and early parenthood download a copy of the Baby of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) Australia booklet 'The Best for Me and My Pēpi.'

- www.copmi.net.au/materials/the-best-for-me-and-my-baby-booklet/
- raisingchildren.org.nz
- brainwave.org.nz/



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www.wharaurau.org.nz/all-workstreams/supporting-parents-health-children-sphc

