



RSD: WHEN REJECTION HURTS

A gentle guide for
children and grown-ups

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY

A gentle guide for children and the grown-ups who support them.

Sometimes a small moment can bring a very big hurt. This guide helps you notice what is happening, look after your body, work out what you know, and choose what to do next. Read it together, skip anything that does not help, and remember: you deserve care whether or not anyone uses the word RSD.

UNDERSTANDING RSD

What do people mean by RSD?

RSD is short for **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria**. Some people use the term to describe very strong hurt, shame, worry or anger when they feel rejected, criticised, left out or as though they have failed. The feeling can arrive fast, before you have had time to find out exactly what happened.

The feeling is real; the label is not a diagnosis

RSD is not a standalone formal diagnosis. The word can help some people describe what they experience, but you do not need a label to ask for support. Children can have intense rejection-related feelings for many different reasons, and every child is different. If someone has been unkind, unfair or unsafe, tell a trusted grown-up so they can help.

As you read: You can talk, write, draw, point, use pictures or AAC, or ask someone to read with you. You do not have to answer every prompt.

NOTICING MY SIGNALS

My rejection alarm

My body may react quickly when something feels like rejection or criticism. There is no one right way for an alarm to feel. You might notice one clue, several clues, or something different.

Moments that can set it off

Not being picked; a delayed reply; a changed plan; a correction; a joke that stings; not knowing what someone meant; or thinking you disappointed someone.

Body clues

Hot face, tight chest, tummy ache, shaky hands, fast heartbeat, tears, a frozen feeling, or wanting to hide.

Thought clues

"They hate me." "I ruined it." "I must fix this now." You may replay the moment or try to guess what everyone is thinking.

Action clues

Going quiet or leaving; saying sorry quickly; getting cross; sending lots of messages; asking for reassurance again and again; or deciding not to try next time.

An alarm is a signal, not a verdict

An alarm tells me that I care and may need help to slow down. It does not prove that I am bad or that I know exactly what another person thinks. I can take the feeling seriously without deciding the whole story straight away. And if something really was hurtful, I can ask for help to make it safer or put it right.

Feelings can have more than one cause

Sometimes the moment is confusing and I need more information. Sometimes someone really has been unkind. Sometimes an old worry makes a new moment feel even bigger. I do not have to work out which one it is alone. A trusted person can listen first, help me check what happened, and take real problems seriously.

What I can check

What did I actually see or hear? Was there a change, a misunderstanding, or a pattern that keeps happening?

What I can ask for

"Can you explain what happened?" "Please tell me if the plan changes." "Can you help me talk to them?"

My first clues are usually...

Notice your own pattern

I may notice this in my body: _____

My thoughts or actions might be: _____

A grown-up who can help me notice is: _____

Noticing a clue is not about blaming yourself. It is a way to find out what support could help. I can be kind to myself while I learn what the alarm is telling me.

HELPING MY BODY FEEL SAFER

Pause, then work it out

I can take a little time before I reply, decide or try to fix everything. A pause does not mean I am ignoring the problem. It gives me a chance to choose my next step.

Try separating the moment into four parts

What happened? My friend has not replied yet.

My first guess: "They do not want to be my friend."

What I know: I have not had a reply.

What I do not know yet: Why they have not replied. There could be another explanation, or there may be something we need to talk about.

You can ask yourself these questions, or ask someone to help:

- **Facts:** What did I see or hear? What do I know for sure?
- **Feelings:** What did I feel, and what did I think it meant?
- **Missing information:** What do I not know yet? Is there another possible explanation?
- **Real hurt:** Was something unkind, unfair or unsafe? What help or boundary do I need?

A pause that helps me

- **Name the signal.** "My rejection alarm is on." I can say it, show a picture or make a gesture.
- **Make things simpler.** Fewer words, less noise, a quieter place, more space, or a trusted person beside me may help.
- **Choose one body support.** Move, stretch, get a drink, hold a comfort item, draw, or sit quietly.
- **Slow down big decisions.** If I am safe, I can wait before sending a long message, apologising again or ending a friendship.
- **Choose my next step.** Ask what someone meant, set a boundary, talk to a grown-up, or take more time.

If I have already reacted quickly

I can still come back to the moment when I feel ready. I might say, "I was overwhelmed and I sent a lot of messages. I am sorry for that. I still want to understand what happened." I can apologise for an action without saying my feelings did not matter. If I need a boundary, I can ask for help to say it clearly.

A small example

A teacher corrects my answer. My alarm says, "Everyone thinks I am stupid." I can pause, notice that I feel embarrassed, and remember the fact: the teacher corrected one answer. If I am still worried, I can ask privately what I need to practise. The correction may still have felt hard; I deserve support with that too.

I do not have to calm down perfectly

The aim is not to stop caring or make every feeling disappear. The aim is to get enough space to choose what helps. If I am being hurt, bullied or feel unsafe, I should tell a trusted adult now.

FINDING SUPPORT

Words, actions and a plan

I can communicate in the way that works for me. I can talk, write, text, point, draw, use pictures or AAC, or ask someone to sit quietly with me.

Words I can try

"I feel hurt. I need a minute."
 "Can you tell me what you meant?"
 "That did hurt me. Please stop."

When talking is hard

"I cannot talk yet. Can I write or point?"
 "I need a grown-up to help me."
 "Can you stay nearby and check back later?"

A sentence starter

When I need help

When _____ happened, I felt _____.
 I need _____ now. The person I can tell is _____.

What helps when I feel rejected

A grown-up can help me feel safe before we solve the problem. Helpful words include: **"I can see that really hurt."** **"I am listening; you can tell me, write it or show me."** **"We do not have to work it all out this second."** **"If someone was unkind, we will take that seriously."**

Helpful support

Use a calm voice, short clear words and enough time. Ask whether I want comfort, space, help to understand, or help to act. If we take a break, say when you will come back.

What can make it harder

Avoid "you are too sensitive", "you are overreacting" or demanding an explanation while I am overwhelmed. Do not assume the concern is imaginary. Listen, check what happened, and help with repair or safety.

Support before the difficult moment

Grown-ups can help by giving me a warning when plans change, explaining instructions clearly, correcting me privately when possible, and agreeing how I can ask for a pause. After a hard moment, they can check in when I am ready and help me repair things without shame. They can also look for repeated exclusion, bullying or unfair treatment rather than expecting me to manage it alone.

My support plan

Fill this in with someone I trust. It can change when I learn more about what helps.

My early clues and what helps

My early clues: _____
 What helps me feel safer: _____
 Words, pictures or signals I can use: _____
 Grown-ups I can go to: _____
 What I want grown-ups to remember: _____

When to ask for more help: If these feelings often get in the way of school, friendships, sleep or feeling safe, tell a trusted adult and ask them to arrange support. Parents or carers can speak with the child's GP, clinician or school support team. It can help to share examples of what happens, what makes it harder, and what has helped even a little.

Information note: This is educational information, not a diagnosis or a substitute for individual advice. RSD is a descriptive term, not a standalone formal diagnosis. Sources: Cleveland Clinic (2022); NICE guideline NG87; NHS guidance on ADHD in children and young people; PLOS ONE qualitative study (2025). Full links are in the website write-up.