Tip sheet 4:
Talking about warning signs



4.1 Why this matters

- Many young people are taught to be polite instead of listening to their gut.
- Warning signs are real information that helps young people stay safe.
- The body often notices stress or danger before the brain catches up.
- Young people often feel something before they can explain it.
- When the body is in a survival state (like fight or flight), the thinking part of the brain is less active. They need help to feel calm before they can talk.
- In grooming or abuse situations, many young people freeze, fawn or flop. Knowing these responses stops adults from asking 'Why didn't you just say no?'
- Many young people feel stressed or overwhelmed at times. Noticing body cues can help them get support before things build up.

4.2 What you might notice

Young people react to stress in different ways. These are the five most common responses:

Response	What it might look like
Fight	anger, raised voice, physical tension
Flight	pacing, leaving, fidgeting
Freeze	going quiet, staying very still, blank expression
Flop	low energy, slumped posture, appearing 'shut down'
Fawn	over-agreeing, people-pleasing

You may also notice:

- a young person saying they feel off
- sudden overwhelm or confusion
- stomach aches, headaches or tiredness
- avoiding eye contact
- becoming overly helpful or apologetic.

These responses are often protective, especially when a young person feels overwhelmed, unsafe or doesn't know how to ask for help. They are signs to be curious, not a diagnosis. Look for patterns and changes in behaviour over time.

4.3 What helps

Staying calm together	Sit nearby, walk together or do a simple task side-by-side. Slow your voice down. Check your own body first. Take a slow breath so your calm energy helps them settle.
Naming what's happening	Use messages like: *'Your body's trying to protect you.'*
Helping the body settle	Try slow breathing, gentle movement, grounding tools 5-4-3-2-1 or Box Breathing.
Offering small choices	Choices help young people feel more in control. • *'Do you want to sit or walk?'* • *'Talk now or take a minute first?'*
Asking gentle questions	If they can talk, try: • *'What's your body telling you?'* • *'When did you start feeling this way?'* • *'What might help right now?'*
Trusting their 'gut feeling'	Let them know it's OK to listen to their body's warning signs.

4.4 What to avoid

Asking ‘why?’	When the body is on high alert, it can be hard for young people to explain why. ‘Why’ can feel like blame.
Matching their energy	If they are loud or angry, aim to be the calm in the storm. If you get loud too, their body will feel even less safe.
Minimising feelings	Avoid: ‘You’re overreacting.’ To their body, the feeling is real.
Pushing for details	You don’t need to work out everything right away. Focus on safety first.
Pushing them to talk before they’re ready	Silence can be part of feeling overwhelmed. Give them time and let them know you’re there.
Keeping secrets	Safe relationships don’t need unsafe secrets. A warning sign may be their body’s way of saying a secret feels wrong.

4.5 Quick responses

These are suggestions. Use your own words and adapt them to suit you and the young person.

If the young person…	You can say or do…
Notices a physical warning sign	*‘Your body is telling you something. What’s it feeling like right now?’*
Feels overwhelmed	*‘Let’s pause for a moment. Try one slow breath with me.’*
Is in a fight response	Stay calm. *‘I’m here. Let’s take a minute so your body can settle.’*
Is in freeze or flop	Reduce pressure. *‘It’s OK to have your own opinion. You don’t have to agree just to make me happy.’*
Is in fawn	*‘You don’t have to say yes to keep things calm. What do you think?’*
Reads a safe situation as danger	*‘It’s OK that you feel nervous. Let’s take a minute to look at what’s happening together.’*

If a young person’s warning signs worry you or they share something that feels unsafe, stay calm, follow the steps in **How to respond: The 6-step-framework**, and reach out to another trusted adult, a professional or a service for guidance. For more information, see the **Starting a supportive conversation** and **What to do when a young person shares a concern** sections of the Trusted Adult Guide.

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(unless Excluded Material)