

The Animal Ladder – A Guide for Parents and Carers

Children sometimes show their feelings in ways that can be hard to understand. The Animal Ladder is a simple way of making sense of this. It uses three animal characters to show the different ways a child's body and feelings try to keep them safe.

The Happy Puppy

- When your child feels safe and connected, they are like a playful puppy.
- They want to explore, laugh, and spend time with others.
- This is when they feel most able to learn and grow.

The Scratchy Cat

- When life feels tricky, the cat appears.
- Your child may seem restless, cross, or quick to argue.
- Like a cat on edge, they are ready to fight or run. This is not “naughty” — it’s their body trying to protect them.

The Snapping Turtle

- When things feel too much, the turtle comes out.
 - Your child may seem withdrawn, tired, or like they want to hide.
 - The turtle retreats into its shell to keep safe, sometimes snapping to keep others away.
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The Ladder

Imagine these animals on a ladder:

- At the top is the Happy Puppy – calm and connected.
- In the middle is the Scratchy Cat – watchful and on edge.
- At the bottom is the Snapping Turtle – withdrawn and hidden.

Children move up and down this ladder every day. None of these states are bad. They are simply different ways your child's body is responding to what's around them.

How You Can Help

You can't stop your child from moving down the ladder, but you can help them climb back up.

- Notice which “animal” seems to be in charge.
 - Stay calm and present. Your steady presence helps them feel safe.
 - Validate their feelings: “I can see this is hard for you.”
 - Offer comfort before solutions: a cuddle, sitting nearby, or quiet time together.
 - Suggest gentle activities: drawing, music, movement, or being outside.
 - Model calm breathing or self-soothing yourself. They learn most from watching you.
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🌟 **Remember:** All children (and adults) move between Puppy, Cat, and Turtle. Your role is not to “fix” the feelings but to be alongside your child until they feel safe enough to climb back up. Connection matters more than correction.