

How to talk to kids about mental health

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TALKING
TIPS

We wouldn't hesitate to talk to our kids about their physical health; it's time to make sure we feel just as comfortable talking to them about mental health

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With more and more people speaking out about their struggles with mental health, wellbeing, and self-care, we're seeing the trickle-down effect this can have for us – and for our kids. Having open, honest conversations is becoming more common, but we've still got room for improvement.

In early 2018, the children's charity Barnardo's reported that almost half of children aged between 12 and 16 feel sad or anxious at least once a week, with this figure rising to 70% specifically for 16-year-olds.

Additionally, nearly 25% reported daily negative feelings, with 80% saying they worry about their future.

While mental health education is set to become mandatory from 2020, that still leaves a pretty big gap for children who may not have been introduced to discussions around mental health yet.

By taking the time to talk to children about how they are feeling and the pressures they



face, we can help them to understand more about their emotional and mental wellbeing, and to recognise signs they may be struggling.

Knowing we want to start a conversation, and knowing how to actually do it can be two very different things. Getting into the habit of having open, honest discussions in a relaxed setting can help parents feel more confident speaking about sensitive or complex topics, and children to feel more comfortable asking for help.

We spoke to three counsellors and the director of the mental health charity Time to Change to discover their top tips for how to talk to kids about mental health:

1 Do an activity together

“It doesn’t matter what the activity is as long as it’s something you can both enjoy and engage in. For example, baking, walking, or making art,” says Nora Allali-Carling, counsellor and psychotherapist. “This will give you both an opportunity to connect, relax, and may encourage the child to open up more.”

Nora explains that this informal approach helps to create a non-threatening environment for conversations to take place. Doing so can result in the opportune moment to talk about self-care, under the guise of finding out what relaxes you, and doing nice things more often.

Children can’t always make sense of their overwhelming emotions, but giving their feelings a name helps them to develop a language for emotional and mental health

2 Help them to recognise their feelings

“Acknowledge and name your child’s feelings, but don’t necessarily leap to finding a solution to their difficulty,” Lucy Fuller, a counsellor and child and adolescent psychotherapist, recommends. “When your child is overwhelmed with emotion, for example having a tantrum, feeling sad or consumed with frustration, calmly name their feeling and let them know that it is OK to feel that way.

“To know that someone is alongside and ‘gets’ how you feel can have a very calming effect. Children can’t always make sense of their overwhelming emotions, but giving their feelings a name helps them to develop a language for emotions and mental health.”

3 Try using storytelling

“Mental health is an important part of life, and children must be able to accept both happy and sad emotions,” psychotherapist Philip Karahassan explains. “To help them develop, and to discuss both their and your feelings in a way they will understand, tell them a story about why and how you might be feeling, or why someone might be acting in a different way.”

Philip also notes that alongside telling a story, an exercise that might be helpful is to draw out a weekly “feelings chart” that you can fill in together, which can help you “understand feelings in a fun, explorative and collaborative way”.

4 Put it in context and pick the right setting

Jo Loughran, director of Time to Change, notes that mental wellbeing isn’t about “feeling happy all the time”, and that mental health problems are common. Her advice?

“Keep your conversations small and informal,” she says. “You don’t have to set aside hours to chat, and informal spaces like in the car, over a meal, or while you’re watching TV can be great.

“You might find it easier to talk about hypothetical situations rather than their direct questions about their feelings, such as saying: ‘Exams can be really stressful, can’t they?’ Or chatting about the experiences of a TV character.” 🏠

For more information on talking to children about mental health, visit counselling-directory.org.uk, time-to-change.org.uk, or happiful.com/tag/kids

Compulsory mental health education

From **September 2020**, all schools will teach children about both physical and mental health. Updates to the curriculum will also include advice on staying safe on and offline, along with the importance of healthy relationships.