

LET'S TALK

A parent's guide for starting real conversations about mental health



This guide will help you identify when your child may be struggling emotionally, how to prepare yourself as a parent for a conversation about mental health, and how to get the conversation started.



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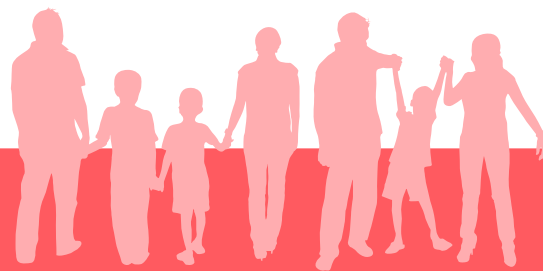
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Children have emotional ups and downs. Some of that roller coaster is a part of growing up; it's typical, and mostly they just need to feel supported. Other times, though, children need more help addressing their emotional and mental health needs.

As a parent or guardian, you navigate this path alongside them, often witnessing their struggle. A survey of 2000 parents showed that 70% felt their children were experiencing more burnout, or "low emotional battery," than adults.¹ **How can you help? Start by getting your kids talking.**

Talking about thoughts and feelings is easy for some parents and more difficult for others. With such an important topic, it's okay to be nervous, cautious, or even excited. **A little preparation can calm nerves and help you approach your child with thoughtful confidence.**



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of parents felt their children were experiencing more burnout, or "low emotional battery," than they were

¹Data from a survey conducted by OnePoll on behalf of Presence from March 9 to March 12, 2023, with a panel of parents with school-aged children.

Identifying when your child may need help

Behavioral changes are the largest indicator that something might be wrong. **Some of the most noticeable are listed below, but any sudden change is reason to start a conversation.**

Here are some things to look out for:

- 1 Withdrawal.** Taking a time out for a day or two while processing emotions is common, but ongoing withdrawal is unhealthy. Withdrawal can look like a reluctance to spend time with friends or family, not participating in activities they usually enjoy, self-isolation, or not engaging in conversation. Withdrawing can often indicate your child is in “flight or freeze” mode, from the infamous “fight, flight, or freeze” response and needs help.
- 2 Changes in sleep.** Sudden changes in sleep habits, such as sleeping too much or too little, can be a strong indicator of emotional turmoil. This may be due to racing thoughts, emotional dysregulation, depression, or a host of other struggles your child may need help with.
- 3 Self-neglect.** Self-neglect can be anything from not wanting to eat or shower to self-harm, such as cutting. While self-harm is an obvious sign that your child needs help, other forms of self-neglect can fly under the radar. In today’s teens, it can look like laziness or an “I don’t care what other people think” attitude.
- 4 All negative, all the time.** Negative words are the product of negative thoughts. A child who is overly negative about everyone and everything is usually harboring similar thoughts about themselves. While all kids can be grumpy sometimes, persistently irritable or suddenly jaded behavior can be an indicator of deeper distress.



WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Withdrawal
- Changes in sleep
- Self-neglect
- All negative, all the time



Preparing for the conversation

Whether you have concerns about your child, or you just want to check in with them, taking a minute to think about your own emotional status can help the conversation go more smoothly.

You are human. You have your own relationship with feelings. Maybe you are a sensitive person, in-touch with all of your emotions. Maybe you don't love "touchy, feely" conversations, and emotions make you uncomfortable. Maybe you fall somewhere in between. Knowing your own thoughts about emotions and how you cope with ups and downs is helpful for you to cultivate an environment that works for both you and your child.

Ask yourself a few questions:

- 1 Can I stay calm?** Being calm means not getting angry, not crying, and not becoming overly emotional.
- 2 Can I keep the focus on my child?** While it can be tempting to get defensive, become angry on your child's behalf, or exit the conversation if you're feeling awkward, it's important to keep asking yourself, "how is my child feeling?"
- 3 Do I have healthy coping strategies?** If your coping strategies seem to work for you, it can be tempting to advise your child to do the same. First, give some thought to whether your strategies are truly healthy and if they fit your child's personality.

If your answers to any of these are "no," you have a few options. If you feel the conversation is time sensitive, is there another trusted adult who can help mediate? It's okay to seek support. If the conversation can wait a few days, take some time to reflect on why your answers are "no" and what you might do to change them to a "yes".



2 IMPORTANT TOOLS IN YOUR CONVERSATION TOOLBOX

→ Questions

→ Analogies

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Whether you're feeling confident or unsure, practicing the conversation ahead of time is helpful. Play out the conversation in your head or with another adult. **Practice asking questions and using analogies, as these will be two important tools in your conversation toolbox.**

Ask Questions. Asking questions is a great way to guide your child. This can be an especially good strategy for parents who feel comfortable expressing emotions and can stay calm despite any answer. But what should you ask?

For children of all ages, you can start by asking about any changes in behavior.

"I've noticed you are having trouble sleeping lately. Why do you think that is?" Or,

"How do you feel when you try to sleep? How does your body feel? Does your brain quiet down? Do your arms and legs relax?"

Get your child talking, and then follow up with questions until you locate the source of their distress.

Use Analogies. Analogies are helpful for explaining important topics that a child might not have the vocabulary or world experience to grasp otherwise. It's also a great tool for both children and adults who are less comfortable with emotional conversations. For example:

"Sometimes things that upset us are like a splinter. At first it seems like no big deal, but over time it can get infected and turn into a big problem if we don't take it out. You seem upset lately: has anything gotten under your skin?" Or, "I know you're upset about what happened with your friends, so tell me what it feels like. What's something else you've experienced that feels the same?"

Get Talking

Once you've had a chance to reflect on your own thoughts and feelings, it's time to have the conversation. **There are three important factors for cultivating an environment for sharing.**

- 1 Be Present.** It may seem obvious, but actively avoiding disruption is essential. Leave your phone in a different room. Don't start the conversation if you are short on time. Ensure other family members can't stumble in and interrupt. We are a multi-tasking world, and being present shows your child is a priority.
- 2 Express Support.** Whether the perspective of adulthood is making your child's concerns seem silly to you or they are telling you something you really don't want to hear, supporting their sharing can make or break the conversation and set the precedent for future ones. Children need to know they are safe to



share. Supporting that does not mean you are supporting anything else. You can appreciate their bravery to express their thoughts and feelings, while still disagreeing with those thoughts or actions they may have taken.

3 Respect Boundaries. No one can be forced to talk. Like most of us, children need to know they can take a step back if needed. They can have time to gather their thoughts. They can say when the feelings are too overwhelming and you need to try the conversation again another time. Most children don't have the words to express their boundaries in the moment, so be aware of their body language. The most important thing is to keep trying and celebrate the small victories. Not every conversation will be groundbreaking.

Conclusion



Although it can be stressful, talking to your child about their feelings and emotions is important for supporting healthy development. Taking time to consider your own feelings and relationship dynamics, rather than relying on general advice, will help create an authentic interaction that creates a foundation of trust.

Most importantly, get your child talking and really listen.

If you feel your child may need the support of a mental health professional, seek out support through your school or medical provider immediately.



About the Author

Stephanie Taylor, Ed.S, NCSP, is a licensed school psychologist and serves as Vice President of Clinical Innovation & Outreach for Presence. Taylor developed this guide having worked with parents and children for two decades and experiencing all aspects of the school system as a

high school English teacher, special education teacher, school psychologist, Director of Special Education and State School Psychology Consultant for the State of Idaho. She joined Presence, the leading provider of remote evaluations and teletherapy, in 2014 to develop the company's behavioral and mental health technology offerings.

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