



Talking to kids when they need help

Helpful tips in starting a conversation and understanding what's going on in the lives of your children and teens.

Last updated: March 21, 2022 Date created: April 9, 2020 3 min read



As parents and teachers, you are the first line of support for kids and teens. It's important for you to have an open line of communication with them and build a sense of trust. When your kids and teens are having difficulties, you want them to feel comfortable turning to you for help.

Just as important is the ability to identify when your kids are struggling emotionally. Kids and teens tend to internalize their feelings. If something is troubling them, they may not speak up and ask for support. Sometimes, they don't realize that help is available. So,

it's essential for parents and teachers to be able to detect when something is wrong and how to approach your kids and teens.

Getting your kids to open up and talk to you can feel like a challenge. The following tips can be helpful in starting a conversation and understanding what's going on in their lives.

Make them feel safe

You want to put kids and teens at ease so they feel comfortable talking to you. It is essential to make it clear why you are talking with them. Kids especially are fearful that they may be in trouble or are being punished if they are pulled aside to talk. Reassure them that this is not the case and that you are there to offer support. Parents might consider scheduling a time to talk one-on-one on a regular basis, such as having lunch with your kid or teen weekly or biweekly.

Listen to them

Take the time to actively listen to what your kid or teen has to say. Many times, all kids or teens want is someone who will listen to them. Try to understand their perspective before offering suggestions. Sometimes your own anxiety can prompt you to try to fix everything. But in many cases the best help you can offer is to listen attentively.

Affirm and support their need for help

If a kid or teen tells you they're feeling sad or upset, for example, tell them you're proud of them for sharing their feelings. Let them know you appreciate the courage it took for them to talk with you and for trusting you to help them. If your kid seems to need more help than you can provide, consult with an appropriate professional. You may want to start by talking to the school psychologist.

Be genuine

Try to avoid speaking from a script. Teens can tell when you're not being genuine. If you are open, authentic, and relaxed, it will help them to be the same.

Don't be afraid to say I don't know

As a parent or teacher, it is OK to admit that you don't have all the answers. However, if a kid or teen asks you something, you should make every effort to find an answer or someone who can help.

Warning signs of suicide: Suicide is preventable

The two most important steps in preventing suicide are recognizing warning signs and getting help. Warning signs may include significant alcohol or drug use, a sudden drop in school performance or talking about death or hurting oneself. If you believe your child or student is in crisis, call 911 immediately and stay with him or her while help is on the way.

Resources

- [Campaign to Change Direction \(http://www.changedirection.org/know-the-five-signs/\)](http://www.changedirection.org/know-the-five-signs/)
- [Crisis hotlines and resources \(/topics/crisis-hotlines\)](/topics/crisis-hotlines)
- [\(http://www.changedirection.org/know-the-five-signs/\)](http://www.changedirection.org/know-the-five-signs/) [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\) \(http://www.nami.org/\)](http://www.nami.org/)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(https://www.nctsn.org/\)](https://www.nctsn.org/)

APA gratefully acknowledges Laurie D. McCubbin, PhD, Stephanie S. Smith, PsyD, Lynn Schiller, PhD, Andrew J. Adler, EdD, and Diane C. Marti, PhD, for contributing to this fact sheet.

Related and recent



Reexamine health insurance policies with a focus on employee mental health
 (/topics/workplace/mental-health/reexamine-health-insurance)



How these organizations are leading in making employee mental health a priority
 (/topics/workplace/organizations-improving-employee-mental-health)

Even with excellent preventive strategies in place, mental health conditions will arise, and employees will need support, making comprehensive health insurance benefits that cover psychological services essential.

Learn more from these case studies of successful leaders promoting mental health among workers.



A crisis of campus sexual assault (/monitor/2022/04/news-campus-sexual-assault)

The ongoing pandemic may spur an increase in sexual violence on college campuses. Psychologists' research and interventions are needed more than ever.



Psychological fallout of COVID may be with us for years, APA CEO says (/news/apa/2022/covid-psychological-fallout)

Unresolved grief is just one piece of the pandemic's widespread mental health fallout, a psychological second pandemic that needs to be addressed, says APA CEO Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD.



Talking to kids about the war in Ukraine (/news/apa/2022/children-teens-war-ukraine)

Psychologists offer strategies for discussing the conflict in age-appropriate ways with children and teens.



Mental health makes us whole (/monitor/2022/03/ceo)

Renewed stigma threatens to hurt gains made by the field.

Find this article at:

<https://www.apa.org/topics/parenting/helping-kids>