

# Talking to Your Child or Teen About Mental Health

Discussion Guide for Parents and Caregivers

## Why Talk to Your Child or Teen About Mental Health

Your child or teen's mental health and wellness are just as important as their physical health. Mental health is a component of overall wellness that concerns thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Mental health challenges are pretty common. That's why it's important to talk openly and often with your child about mental health. You can help your child or teen learn to manage their emotions, develop good habits for mental wellness, and recognize when they need to ask for support.

**More than one in five teens has had a mental health disorder that impaired their ability to function at home, school or in the community. Some 50% of all mental illness begins by age 14.**

Talking about mental health may feel strange or uncomfortable. As a parent or caregiver, you might not know where to start, or exactly what to say. That's OK. This short guide can help with:

- Conversation starters
- What to say – and what not to say – when your child or teen opens up
- How to approach your child or teen if you're concerned about their mental health
- Warning signs that your child or teen may be struggling with a mental health issue
- How to get help

## How to Talk Your Child or Teen About Mental Health

### **Create a Safe Space To Talk**

Ideally, a safe space is something you create over time. Find ways to connect with your child about things that are going on in their lives. Plan activities they enjoy, things that make them feel comfortable. In this relaxed atmosphere, have a low-stakes conversation by asking your child about their friends, school, interest, current events, and how they feel about those things.

### **Open the Door for Sharing**

Talking about mental health is easier than you think. Start with the questions below, which are designed to encourage children and teens to talk about themselves. These conversations should help build trust and open the door for your child to share more about their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

### **Look for Other Adult Helpers**

If your child doesn't want to open up to you, is there another adult they'd be more comfortable with – a mentor, coach, relative or religious leader? Sometimes kids find it easier to talk to someone other than a parent or caregiver, and that's O.K.! What's important is that your child has opportunities to share their feelings and experiences with a supportive adult.

## Question Cards

At dinner time, as a daily check-in after school, or whenever you're spending quality time with your child, use these questions as conversation-starters. Model openness by sharing your own experiences when appropriate. The more often you have these kinds of conversations, the more comfortable your child will be sharing with you – and letting you know when they need your support or help with a more urgent mental health concern.

What makes you happy/sad/angry/frustrated/worried/scared?

If you had a magic wand and could create the perfect life, what would it look like?

Tell me about your favorite book/movie/show and why you like it.

When you feel sad/angry/frustrated/worried/scared, what do you do to make yourself feel better?

If you were in charge of your house, what rules would you make?

Name three things you are thankful for.

Name something you are really good at.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Pick three words to describe yourself.

What makes you a good friend?

What is the best thing about school?

What do you like most about yourself?

What makes you feel supported?

What is something you are struggling with or worrying about?

What is something you want to get better at?

## How to Address Mental Health Concerns

### Be Kind, But Direct

If you notice warning signs that your child may need additional mental or emotional support, it's best to initiate a direct conversation. Some important things to keep in mind:

- Ask focused, compassionate questions about the things you are noticing, rather than making judgmental statements or accusations.
- Let them know that what they're feeling is OK, and that you are here to help and support them.
- Don't assume you know the cause of your child's mental health concern. You'll learn more by letting your child or teen tell you the problem. For example, if your child seems anxious, encourage them to talk more specifically about their fears.
- Offer to help, then let your child or teen tell you what they need from you. When you work together with your young person to solve a problem, they feel supported, valued and empowered to manage their problems in emotionally healthy ways.

What to Say	
Instead of ...	Try ...
"You'll be fine. Just get over it."	"Wow, that sounds really difficult. I'm sorry you're going through that. I'm here for you."
"Just try to be more positive."	"I'm sorry you're feeling down right now. I'm here to listen."
"Why are you crabby all the time?"	"I noticed you don't seem like yourself lately. Is everything okay? I'm here for you."
"You need to go to bed earlier."	"I noticed you're staying up pretty late? Are you having trouble sleeping? What's keeping you up?"
"Why aren't you doing your homework? You need to get your grades up."	"It seems like you're having trouble in school, what's going on? How can I help?"
"Why do you always pick at your food?"	"I noticed you haven't eaten much, how are you feeling?"
"You need to calm down."	"I see that you're upset. Can you tell me more about what's going on?"
"Just look on the bright side."	"Sometimes it must seem like things are stacked against you. We'll get through this together."
"You just need to take some deep breaths."	"What can I do to help you get through that situation if it comes up again?"
"You know, I feel that same way and here's what I do about it."	"I think I understand that you feel _____ when _____ happens, is that right?"

As a parent or caregiver, you will not always get this right. At first, your child might not want to talk much, and might even seem angrier after you talk. That's OK. A good goal is to get it right more often than not. When you make a mistake, be open, apologize and try again. Not only will your child or teen appreciate your honesty, seeing you take these steps gives them permission to make mistakes and try again.

## Know the Warning Signs

Every child is different, so the signs and symptoms they exhibit when struggling with a mental health issue can vary greatly. But there are some common warning signs you should not ignore. If you notice one of these warning signs, it is important to address it with your child or teen – and to know how to find help if your child needs it. If you're not sure whether your child's behavior is a warning sign, talk to a professional – a pediatrician, teacher, school counselor or religious leader – who has mental health experience.

### Warning Signs

- Changes in school performance or poor grades despite strong efforts
- Any substance use
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Inability to cope with problems and daily activities
- Excessive worry or anxiety (e.g., refusing to go to bed or school)
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments
- Hyperactivity
- Changes in ability to manage responsibilities – at home and/or at school
- Persistent nightmares
- Withdrawal from activities they once loved
- Persistent disobedience or aggression
- Persistent sadness and/or hopelessness
- Frequent temper tantrums or outbursts of anger
- Defiance of authority
- Risky sexual activity
- Intense fear
- Truancy, theft and/or vandalism

**ON OUR  
SLEEVES™**

The Movement for  
Children's Mental Health

**For more information** about the signs of potential mental health issues, and how to find to help, visit [onoursleeves.org/find-help/concerns](https://onoursleeves.org/find-help/concerns).

On Our Sleeves is powered by the experts at Nationwide Children's Hospital. To learn more, visit [onoursleeves.org](https://onoursleeves.org).

## When Your Child or Teen Needs Help

### Getting Support and/or Treatment

Supporting your child or teen through mental health challenges is not something you have to do alone. Stay connected with the people in your child's life who have experience addressing mental health concerns – your child's pediatrician, teacher, school counselor or a religious leader. These professionals who know you and your child can be your first line of defense.

If you believe your child or teen needs mental health treatment, contact your pediatrician and ask for a referral. Or, use these websites to find mental health resources near you:

- **On Our Sleeves:** [onoursleeves.org/find-help/state-resources](https://onoursleeves.org/find-help/state-resources)
- **Mental Health America:** [mhanational.org](https://mhanational.org)
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration:** [samhsa.gov/find-treatment](https://samhsa.gov/find-treatment)

### If Your Child or Teen Has Suicidal Thoughts

If your child or teen tells you they've had thoughts about suicide, remain calm and listen non-judgmentally to determine their needs. Your priority is to keep your child safe; ideally, they should have some input into how or where to do that. If your child is in immediate danger, going to an emergency room or mental health crisis center is the safest plan. The professionals there are trained to help with the immediate danger of suicide, and to help you and your child make a plan to get continuing support.

Consider calling 211 to be connected with a variety of local resources. If the service is available in your area, operators can dispatch a mobile crisis response unit with trained mental health professionals to do a crisis assessment and recommend next steps. If your child is not in immediate danger of harming themselves, but would benefit from speaking with a trained counselor, consider contacting a crisis hotline:

- **Crisis Text Line:** National text line dedicated to providing immediate crisis text support with the help of trained crisis counselors.
  - › Text "club" to 741741.
  - › Visit [crisistextline.org](https://crisistextline.org)
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** Provides confidential support to people in crisis and their loved ones.
  - › 1-800-273-8255 (English)
  - › 1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
  - › 1-800-799-4889 (Deaf or Hard of Hearing)
  - › Visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- **Trevor Project:** National hotline and website with chat features provides dedicated crisis support for LGBTQ youth.
  - › 1-866-488-7386
  - › Visit [thetrevorproject.org](https://thetrevorproject.org)



This resource was supported by a Cooperative Agreement, "National Collaboration to Promote Health, Wellness and Academic Success of School-Age Children (CDC-RFA-DP16-1601)," with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.