



Help Me Understand

Talking with your child about mental health

As your child's first and primary source of support, you foster their healthy development and growth, in big and small ways, each and every day. This includes nurturing their mental health and well-being, helping them to build resilience, find school success and foster independence so they can lead healthy and successful lives. This also involves creating opportunities for your child to learn skills for promoting and maintaining their own mental health.

This resource was developed to build parent and caregiver confidence in talking about mental health regularly at home.

Note: While the term "child" is used throughout, it's understood that the child in your care may be a teenager or young adult, and that you may be caring for more than one child.

Mental health refers to the way we think, feel and act. Good mental health allows us to feel, think and act in ways that help us enjoy life and cope with its challenges.

How can I talk to my child about their mental health?

Talking about your child's mental health builds trust, supports their feelings, boosts well-being, and shows them they can turn to you when life feels hard. It is important to talk about mental health and emotions regularly at home, not just when we have concerns.

Starting a conversation about mental health can be difficult. You might wonder what to say, how to bring it up – or whether to even broach it. In short – you should.

Consider these conversation starters:

- How are you?/ How are you feeling?
- What was the best part of your day today? How did it make you feel?
- What was the worst part of your day?
- What did you do today that made you proud?
- What would you like to talk about?

If your child is having a hard time, try asking gentle questions:

- Do you want to talk about what's going on?
- Is there anything you need from me? Space, time to talk, time to do something fun?
- If your child isn't ready to talk, reassure them by saying: You can talk to me any time; I am always here for you.
- If you need to speak to someone else, that's okay too.



- If you tell me what’s worrying you, I’ll do my best to help.
- Even if I don’t understand, please know that I want to.
- We’ll get through this together.

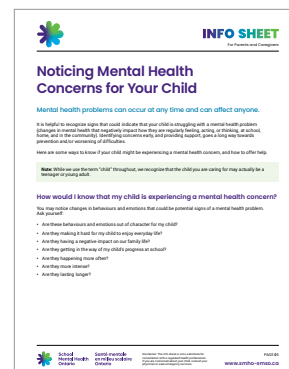
You can also try other forms of communication, such as writing a letter, drawing a picture or texting, to make it easier for your child to confide in you.

How can I encourage my child to open up about how they are feeling?

Here are some considerations for talking to your child and their feelings:

- **Be genuine:** Children know when an adult is pretending. If a topic makes you uncomfortable, say, “This isn’t easy for me to bring up, and it may be difficult for you as well.”
- **Use simple language:** Avoid language you wouldn’t normally use with your child. Be yourself.
- **Allow for silence:** Letting your child sit with their thoughts helps them find words for what they’re feeling. If enough time passes, try offering helpful words: “I feel that you look upset. Can I ask you, are you sad, frustrated, or angry?”
- **Watch your body language:** It sends big signals to ALL children. Talk to them on their level: sit beside them or walk side-by-side. Uncross your arms and use a low, calm voice.
- **Provide positive feedback:** Recognizing your child’s strengths encourages them to talk. For example, “I saw you went to bed on time last night despite wanting to stay up. That shows you care about your health.”
- **Focus the conversation on your child, not on yourself:** Try not to compare yourself to your child. A child may view this as devaluing their experience or perspective.
- **Recognize your child’s feelings:** Their situation is their whole world, and acknowledging and respecting their feelings shows them that you care. If a child is feeling harassed, bullied or a victim of racism, it’s important to gather the context and work swiftly with your child to address it.
- **Recognize their actions:** Understand that a child’s actions may be a coping mechanism. They might act impulsively (leave the room, walk away, etc.) as they may lack age-appropriate skills. Show a younger child how to breathe deeply and suggest that older children take a solo walk.
- **Have frequent conversations:** Children at different ages experience different levels of stress. It helps to have conversations about feelings, thoughts, and actions that are a part of your child’s life. Help them understand that their mental health is just as important as their physical health.
- **Lead by example:** Actions speak louder than words—model mental health to your child. If you’re having difficult feelings, name them. Let your child see you use a calming or grounding strategy, like deep breathing.

If during conversations about mental health, your child shares things that make you concerned, it is important to reach out for support. To learn more about how to talk with your child when you have concerns about their mental health see [Noticing mental health concerns for your child](#).



Where can I go for help if I have concerns?

At school – There are many people who can provide support at school. You can speak to your child’s classroom teacher or a school staff member with whom you feel comfortable. Schools in Ontario offer assessment and brief prevention and early intervention services from social work and psychology staff.

In the community – if more support is needed, school staff, or your family doctor can connect your child with mental health services. If you do not have a family doctor/nurse practitioner, please visit <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-family-doctor-or-nurse-practitioner> to get connected.

You can also contact:

- [Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#) - Access free mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person) ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals necessary.
- [One Stop Talk](#) - Instantly connect with a therapist from anywhere in Ontario to create a plan and access additional support when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) - Access a range of services in several Ontario communities. Easily access free services by walk-in or appointment.

Helpful resources

- <https://www.family.cmho.org/parent-resources/>

References

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