



# Tips for Conversations with Your Child about Mental Health and Wellbeing

All parents and caregivers want their child to experience positive emotions and have a healthy way of coping with challenges, but it can feel hard to know where to start conversations that build these skills in our kids. This tip sheet provides practical advice for caregivers to approach these conversations effectively.

## 1. Create a Safe and Open Environment

Choose a comfortable and private time to talk without distractions. It's important that the child feels safe to share their thoughts and feelings without judgment.

- **Availability:** Make sure your child knows that they can talk to you and/or another trusted adult when they need to.
  - Let the child know very clearly that it is normal to not always know what to do and to need help. Make sure that they have heard you say, out loud, that you want them to tell you or another safe adult when they are having trouble because you care about them and want to help.
  - Establishing a check-in time can also help. Some families make it a habit to ask open-ended but specific questions (examples: "Who did you sit with at lunch today", "What was one surprising thing that happened today?") on the way home from school, at dinner or before bed each day.
  - Talk about who else in their life they can talk to. Brainstorm some people at school, family and any other places where they spend time that might help them if needed. Practice some ways to ask for help.
- **Active Listening:** Find ways to show your child that you are paying attention to what they are saying. Some suggested ways to show this:
  - Make sure your phone is put down.
  - Make eye contact, and/ or have an interested facial expression.
  - See if you can pinpoint a feeling they might be having even if you don't fully understand their reasons for feeling this way.
  - Summarize what they said, for example: "So, Leo sat with someone else today at lunch today. Sounds like you wanted him to sit at your table."

- **Non-Judgmental Response:** React with calm and empathy, even if what they share is difficult to hear. Avoid phrases that come from a place of love but might make them try to hide their feelings, such as "It's ok" or "Don't be sad". You can try phrases like:
  - "That sounds frustrating/ scary/ annoying..."
  - "I can see that really bothered you."
  - "I'm so glad that you could tell me about that."
  - "What happened next?"
  - "What do you think you'll do next time?"

## 2. Initiate Non-Threatening Conversation

Sometimes, children won't bring up hard topics on their own but still get worried by them. If you think something could be bothering your child but they aren't bringing it up on their own, it can help your child if you start the discussion.

- **Use the "Third Person":** Reference characters in books or movies, or mention events in the news to talk about emotions. For instance, "That character looked really sad. Could you tell why they might feel that way?"
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions:** Instead of questions that are easily answered with "yes" or "no", ask questions that encourage them to elaborate.
  - *Instead of:* "Are you okay?" → *Try:* "What has been the best/hardest part of your day?"
- **Share Appropriately:** Briefly share your own experiences with emotions or stress management to normalize the conversation. Keep it brief and focused on how you coped without overwhelming the child with your problems. Here are some examples:
  - "It can be hard for me to get ready for work on Mondays. I don't always want to do things that are challenging! It can help me to..."
  - "When I was a kid, there was a kid in my class that did that too. You know what I did?..."

## 3. Know When to Seek Help

It's important to recognize when a child is having trouble that is beyond what one person can handle by themselves. Here are a few challenges that families can face and resources we recommend and/or offer.

| Signs to look for                                                                               | Action to take                                                                                      | Resource available                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Your child has a lot of anxiety or worry leading to trouble sleeping, eating or going to school | Counseling for parents focused on addressing their child's anxiety                                  | <a href="#">SPACE counseling</a>                          |
| You find your child's behavior very frustrating                                                 | Seek a parent-child or dyadic therapist to help you and your child work on challenges together      | <a href="#">Dyadic or Play Therapy</a>                    |
| Social withdrawal or challenges in getting along with others                                    | Seek a consultant to help your child access inclusive support or a social group to build confidence | <a href="#">Preschool Consultation/ Inclusion Support</a> |

| Signs to look for                                          | Action to take                                               | Resource available                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A significant change in behavior after a frightening event | Contact a therapy provider who specializes in trauma support | <a href="#">Child Parent Psychotherapy or other trauma-focused therapy</a> |

When seeking help, we are here to support you. We are accepting new clients and can recommend some different options that will be best for your particular situation or concerns. Feel free to contact us at +1-510-438-1996 or [hello@thececc.org](mailto:hello@thececc.org). We are available 8-6 Monday through Friday and have weekend appointments available.

## 4. Maintain Ongoing Communication

Keep the lines of communication open as your child grows and faces new challenges.



- **Model Healthy Behaviors:** Show your child how you manage your own stress and emotions in a healthy way.
- **Be Patient:** It may take time for a child to learn and practice a new skill. Reiterate your support and let them know you are always there for them.
- **Educate Yourself:** Learn about child development and common challenges so you can better understand and support your child. You can find more helpful materials on our organization's parent resources page.

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