

## Let's Talk About Mental Health

The purpose of our 'Let's Talk About...' series is to support parents in understanding and having conversations about different aspects of emotional health, wellbeing, and development.

The accompanying narrated PowerPoint goes into more detail, but this handout pulls together some of the salient points that may be beneficial for parents in having conversations with their children about mental health.

### What is 'mental health' and how to normalise it with children

- Mental health encompasses all the aspects that make us who we are; our feelings, the way we think, our emotions and our moods. Just like our physical health, everyone has mental health, and we all need to take care of it.
- Mental health and wellbeing are not fixed - we all exist on a continuum of mental health and will fluctuate between feeling mentally robust, well and strong, to feeling mentally low, weak, and lacking resilience.
- Emotions aren't good or bad, positive or negative. Your feelings are your feelings; they are necessary and serve a purpose for us. There are times when those feelings could be described as 'uncomfortable' however no emotion is inherently bad, and it's important children understand that it isn't bad to feel angry or sad.
- Everyday feelings vs overwhelming feelings - Everyday feelings come and go and are a normal reaction to what is happening in our lives. Everyday feelings are always changing and don't hang around for long. Overwhelming feelings, conversely, hang around for a long time and can change the way we feel and behave. They may stop us doing what we want in life and begin to cause problems.

- Talking about feelings can stop them becoming overwhelming. There can still be an element of shame or stigma around struggling with mental health so it's important that adults normalise discussing emotions and supporting mental health and wellbeing.
  
- Needing support with your mental health isn't a sign of weakness. Experiencing periods of low mood, anxiety or depression or needing help from a counsellor or other support service does not mean you are ill or broken or damaged. Sometimes struggling with your mental health can feel like being in a pitch-black room and trying to get out. You may stumble and fall over things you can't see and hurt yourself in the process. Counselling support can be like someone turning on a torch - you still need to get out of the room yourself, but way out might be a bit clearer, the hazards easier to see.

### Supporting Emotional Growth - Emotion Coaching

1. Be aware of your child's emotions, by better understanding your own

The first step towards helping a child learn about emotions is being aware of what a child is feeling. This awareness begins with you. Parents who understand their own emotions are better able to relate to their child's feelings

Gottman suggests asking yourself questions to uncover why you might have developed certain responses to emotions like sadness and anger.

- Did your family use times of unhappiness, fear, or anger to show each other support, offer guidance, and help each other solve problems?
- Were sadness, anger and fear shoved under the blanket or dismissed as unproductive, frivolous, dangerous, or self-indulgent?

### 2. Recognize that emotions are an opportunity to connect

The best time to support children with emotional regulation is during the experience when the feelings are real. This means sharing the moment of feeling sad or feeling angry with a child before those feelings grow to a high level.

- Pay close attention to your child's emotions—don't dismiss or avoid them
- Think of emotional moments as "opportunities to draw closer" to your child.
- Encourage your child to talk about their emotions and try to share in the feeling yourself.
- Share your own feelings when it's appropriate.
- Tell your child their feelings are okay...and then offer guidance in sorting out those feelings.

### 3. Listen with empathy

Two of the most important steps parents can take to help their children deal successfully with their emotions are listening with empathy and supporting a child's feelings. Comforting children with their feelings reassures them that they are not alone and lets them know their feelings are okay.

Empathic listening involves fully engaging with your child by using all your senses to observe your child's emotional state and reflect back to them what you hear, see, and imagine in a soothing, non-judgmental way.

These words also help the child label the emotion. For example, "I can see that you're breathing rapidly, and your body is very tense. I wonder if you're feeling angry about something?"

Once your child feels understood, let them know that their feelings and wishes are okay, even if their actions aren't.

### 4. Help your child name their emotions

Sometimes, children will struggle to translate the sensations inside their bodies or thoughts in their minds into emotions. Supporting your child in labelling those emotions can be hugely beneficial.

If your child is older, this may seem like it isn't relevant, however teens and young adults can still struggle to identify what they are feeling and recognise the impact that is having on their thoughts and actions.

If you label an emotion - by observing aloud that they seem angry, sad or disappointed, you can help normalise these emotions and open up an opportunity to connect and have a conversation. Researchers have shown that the simple act of labelling an emotion has a soothing effect on the nervous system, which helps children recover more quickly from an upsetting experience.

Naming emotions helps different brain areas communicate with each other, which in turn helps children calm themselves. This process is called learning "emotional regulation," which is a critical coping skill needed for managing life's up's and down's.

### 5. Set limits and problem solve

This doesn't necessarily need to happen in the moment, particularly with older children. It may be beneficial to allow your child some time and space to self-regulate if emotions have become heightened, but the coming together to set limits and problem solve is an important part of the process and crucial to emotional growth and development.

What is most important to remember in this stage is that we are setting limits on the **behaviour** but not on the emotions. It's also important to have consistent boundaries and ideally boundaries that have been discussed with your child in advance, and are enforced by all care givers so the child isn't getting mixed messages (which can lead to a loss of emotional safety if they feel like the goal posts are always moving)

## Final Tips

- Help your child boost their emotional literacy by naming, reflecting and validating their emotions.
- Try side on conversations – being by your child's side (e.g. in the car, making dinner, playing a computer game) is less confrontational and may feel more comfortable, particularly if it allows for natural pauses in the conversation.
- Understand that children and teenagers aren't "mini-adults" in terms of brain development, which has a significant impact on their ability to make decisions and assess risk/reward effectively.
- Learning from failure is critical, particularly in children and teenagers. If it's safe to do so, respect your child's wishes even if it will lead to a failure. The process of reflecting on this failure, with empathic listening and validating feelings, will be crucial to your child's development.
- Even if the thing your child is sharing or emotional about seems trivial to you, try to avoid mocking or belittling comments. Sometimes something that feels insignificant to us as adults it's all consuming to your child.
- Emotional honesty is really important for children's mental health – part of this is being prepared to acknowledge if you're wrong or have overreacted. This can be an incredibly powerful teaching moment – you are showing your child that you can apologise and make amends if you get something wrong.

For further support or advice, contact the Wellbeing Team on  
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