
How to support a child who needs help

Children are less likely to have the capacity to verbalize their feelings. Talking to your child early and often about mental health is a great first step—this may just be showing up as a safe space for processing negative or confusing emotions. During conversations about mental health, consider these tips for equipping your children with the ability to express themselves.

Start with open-ended questions to move the conversation along, but be specific.

“How are you feeling” will likely result in answers like, “I don’t know,” “fine,” “sad,” “angry,” “weird,” or even, “why?”

You might instead ask about specific topics, issues or feelings that you know your child has been worried about or has been having:

- “How was school today? I know math has felt hard.”
- “How are your friends doing? Who have you been playing with?”
- “What has recess been like?”

Share your observations

Don’t be afraid to ask direct questions, especially if you are concerned that they might consider hurting themselves or others, or be suicidal.

- “I’ve noticed that you seem sad today, did anything happen?”
- “I’m worried about you. How can I help?”
- “Are you considering harming yourself?”

Give them the words

Young children might benefit from reading a book with you about mental health or big feelings. You can help children identify with the book characters with questions like, “Are you feeling like the character in this book?” and “Suzy said she was sad – do you know what it means to be sad?” Put words to feelings. It’s okay to offer children multiple choice options for their emotions or use face charts to help them identify their emotions by looking at others’ facial expressions.

Book recommendations

The Boy with Big, Big Feelings by Britney Winn Lee

A Little Spot of Feelings box set by Diane Alber

My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognize Emotions and Express Feelings by Natalia Maguire

B is for Breathe: The ABCs of Coping with Fussy and Frustrating Feelings by Melissa Boyd

The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions by Anna Llenas

Show empathy

It can be easy to become frustrated by a tantrum over the blue versus yellow cup, but validating emotions, big and small, at an early age and in an ongoing manner will develop trust. Mental health symptoms can show up as emotional and physical pain—children need to know their symptoms will be trusted.

