

Talking With Children and Young People About Mental Health

Children may struggle to find the words to describe their experience, especially if they are feeling sad or worried for much of the time. It is up to you and other adults to take the lead and notice what is happening for a child or young person (child).

Listen deeply to children when talking with them about their mental health. Give them the space to say whatever they want. Resist the temptation to immediately try and make them feel better as they may feel that you are not validating their experiences and feelings.

The information below provides some examples of ways you might start a conversation with a child.

What to Consider When Talking to Children About Mental Health

Before you have these conversations, think about:

- the purpose of your conversation with the child and what you are hoping to achieve; for example, are you trying to find the best way of supporting the child?
- the age, developmental stage, capacity or situation of the child
- who is the best person is to have this conversation — you, a parent, a carer, other family/kin, member of their community or a trained therapist?
- how you will provide responsive support if the child says something that makes you worried about their immediate safety?
- how you will make sure the child is supported and reassured after your conversation, especially if it is distressing?

Practice considerations	Conversation ideas
<p>Understand the persistence and intensity of the child's feelings.</p> <p>Use tools such as scaling questions or the The Bears App to explore the intensity of the child's feelings.</p>	<p>Have a look at these bear cards. Can you pick a bear that describes how you're feeling today? Can you pick a bear that describes how you would like to be feeling?</p>

Practice considerations	Conversation ideas
	<p>Have a look at the scale from 1 to 10. If 1 is the worst you have ever felt, and 10 is the best you have ever felt, how are you feeling today?</p> <p>How did you feel yesterday? Do you think this might change tomorrow or next week?</p> <p>Tell me what words we can use to describe when you are at a 10.</p> <p>What words can we use to describe when you're at a 3?</p>
<p>Be curious if the child says something to make you worried about their safety.</p>	<p>I noticed you looked (uncomfortable, sad or worried) ... when you mentioned John. Can you tell me more about this?</p> <p>Some children change from being happy to being sad and worried when someone is hurting them or making them feel unsafe. Is there something you'd like to talk to me about?</p>
<p>Be responsive if the child talks about hurting themselves or dying.</p> <p>If you are worried call the Mental Health Line for assistance on 1800 011 511 for 24-hour service.</p> <p>If you have immediate concerns for a child, call 000.</p>	<p>Thanks for telling me about [use the child's words]. That must have been really hard to say. It's important you've spoken up. I want you to know that me, Aunty Janice and Troy really care about you and want you to be OK. Let's talk about a plan to keep you safe tonight. We can also talk about what we can do to help you. What do you think you need from me to keep safe? From others?</p>
<p>Support the child to get help</p>	<p>Lots of people need help to talk about their sadness and worry and find a way to feel better. I'd like you to talk to a lady called Natalie about how you've been feeling. Natalie is a counsellor. A counsellor is someone who will listen to you, and help you find ways so you don't feel so [use the</p>

Practice considerations	Conversation ideas
	<p>child's language]. It might be hard to talk to Natalie at first, but once you start to get to know her, you will probably start to feel more comfortable.</p>

Conversation Tips When Talking to Young People

Conversations with older young people about their mental health can be challenging, especially if you do not know where to start. Consider the following advice:

- **Invest the time to talk.** It is unlikely a young person is willing to talk to you on a first visit. Build a relationship of trust with them. Do not rush the young person.
- **Find the right time and place to talk.** Avoid visiting the young person at school or interrupting their lesson times. Think about where they will be most comfortable. Try not to meet in your office, especially if this represents a sad or traumatic time for them. Some young people find it easier to talk with minimal eye contact, so consider going for a walk with them, or sitting next to them instead of opposite them.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Some young people might be hypersensitive or reactive to anything their body sees as a threat. Be aware of personal space. If they react to something you do, notice this and be aware of how this may relate to their experiences.
- **Just start the conversation.** If you are worried about a young person, ask them about it. Be clear about your role and about what you are worried about.
- **Validate feelings and experiences.** Validate their experiences, do not minimise them and help them to name their feelings. Use this language (what they have named as their feelings) for your future conversations.
- **Sit calmly and breathe.** If a young person is upset, angry or disconnected from your conversation, be patient and take your time.

Watch your own reactions. If you respond with shock, judgement and anger, they are unlikely to keep talking or talk to you again in the future. Think about what you can do that would be most helpful for the young person at that moment.

- **Listen more, talk less.** Use open-ended questions instead of questions that will give a yes or no answer.
- **Avoid the temptation to give advice or lecture.** Do not jump in immediately with advice. Ask questions and try not to overwhelm the young person.

- **Talk openly about mental health.** Talk about how other young people might experience the same issues. Tell them about ways they can feel better, such as getting support, taking medication, diet, exercise, sleep, and connecting with peers, family and the community. Bring hope and optimism to these conversations.
- **Talk about ways to get help.** Ask the young person what they think. Give suggestions and listen to what they need from you to get help. For example, “One place to start would be to go and see your doctor and let them know how you are feeling. Is there someone you would like to go with you to an appointment?”
- **Explain what might happen.** Give them as much information as they need to know, depending on their developmental stage or worries about what will happen. For example, “Your doctor may help you make a mental health plan. This is written down and lists all the things you think might help, such as going to see a counsellor. It includes numbers you can call if you feel you’re having a really bad time. The doctor may also suggest prescribing medication to help you.”
- **Notice and build on strengths.** Most young people will want to maintain connection to important people in their lives, and to their hobbies and interests. These play a protective role for young people. You might want to help draw up a plan for the week so they can remain connected to who and what is important to them.
- **Tell the young person they are not alone.** Let them know you are there to support them and you will help however you can.
- **Explore cultural factors.** Know more about an Aboriginal or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse child’s culture. Explore how they view mental illness (or what other language they use), how they seek help (or what barriers do they experience), who in their culture is part of conversations about mental health and how culture can help protect a child.

Get more advice about talking to young people from [Beyondblue](#).

Talking to Aboriginal Children About Their Mental Health

It’s important to plan how you will work with an Aboriginal child. Seek advice and consultation from Aboriginal practitioners and the community. Ask them what they think you need to know to best work with the child.

Remember that most Aboriginal communities prefer to define mental health as 'social and emotional wellbeing'. This lens will help you put the child’s experience in the context of loss of country, spiritual healing, family and identity as a result of colonisation and oppression. It will also help you to harness the strengths of the child’s community, and the role they can play in the healing.

For more information, watch this video, [Engaging an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Young Person](#)

Where Can You Find Help For a Child?

You can link or refer a parent to the following services:

- Emergency 000 (someone in immediate danger) – call 000
- their GP, psychologist, psychiatrist, local community mental health team or other health professional
- [Kids Helpline](#) (counselling support child 5-25, 24/7) – call 1800 551 800
- [Beyondblue](#) (anyone feeling depressed or anxious) – call 1300 22 4636 or chat online
- [Head Space](#) acts as a one-stop-shop for young people who need help with mental health, physical health (including sexual health), alcohol and other drugs or work and study support. Chat online, email, or speak on the phone with a qualified professional. It's free, confidential and can be anonymous. Explore eheadspace, headspace Work & Study and headspace Career Mentoring.
- [Black Dog Institute](#) (people affected by mood disorders) – online help
- [SANE Australia](#) (people living with a mental illness) – call 1800 187 263
- [Mental Health Line](#) (talk to a mental health professional) – call 1800 011 511
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) (anyone thinking about suicide) – call 1300 659 467
- [Thirrili](#) (Aboriginal community, National Indigenous Critical Response Service, provides emotional and practical support to bereaved families and individuals impacted by suicide or other traumatic loss, 24/7) – call 1800 805 801.

References:

Raising Children Network (2006-2020). Child development: the first five years. Available: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/development/understanding-development/development-first-five-years>

World Health Organization (2003). *Mental Illness*, 7. Available: https://www.who.int/mental_health/media/investing_mnh.pdf

Digital Applications. Innovative Resources
<https://innovativeresources.org/resources/digital-applications/bears-app/>

HeadSpace Australia – You Tube Channel
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCORFEF05t9rFXq5TFW4vGDw>

How to talk about mental health
<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-13/mental-health-conditions-in-young-people/how-to-talk-about-mental-health>