

How to talk to your children about their feelings

A guide for parents and carers



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- Goal setting and journalling
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- Community support (discussion boards and live forums)
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It can be so tricky to bring up difficult topics, and talking about emotions with your children can sometimes feel more than a little daunting for parents and carers. You may worry about saying the wrong thing, making your child feel uncomfortable, and even worry about making them feel worse. But the fact you want to explore emotions with your child is enough, even if sometimes it doesn't go as you planned!

If this feels familiar for you, you are definitely not alone!

As many of us here are parents ourselves, we wanted to put together some handy tips on how you could begin talking to your children about their feelings.

*While the focus here is parents and carers, extended family members, teachers, and other professionals working with children and young people may also find this useful.

Why you might want to talk to your children about their feelings

There can be a number of reasons why you want to talk to your children about their emotions.

These may include the following:

- You've noticed your child is acting differently, and you are concerned about them.
- Something has recently happened that might have affected your child, and you want to check in to see how they are doing.
- You want to help your child to feel more comfortable talking about their feelings in general.

Our top tips to get you started:

We are very lucky to have some amazing parents, grandparents, carers, family members, and child and adolescent professionals on our team.

Many of them contributed to our **top tips**, which we hope you find useful.

Number 1

Think about whether your child feels ready to talk

Just because you want to talk doesn't mean they feel ready to. Look out for the things they say--and their body language, too--for indicators on whether they really want to talk about their feelings.

'I know when my son isn't in the mood to talk, as his whole body is saying, 'Not now, Mum!' I always respect that, though, and never push. As a result, I think he feels more able to talk to me when it feels right.' - G

Number 2

Think about the setting

Talking about feelings can be really sensitive, so making sure the space is private, comfortable, and feels safe for your child can be key to a positive outcome.



Number 3

Choose your timing wisely

Talking about feelings, or any difficult subject, can be quite sensitive. Choosing a time when you are both calm and relaxed can be more useful than choosing a time when there are any heightened emotions already at play.

'I always find discussing something important when my child is upset or angry often doesn't end as well as I hope. Both being relaxed has much better results and helps us both reflect on and express our feelings with more consideration.' - H

Number 4

Practice asking open questions (rather than closed ones)

Closed questions usually encourage yes or no type answers. For example, Do you like school? is a closed question, because the response is likely to be either 'yes' or 'no'. The finality and brevity of such a response doesn't allow the conversation to go much further.

Open questions, on the other hand, go a bit deeper and encourage more thinking and exploration. Instead, try saying, tell me about school.

This simple difference in style might help your child consider their own thoughts and feelings a little more and encourage them to share more of their story or problem with you.



Number 5

Take away the intensity

It can be pretty daunting (on both sides!) to sit down to talk about something as important as feelings. But decreasing some of the intensity can sometimes reduce the pressure and make things a little less stressful.

Here are some examples:

- Have a chat while on a dog walk or stroll together. Doing something shoulder-to-shoulder might mean there's less intense eye contact, which can feel more comfortable, especially when there's big emotions at play.
- Have a chat while doing an activity together, such as playing a board game or working on a craft project. The distraction of keeping everyone busy can take the pressure away.
- Have a chat during a car journey. Not feeling the pressure for eye contact or hyperfocus on the conversation can be helpful. Just be sure that emotions are not too heightened for you to concentrate on the road and drive safely!

'I avoid sitting them down and instead do it during an activity like washing up, cleaning the car, or cooking together, as I find they are much more likely to open up.' - N**

*Please note - It might also be useful (and less intense) to start slowly with any difficult topics. So instead of going straight in with the big topics, maybe talking about something else first to break the ice.

Number 6

Model it

Being more open and honest about how you yourself feel (in an age appropriate way, of course) can normalise the idea of talking about emotions. Children who see that adults also have big feelings, doubts, get scared or anxious, get frustrated with others at work, etc. might feel more comfortable opening up themselves.

‘When I was a child, I can’t remember my parents showing their feelings. Understandably, I had a hard time doing it myself. With my own children, I try my best to create an environment where we can all talk about how we feel, so when things are difficult, reaching out doesn’t feel so tough.’ - S

Number 7

Name it

Sometimes it can be hard for children to identify their feelings. Naming what you observe can help them to do this. For example, when talking to a young child, you might say, ‘You seem really angry today. I can see you are clenching your hands, and you don’t have a happy face. I wonder if anything has made you angry or upset?’

*This advice mainly applies to younger children who are still developing their emotional vocabulary and may need assistance in identifying their feelings. However, this technique can work for older children as well; just take care that you don’t come across as condescending. Something like, “You’ve seemed pretty quiet and withdrawn lately; can you tell me what’s bothering you?” can be a good approach.

Number 8

Ask them what they need

It can be tough to talk about how you feel, and when we want to talk about things as parents, children don't always want to or feel ready. Asking what a child needs from you can help them feel more in control, heard, and respected.

Children might also not know what they need, so suggesting a few options can be a good starting point. Examples include: Do you need some space right now? Do you need a hug? Would you like for us to do something together to take your mind off things?

'Sometimes, even when I want to talk about something, my child doesn't. As hard as that is, I try to respect that. Sometimes they just want a cuddle, and I can definitely provide those!' - L

Number 9

Listen carefully

This sounds pretty straightforward, but sometimes, when we care, we may jump into problem-solving mode a little too hastily. And while it might come from a really good place, it's not always helpful.

'Listen, like really listen to what they're saying without jumping in with advice or guidance (as much as you want to)! When you really take the time to listen without judgement, it can show your children that you love them, what they are feeling is valid, and that sharing when they are ready is a really good thing.' - P



Number 10

Get creative

We might feel a pressure to have all the answers and say the right things, but sometimes, we just need to think a little differently. Helping our children express their feelings through play or using art materials can be just as important and useful, especially for much younger children whose natural language is often play.

'I use 'worry monsters' with the little people in my life. They are small toy figures that 'listen' to worries. They love them! When they feel worried about something, they go somewhere quiet and talk to their worry monster, who, in their minds, swallow up the worries and help them get back to playing. It really helps them to express how they feel in a language they understand.' - O

It's important to note that when it comes to parenting, (and actually any relationship) things aren't always perfect all the time. And that's okay. There's sometimes a lot of pressure to get things right. But actually being a parent who is trying their best to meet their child's needs, whatever their circumstances is good enough. Not having all the answers and getting things wrong, certainly doesn't make you a bad parent. It makes you human.



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