

When it comes to emotions, it's undeniable that children and adults have differing reactions and ways of expressing their feelings. To manage these differences, here are some key aspects that may make for a more productive, meaningful conversation when talking to your child about their mental/brain health.

Accept your child's feelings on his or her own terms

- It's common for parents to be afraid to ask their child how they are really feeling. However, if mental/brain health illnesses are not discussed openly, your child may feel even more alone.

Tell them you care

- Use phrases such as, "I love you," "You are important to me," or "Your feelings matter" to validate and affirm your child's feelings and assure them that they are not alone.

Express your concern and maintain honesty

- Examples of what to say can look like, "I'm sad because you don't seem to have as much energy to participate in the activities you usually enjoy," or "I'm worried because I've noticed you've been crying more often."
- Answer your child's questions as honestly as possible based on what is age appropriate.
- For a younger child, maybe you say, "You are going to see a doctor who helps people with their feelings. While some doctors fix broken bones, others help you with your feelings."

Understand their feelings

- Asking open ended questions can open self-realization and offer a more productive conversation.
- Saying things such as, "Sometimes when people are depressed, they feel sad, alone, and angry, and may want to stay in bed and cry all day. How have you been feeling?"
- As your child opens up, continue asking open-ended questions such as, "Tell me more about..." to gain further insight into their feelings.

"Be The One"

- Most children and teens with depression feel alone. Reassure your child that you are there for them every step of the way.
- Say things such as, "We can handle this together. I'm going to stick by you."

Assess potential need for medication

- While counseling and openly discussing one's feelings is very important, sometimes medications are also needed to help people feel better.
- There may be a brain chemistry adjustment that is necessary, and it can be helpful to get professional medical information regarding antidepressants that adjust chemicals in the brain to assist individuals with depression.

Accept

- Accept mental illness just as it is: an illness. Educate yourself, and research as much as possible about the illness and treatment options available. Understand the options and proceed with regular doctor's appointments.

Have you noticed your child feeling sad and defeated? Are they excluding themselves from normal activities, oversleeping or not sleeping enough? Are they responding with irritability, or having an overall negative attitude? These are normal feelings to experience as a developing child, but if they are persistent and long-term, your child may be living with depression.

Depression in children often goes undiagnosed, as we don't always believe that depression can happen in our young children. It is often mistaken for something else, like laziness or defiance. Talking to your children about their emotions and how they are feeling is key to understanding if depression is the cause of their changed behaviors. These conversations are imperative for emotional growth and mental wellness.

What can I do?

Talk openly with your child. Ask open ended questions. Promote answers that don't allow for a yes or no response. This will allow for a deeper conversation.

- What was the best thing that happened to you at school today?
- Was there anything that made you sad today?
- If you could do it over, how would you do it differently?
- What do you like or dislike about a certain topic?
- Talking can change and save lives.

Be patient

- Recognize your child's mood. There's a reason they may be feeling down.
- Defiant behavior usually happens when there's more going on. Instead of punishing them, start a conversation to find out why they are acting out.
- Love heals. Talk to them with love and understanding rather than angst. You will have a much better result.

Discuss with a doctor

- There is a difference between sadness and depression. Depression will last longer than a two-week period. If you notice your child's sadness lasting for longer, consult your child's doctor.
- Our mental health and our physical health go hand in hand. We need to talk about our hurt feelings and depressed moods just as we would our hurting body. The brain is an organ, and just like every other organ in our body, it sometimes needs to be checked on too.

Assure them they are not alone

We all have brains, so we all have feelings. We should talk about our feelings with each other so we can understand that it is normal to have feelings of sadness, insecurities, and fears. It's important for our children to know they are not alone.

- Provide your child with love and understanding. Being dismissive about their emotions when expressed, can cause them to shut down and not open up.
- Assure them you are there to help and support. Say things such as, "You are so loved, and we're going to navigate this together," or "You are valued, your feelings matter, and you matter."
- Remember, love heals. Love your child and do the best you can to listen to what they are saying, listen intentionally, and love unconditionally.