



Your child's mental health – some tips

Creating good family mental health



Mental health often gets talked about in terms of problems, but everyone has mental health. Sometimes our mental health is good and we feel happy, relaxed, confident and emotionally connected to others. At other times, we can feel stressed or anxious, distressed or isolated. We can develop less common issues like self-harm or challenges with eating.

So, mental health is not just something to talk about with your children when there might be a problem. When you chat about other positive things like healthy eating or getting enough exercise you can refer to activities to keep mentally healthy. This makes it seem more 'normal' and less scary to talk about when things aren't going so well.

If you develop habits that promote good mental health then you will naturally encourage these in your child. Boingboing's [Resilience Framework](#) will give you lots of ideas about what you can do to promote the whole family's mental health. We call these 'Resilient Moves'. They are very ordinary things but when times get tough we can make a conscious effort to do them because we know they promote mental health.

Why not see how you can include as many as possible into your family life? Doing these activities together mean that you are being a positive role model for your children and creating a family culture of positive mental health.

Identifying when your child might be needing extra support



It is important to notice any changes in your child. They might become more withdrawn, might be communicating less, seem less motivated, or you might notice a change in their sleep or eating patterns. This could be due to normal changes of adolescence. It could be as a result of external changes or pressures (e.g. coping with transition from primary to secondary school or one class to another, being bullied or the breakup of an important friendship). It can also be signs of your child needing extra support around their mental health. The good news is that ways of addressing these are much the same.

Find good times and places for conversations



When we feel anxious as parents, it's tempting to launch into a 'heavy', sit down conversation, but this is probably the last thing your child needs. It is much easier for someone to open up about how they are feeling when they were doing something side by side with you (playing a game, washing up, walking the dog, cooking together etc.). Try to find times and places where you won't be interrupted by the demands of others. Try and make conversations about mental health a normal part of your family life.

Listen more than talk



Try to listen and avoid jumping to conclusions based on your own experiences – they are yours, not your child's. Listening enables your child to feel that you want to understand what is going on for them. You could reflect back what you have heard to check your understanding. Avoid giving advice unless your child is actually asking for that. Remember what they most need is to know that they can talk about what they are going through safely without you over-reacting. Be comfortable with silence. Show empathy by making little affirming responses like 'that sounds really hard', 'I'm sorry it's tough for you at the moment'.

Let your child know you are asking because you care, not because you are judging them



Your children care about what you think of them, even if it doesn't always seem that way. Try to make it clear that you are asking how they are because you care about them and not as a negative response to a change in their behaviour. You can ask if they are ok and perhaps give a specific reason why you are asking (for example, 'I noticed that you seem quieter than usual' or 'I noticed that you seem reluctant to leave for school in the mornings, these days.')

Stigma around mental health can make us feel that needing support is a sign of weakness. Wait until they feel comfortable to talk, even if this is in small steps over a period of time and praise their courage for talking about their mental health. Try not to judge or show any worry as this may put them off opening up any further.

Let your child know that distress is normal



It is important to give your child the clear message that everyone will feel distressed from time to time; having positive mental health isn't about feeling happy all the time, but about being able to manage distress. At the same time, acknowledge that feeling distressed can be very painful and unpleasant.

It is important for your child to feel hopeful that difficulties can pass, and that there are positive things that can help (they can pick some Resilient Moves from the Resilient Framework). Have some time together to stay connected – even if it is just 10 minutes at a time.

Remember you are not on your own



Sometimes it is good for you as a parent to have someone to talk to, for support and another perspective. Your child's teacher or tutor could be a good person to contact. Your experiences at home might help the teacher to look out for signs that your child might be struggling at school. The school can tell you about local places offering support. Your GP can also be a good source of information and support.

At Boingboing, we are lucky that young people who have lived through challenges have taught us about how to support other young people in similar situations. On our [website](#), you can find a great [Parents' Guide](#) written by young people who have experienced mental health issues themselves. Their insight and advice are well worth reading.