



Meraki

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Family Conversations

Using everyday interactions to support mental wellbeing

Every parent and caregiver wants to have quality conversations with the young people in their lives. They want to engage in relationships that will support their children in growing into confident and successful adults. They want to be one of the most trusted adults in their child's life whom they turn to when the challenges they face become overwhelming. Parents and caregivers are always doing the best with what they have, but many parents and caregivers, feel uncertain how to maintain a foundation of open communication with their children. While every child is different, and all relationships are unique, here are some of our favorite tips to help parents encourage open communication and conversations that support mental wellbeing.

Be Open and Honest: Above all else, be interested in your child's life. Celebrate the good times, be present, curious and honest during the challenging times. Children who know they can come to you on a wide variety of topics are more likely to speak up when something in their life feels wrong or unsafe.

Discuss current events with children of all ages, explore topics from history, and exchange open ended questions about perceptions. During conversations that are more difficult or topics associated with increased stress, it is important to remember you don't need to have all of the answers, but you should respond calmly and honestly about what you do know.

Be Consistent: Not all conversations, even those about uncomfortable topics, have to be big and intense. Make discussions about feelings a regular part of your day, providing examples of your own ups and downs. If something has made you angry or sad – perhaps a television show being canceled – ask your child what she would do to feel better. While you don't want to pull your child into a dramatic situation, it is good for children to know their caregivers have good and bad days and experience a wide range of emotions. Find opportunities to speak to your children about their friends and what it means to be a supportive friend. Express interest (not judgement) of their friends. The sooner in your child's life and the more regular you have these conversations, the more comfortable they will be in the teen years.

When children and teens do share, whether their emotions or friendship, focus on having a consistent response. Being empathetic, curious, and using open ended questions to better understand will help create feelings of safety and trust in discussing these topics.



Honor the Journey: All Children travel through various stages of development, some of which are more difficult than others. Whenever kids enter a new phase of development whether physical, cognitive, social, or emotional they will likely have some changes to sleep, nutrition, mood, and behavior. When you notice these, you will need to use more patience and empathy as your child will likely struggle to navigate even everyday problem solving or meet the usual expectations. Using reflective statements and sharing observations can be a great tool to provide kids with a space to talk about what their inner world is looking and feeling like. For example, "I noticed this week has been hard for you, it seems you are frustrated about a lot, being a teen can be hard, can you help me understand what's going on?"

As our children develop, the way they want and need closeness from you will change. It's normal for friends to become more important and for them to engage in more social comparison. This can make connecting and open communication even more difficult. Be sure to avoid judgment, criticism, or dismissing their struggles. Even the struggles with social media, "friend drama", or wanting to fit in. Use active listening and ask them how you can be supportive. Continue spending one on one time with them doing things together that connect you both to your family's values and activities, allow you to be silly, have fun, and most of all being your authentic selves.

Remain Calm: As a parent or caregiver, there will be many times you will feel worried, angry, frustrated, or sad about the things your child or teen does, says, or talks about. That's okay, you're human and you care a lot. These are important times in your relationship. Try to stay as calm as you can in the moment. Practice ways to ground yourself such as deep breathing, using a mantra, or changing your physical surroundings. When you regulate your emotions first, you will have more successful interactions with your child and be able to more effectively address the concern. In many of these situations, your first instinct may be to immediately remove things you believe are causing harm or creating high risk behavior – for instance, a phone, computer, certain friends or freedoms. Reacting in this way too quickly may be interpreted by youth as punishment for sharing. While some of these actions still might be needed, when you stay calm and have further conversation, you can gain a deeper understanding of the support your child may need. You may even be able to collaboratively decide with your child what changes are needed.

Ask for Help: Remember you are never alone as a parent or caretaker. There are many other adults in your child's life who care a lot about them. If you begin having more consistent concerns or your gut is telling you something is wrong, reach out – perhaps to a teacher or coach – and express your concerns. Perhaps the other adult will have information that can help. Remember to also spend time with friends and family who encourage you, support you, and nurture you along your parenting journey. Growing up and parenting are probably the hardest tasks of our lives, and it's okay to not be okay at times. When you feel overwhelmed, worried and unsure what else you can do, there are caring professionals available to help! Don't be afraid to contact a therapist at Tanager or in your local area for more support. If there is a mental health crisis, call the national suicide and crisis lifeline at 988 from anywhere in the US for free, confidential, support 24/7.

