

Communication Tips to Support Your Child’s Mental Health

Goal	Comments	What to do (examples):	What not to do (examples):
Strengthen your relationship with your child.	<p>It is healthy for teens to have friends and social activities, this shouldn’t completely replace parents and family.</p> <p>A strong parent-child relationship is the single most important factor that helps any young person with stress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spend regular time with your child, ideally one-on-one. • Do activities both can enjoy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not only plan activities you want to do as guardian/parent, do what your child likes to do, too.
Keep the channels of communication open and be direct when it comes to suicide.	<p>May need to go to extra effort to initiate discussions about mental health and suicide.</p> <p>During adolescence, teenagers can avoid talking about their worries and feelings with their parents as they try to develop independence.</p> <p>Ask questions in the context of caring and wanting to help them resolve their pain.</p> <p>Show empathy; listen to understand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start gently by asking: “How are you doing?” • Listen: It’s important to give your child a chance to respond to your first question (give them time, do not rush). • Express your concern - “I love you and I’m worried about you.” • Comment on what you’re noticing - “It seems like things have been stressful for you lately.” • Use open-ended comments - “Tell me more about what you mean when you say you feel crazy.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not try to guess how your child is doing before you’ve had time to listen to their thoughts and opinions. • Do not start the conversation with telling them you know something about them, For example: “So your sister told me that you’ve been drinking.” • Do not be afraid to ask your child questions. • Do not be afraid to directly ask if they are thinking of harming themselves or thinking of suicide.
Listen to your child’s distress; stay calm and provide emotional support.	<p>No matter what your child says, parents need to react calmly; listen when your child is upset. Make a point to hear their distress (if parents do not do this, children may shut down or react with anger).</p> <p>Try to listen as much as talk; listen first. A conversation can be a mix of confusion, sadness, grief, guilt, anger, or anxiety and worry about themselves or others.</p> <p>Okay to help them label that emotion, when they are unable to. Encourage the appropriate expression of emotion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It sounds like (situation) is making you sad...tell me more about that.” • “There are so many things going on, it is understandable you’re feeling this way...is there something, I can do?” or “What would make things better?” • Give time for your child to cool down before starting a conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not take things personally when your child is yelling and upset. • Do not try to solve a “problem” when they are in crisis.

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<p>Normalize their experiences.</p>	<p>Reassure them there are no taboo thoughts and reduce any possible shame.</p> <p>Validate their feelings and experience.</p> <p>Provide an accurate reflection of their experience; summarize what you have heard them say.</p> <p>Show empathy; listen to understand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Given all you are dealing with right now and given what is happening at school, it makes sense to feel as overwhelmed as you have been.” • If it appears they have talked about suicide, be direct. “I heard you say something about not wanting to be here, or that it’s better if you didn’t exist...have you had any thoughts about hurting yourself or thoughts of killing yourself?” • “Yeah, I can see that would be very difficult.” 	<p>Do not say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You shouldn’t be feeling this way.” • “It’s not that bad.” • “You should count yourself lucky.” • “How can you be feeling so bad when we’ve given you so much? What do you expect from us?” • Do not compare to other people like their siblings or friends.
<p>Avoid speculation and jumping in with advice or criticism.</p>	<p>Misinformation and rumors can follow tragedy, have an open conversation and be curious about what your child knows or thinks he knows (from friends, school, or media). These may be false or incomplete.</p> <p>Some parents worry that talking about suicide or using direct language will upset their child or give them ideas, but it is most likely that your child is hearing about it already, and not speaking about it could send the message that you are not open to discussing it with them.</p> <p>Acknowledge that you do not and cannot know everything about the particular situation and resist the urge to speculate.</p> <p>It may be helpful to talk with your child about the complexity of factors that can contribute to death by suicide, including mental health problems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is common for a child or teen to say, “I know all about it,” but asking them to tell you what they “know” can be very informative. • Speak calmly about the facts using exact language, such as “suicide” and “death” and correct any misunderstandings or misinformation if you can. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not jump to conclusions, or instantly give advice. Youth need to feel heard, understood, and accepted. Giving advice or criticizing can seem to a child that we are not really hearing them, and that we don’t really understand what they are going through.

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<p>Encourage the appropriate expression of emotions, so that they understand their own feelings.</p>	<p>Many teenagers tend to either hide their emotions or show them in an explosive manner, leading to their parents' comments about their moodiness.</p> <p>Understanding your own feelings allows you to have a direction to approach the conversation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage them to show and share their feelings of joy, happiness, and excitement in their successes. • They can then show and share their sadness, anxiety, distress, and disappointment. • Learning healthy coping skills and understanding triggers will be helpful in controlling emotions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not label emotions as good or bad, for example: "I prefer it when you're happy, you're such a mood killer when you're quiet and sad like that." • Do not tell them how to feel, For example: "You should be happy because we just bought you a car."
<p>Be mindful of your emotional reaction and their development stage.</p>	<p>When speaking with a tween, you may want to briefly share your own emotional reaction and then shift to helping your child label his or her own reaction.</p> <p>When speaking with older adolescents, you may want to acknowledge the complexity of your own emotional reactions balanced with attending to your teen's emotional needs.</p> <p>Provide accurate reflection of their thoughts and your own thoughts.</p>	<p>Tween example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I am really sad that Jonathan committed suicide. It is terrible that some kids feel so sad and helpless. I imagine that you might be feeling pretty sad and confused." <p>Adolescent example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I am devastated that Maria committed suicide. I get so sad and angry when I hear about the death of a young person, it seems so unfair. I bet this is really hard for you too." 	
<p>Assure your child/teen that they are not alone.</p>	<p>When talking with your teen about suicide, one of the most valuable messages you can communicate is that someone, including you, will listen and help no matter how terrible, alone, or hopeless a person may feel.</p> <p>Explain that even if an immediate solution is not available, you and your child, as a team, will work together to come up with a plan.</p> <p>You can also help your child identify other people who they can confide in, like trusted family members, school counselors or staff, mental health or medical professionals, or spiritual advisors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want you to know that no matter how difficult or hopeless a situation might seem there are always options. You can always talk with me, and together, we can figure out what those other options are." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not surprise your child with a visit with a doctor/counselor to discuss issues without their knowledge. This can ruin the trust.