**Mental health: Conversations with our kids**

Mental wellbeing is important for us all at every stage of our lives: from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. And, while many of us understand the importance of mental health, knowing how to talk about this topic and provide solid support to those around us is often not as clear.

In childhood, we see similar mental health patterns with conditions like epilepsy, developmental disabilities, depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders being major causes of illness and disability. Globally, 10% of children and adolescents experience a mental disorder[[1]](#footnote-1), but the majority do not get the help or care they need. This can have devastating consequences, with suicide being the fourth leading cause of death in 15–19-year-olds[[2]](#footnote-2).

Talking about mental health from an early age is one of the most proactive steps you can take as parent/guardian/caregiver. This helps to form healthy habits and boost mental wellbeing, as well as remove any stigma linked to mental health issues. According to the CDC, “being mentally healthy during childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones and learning healthy social skills and how to cope when there are problems.”

But, how do we have these (often-hard) conversations with our kids? Here are some helpful tips:

1. **Create a safe space**

Make sure that you create a safe space – avoid emotionally-charged or stressful moments. Starting the conversation can be uncomfortable so begin with small, simple questions such as “What’s on your mind?” or “How are you feeling today?”.

*TOP TIP: Remember to reaffirm that your child is cared for and supported and that their feelings are valid.*

1. **Pick a fun activity**

Choose a fun activity that you can do together – go for a walk, play a boardgame, make lunch, attend a yoga class, watch a show, or do a puzzle. This will help create a positive environment for an honest and open conversation to take place.

*TOP TIP: We have some great resources here: find the rainbow with this* [*mindfulness exercise*](https://www.discovery.co.za/vitality/mindful-child-at-home-activities)*, head to the kitchen for* [*berry-licious frozen yogurt lollies*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66FHBjBCD8U) *or try these* [*easy exercises for kids*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaXqNM1pwDI&t=18s) *from Discovery Vitality Biokineticist, Mari Leach.*

1. **Listen more, talk less**

Listening is a difficult skill, but an important one. What is your child telling you that they need? Sometimes this is advice, while other times they may need to soundboard their emotions or just know that you are there for them. Also, be aware of your reactions, your body language can speak volumes.

*TOP TIP: Try to only say about half of what you planned to say. This will force you to move at their pace and give you time to really listen to what is being said and validate these feelings.*

1. **Use concrete examples**

Mental health can be ambiguous and, at times, hard to understand. Explain that, just like the body, the brain can get sick too. And that this is completely normal. Try use the broken leg analogy when talking about mental health and ask questions like “How would you feel if you had a broken leg?” or “Would you need time off school?” to help them see that mental health issues are just as real and debilitating as a physical illness or injury.

*TOP TIP: Storytelling is a powerful way to communicate, especially for children. There’s a wealth of books for younger kids which deal with mental health issues that you can get at your local bookstore. For older children, it may be helpful to reference celebrities who have struggled with mental health issues such as our Global Vitality Ambassador, Chad le Clos.*

1. **Provide support**

People communicate differently. If your child doesn’t want to talk to you, perhaps they would like to talk to a teacher, sibling, counsellor or grandparent. Or perhaps they would prefer to text message rather than talk. Found what works best for them and encourage that communication.

*TOP TIP: Find a mental health counselling center or telephone number where you or your kids can visit or phone for support or help.*

1. World Health Organization. Improving the mental and brain health of children & adolescents. [Link](https://www.who.int/activities/improving-the-mental-and-brain-health-of-children-and-adolescents#:~:text=Worldwide%2C%2010%25%20of%20children%20and,15%2D19%20year%2Dolds.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. World Health Organization. Improving the mental and brain health of children & adolescents. [Link](https://www.who.int/activities/improving-the-mental-and-brain-health-of-children-and-adolescents#:~:text=Worldwide%2C%2010%25%20of%20children%20and,15%2D19%20year%2Dolds.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)