

Tips for Communicating with Kids and Teens

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Resilient kids and teens are better able to handle life's ups and downs. One way to build resilience in kids of all ages is by teaching them how to communicate their feelings and needs. Having regular, open conversations helps everyone understand that it's normal and OK to have any (and all) feelings and to share them with others.

Practice active listening

Active listening means giving someone your full attention when they're talking to you. It communicates that you're engaged and listening, and that you care about what they're saying.

Instead of ...	Try ...
Looking at your phone or the TV.	Putting away all screens, and any other distractions, and making eye contact.
Interrupting with advice.	Listening to understand, rather than waiting to respond or give advice.
Thinking about what you'll say next.	Being patient, present and listening to everything they say. Let them know you're listening with your body language, such as leaning in or nodding.

Ask open-ended questions

Sometimes kids need help opening up and sharing how they're feeling. Asking open-ended questions encourages them to answer with more than just "yes" or "no."

Instead of ...	Try ...
"Did you have a good day?"	"What was the best part of your day?" "What was the hardest part of your day?"
"You doing OK?"	"How are you feeling?"
"Can I help you?"	"What can I do to help?"

Label feelings with "I wonder" statements

It can be hard for kids to express how they feel when they don't have the words. Using "I wonder" statements can help kids of all ages think about and label their feelings without telling them how they feel.

Instead of ...	Try ...
"You seem really upset."	"When you say you're 'upset,' I don't know exactly what you mean. I wonder if you're feeling sad or embarrassed. Are either of those right?"
"Did that hurt your feelings?"	"I think I would feel hurt if that happened to me. I wonder, how did you feel about that?"
"You always say 'I'm fine.' I need you to tell me more if I'm going to help you."	"I hear you when you say you're 'fine.' I wonder what 'fine' means to you?"

Normalize and validate feelings

Normalizing feelings communicates that what the person is feeling makes sense and is normal. Validating feelings lets them know you understand and that their feelings matter. Normalizing and validating someone's feelings doesn't mean you agree with them.

Instead of ...	Try ...
"Don't cry. It breaks my heart to see you cry!"	"It's OK and normal to cry when you're sad."
"I think you'll have fun if you just give it a try!"	"I understand why you're feeling nervous. A lot of people feel nervous when they try new things."
"Don't worry. Everything will be fine!"	"It makes sense that you're feeling worried."

Reflect back

When you repeat back what someone says, it communicates that you're listening and that what they're saying matters to you. It also allows them to hear what they said and reflect further, share more or clarify, if needed.

Instead of ...	Try ...
"That's really interesting."	"It sounds like your favorite part of the day was eating lunch with your friends. What did you enjoy about it?"
"That's not very nice."	"I hear you saying you don't like your math teacher. Is that right?"
"Don't be nervous—I'm sure you did great!"	"You're worried you didn't do well on your test."

What to say when you're not sure

Nobody has all the answers or knows how to respond during every conversation. When you aren't sure what to say, remember that you don't need to have the "right" answer, and you don't have to fix what the other person is feeling. They just need you to listen and be honest.

Instead of ...	Try ...
"That's a lot. You should definitely _____."	To avoid giving advice if you're unsure, try saying, "That sounds really hard. How can I help?"
"I'm not sure how to answer that, but it will all work out!"	To avoid minimizing or dismissing their concerns, try saying, "That question is really important. I need a minute to think about that. I will get back to you as soon as I have the answer."
"I'm not sure what to do with that."	To avoid making the child feel that what's going on is too big for you to hear, try saying, "I'm not sure I have the right words to say, but I am here for you."