

## **How to Talk and Listen to Kids When They Need Help**

Parents can be the first to notice when their child or teen is struggling and needs support. One of the most important things is to build trust with your child that they can turn to you to communicate their feelings and be heard. Just like with adults, we do not want to talk to anyone unless we feel comfortable, kids will turn to those who make them feel its ok to talk and share their feelings. When children turn to you for support or have questions it is really important to listen and allow them to solve their problems rather than overload them with solutions and opinions that can feel helpful but obstruct the teen or child from building problem solving processes and working through to their own solutions.

Active listening is one of the most important skills in communicating with children and teens. It can be harder than it seems. Listen to what your child has to say. There is an old saying "Children should be seen and not heard" and historically children are really been heard in many cultures. Children need someone who will listen to them. It is very challenging for a parent not to let their own anxiety take over and try to fix the problem for their child. In many instances this can hijack the process of listening and talking and lead to an enormous struggle for both parent and child.

How do we know if a teen or child is struggling emotionally? Many parents talk to us about how their kids sit in their room and spend a lot of time on computers talking to their friends. At this age, children and teens do find it hard to externalise or express and understand their feelings. When they are bothered by things they may seem to "shut down". Children do not understand, at times, what help they can get by talking to an adult, teacher, or their parents. This makes it important to keep our radar up about when something is wrong and try and raise these topics in a safe and secure communication style. Getting your kids to open up and talk to you can feel like a challenge. Some suggestions can be helpful in talking to kids and getting an understanding of their issues and challenges.

Providing a safe environment that is not emotionally overloaded can help build your child's confidence in talking about something and not being punished. Children can worry about making parents anxious or about being in trouble. Many teens want to talk about relationships or topics in a 'grey' zone of emerging adulthood. Apart from social norms they have no clear idea about what to do with these thoughts and feelings and have a high level of anxiety about how to talk to their parents or teachers. A very good strategy to keep in touch with children, is to have regular time with them. It can be a regular meal together or a game or a small outing where you can connect to them.

When a child does tell you they are upset or feel confused about issues, it is time to appreciate that moment of connection. It will be important for your child to know that you are proud of them for being able to speak up and for trusting in you. If a child needs more help than you can provide, professional help may be a good idea. You may want to start by talking to a school counsellor or a psychologist who has experience in working with children and teens. We may not have all the answers to

provide our teens and children and its ok if we do not. What we can do is extend a helping hand and that we can find answers together as a team.

Written by:

Dr Raj Khillan

and

Dr Malini Singh

Psychologist

