

Bulldog Health News

Artesia Public Schools

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April 2023

How to Talk to Kids About Mental Health

Having a serious conversation about mental health with a young person can be challenging, to say the least. How do you start the conversation? What should you bring up? How much is too much information? Should it even be discussed?

How do you effectively talk to youth about this challenging topic? This can depend on the age and maturity level of the young person, but there are things you can keep in mind to help make the conversation hopeful and helpful. Use these tips from Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) to get started:

DO:

Be authentic: Kids have a sixth sense when an adult is pretending so be yourself. If you're uncomfortable talking about the topic, admit it. You could say "This is hard for me to bring up, and it may be hard for you to talk about, too."

Be careful about using slang: Like the tip mentioned above, youth know when an adult is trying to be someone they're not. Using slang words out of context can be a red flag to a kid.

Allow for silence: Embracing quiet moments allows kids to find their own words to describe their feelings.

Interrupting a silent spell may break their focus. If enough time passes, try offering words that could help them express their emotions, like "To me, you don't look happy. Are you sad, frustrated, or angry?"

Watch your body language: Body language sends big signals to young people. Talk to kids on the same level as them, like sitting next to them or walking side by side. Keep your arms unfolded and talk in a low, calm voice. Avoid folding your arms and standing above them, which can intimidate them and cause them to lock up.

Provide positive feedback: Genuinely complimenting the young person's strengths and abilities can encourage them to talk, give a specific example of something they did and what it reflects, for example, "I saw that you made it to school on time despite having a rough morning. That shows a lot of determination."

DON'T:

Compare the young person's life experiences to yours at that age: It's easy to want to relate to youth by sharing your experiences at that age. However, a young person can see it as devaluing or outdoing their experience. Keep the conversation focused on them.

Trivialize the young person's feelings: Avoid downplaying kids' feelings by asking what they have to be anxious or depressed about. Though the situation may seem minor to an adult, to a youth, it may seem like it's their whole world.

Ask a young person to justify or explain their behavior: Kids often act impulsively without much forethought. It's not intentional, they simply haven't mentally developed the ability yet. Asking "Why did you throw a tantrum?" or "Why did you leave without permission?" only puts children on the defensive.



Recognizing mental health challenges is the first step toward helping a young person. According to YMHFA, studies show that with proper care and treatment, children with mental health and substance use challenges get better, and many recover completely.

Interested in learning more about YMHFA? Contact me @ mmccaleb@bulldogs.org and see how you could #BeTheDifference for young people in our schools and community.