

Children's Mental Health Month

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Discussing Mental Health with Children and Youth

Many youth and parents of children experiencing mental health challenges do not seek the help and support they need for fear of labeled and judged. There are a lot of misconceptions and stigma surrounding mental health that prevent people from asking for help. Caring adults can engage children and youth in conversations that will normalize expressing our emotions in healthy ways and increase their mental health literacy.

Below are some tips and ideas to consider:

- It is important to acknowledge the different maturity levels of children and youth. Young children will need concrete examples and explanations. Late childhood/early adolescent youth will be able to engage in deeper conversations related to the topic.
- Keep in mind the fact that mental health is a sensitive topic. Encourage members to contribute to the discussion, but do not push them to engage if they seem uncomfortable.
- Sometimes it is helpful to compare mental health issues with physical health issues. For example: At some point, everyone gets sick with a cold, but not everyone gets really sick with something serious like pneumonia. People who have a cold are usually able to do their normal daily activities. But if they get pneumonia, they may need to take medication and/or go to the hospital. Mental health is similar to physical health. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, worry, irritability, or sleep problems are common for most people (just like getting a cold). However, these feelings can get very intense, last for a long period of time, and begin to interfere with school, work, and relationships for some people, meaning they may be experiencing a mental illness (just like getting pneumonia).

Fact or Fiction?

You can also lead young people in a “Fact or Fiction” exercise by compiling questions related to mental health and associated stereotypes. For example:

- Mental illness is contagious. True or False? Answer: False. Mental illness is not contagious. Hereditary factors can, and often do affect the development of a mental health disorders.
- Mental illness can be cured with willpower. True or False? Answer: False. Mental illness is associated with chemical imbalances in the brain and requires a comprehensive treatment plan.

Famous Figures with Mental Health Issues

An excellent way to approach the topic is by sharing this list of [famous people](#) who are reported to have dealt with mental health issues during their lives. You can ask what the list of figures have in common—and what they do not have in common!

Discussing Substance Use with Children and Youth

Similar to the obstacles of discussing mental health, many youth and parents do not seek the help and support that is needed due to a fear of being stigmatized as well as misconceptions about substance use. Therefore, it is imperative to their health that adults create awareness around drug and alcohol use. Engaging children and youth in discussions will normalize the curiosity of substance use and debunk the myths surrounding various drugs and their effects. Below are some tips and ideas to consider when preparing for a discussion.

Below are some points to consider:

It should come as no surprise why children and youth are curious about drugs and alcohol. They are bombarded with messages about drugs in songs and movies. A 2008 study from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports the following statistics in popular music:

- 1 in 3 songs said something about drug, alcohol, or tobacco use.
- 3 in 4 rap songs said something about drug, alcohol, or tobacco use.

Of the top 100 movies over a 9-year period, more than:

- 7 in 10 movies showed characters smoking.
- 1 in 3 movies showed people getting drunk.

Children's Mental Health Facts

Did you know?

- It has been estimated that almost **21% of U.S. children**, ages 9-17, have a **diagnosable mental health or addictive disorder** associated with at least minimum impairment.
- Despite the prevalence of mental health disorders in the nation's children, **79% of children**, aged 6-17, with mental health disorders, **do not receive mental health care**. Uninsured children have a higher rate of unmet needs than children with public or private insurance.
- **Suicide is the second leading cause of death of youth** aged 10 to 24 in the nation.
- **Anxiety disorders are the most common** mental disorders among children.
- With early detection and appropriate treatment, **chances are excellent** that most children with mental health needs can **recover and lead healthy lives**.
- The **treatment success rate** for children's mental health disorders is **80%**. Children are best served by early intervention, which can prevent them from being placed in more costly forms of treatment later.
- **74% of students who drop out of school** and who are categorized as seriously emotionally disturbed are arrested within 5 years of dropping out.
- Untreated mental illness may also increase a child's risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system- **66% of boys and almost 75% of girls in juvenile detention** have at least one mental health disorder, according to one study.

Sources: Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, National Institute of Mental Health and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Seeking Help

When to Seek Help

Parents and family members are usually the first to notice if a child has problems with emotions or behavior. Your observations, along with those of teachers and other caregivers, may lead you to seek help for your child. If you suspect a problem or have questions, consult your pediatrician or contact a mental health professional.

The following signs may indicate the need for professional assistance or evaluation:

- decline in school performance
- poor grades despite strong efforts
- regular worry or anxiety
- repeated refusal to go to school or take part in normal children's activities
- rapidly changing mood swings
- sleeping too much or too little
- feelings of worthlessness
- recurring thoughts of suicide or death
- persistent nightmares
- persistent disobedience or aggression
- frequent temper tantrums
- depression, sadness or irritability
- hyperactivity or fidgeting

Fear and Anxiety

It's okay for children to feel afraid sometimes. Everyone is afraid of something at some point in their life. Fear and anxiety grow out of experiences that we do not understand. If your children have fears that will not go away and affect his or her behavior, the first step is to find out what is frightening them. Be loving, patient and reassuring, not critical. Remember that the fear may be very real to the child.

Signs of Fear

- Nervous mannerisms, shyness, withdrawal and aggressive behavior may be signs of childhood fears.
- A change in normal eating and sleeping patterns may also signal an unhealthy fear. Children who "play sick" or feel anxious regularly may have some problems that need attention.
- Fear of school can occur following a stressful event such as moving to a new neighborhood, changing schools, or after a bad incident at school.
- Children may not want to go to school after a period of being at home because of an illness.

Where to Seek Help

Information and referrals regarding the types of services that are available for children may be obtained from:

- Your local County Mental Health Center
- Your child's pediatrician or school counselor

Anti-Stigma: Do You Know the Facts?

Stigma is not just the use of the wrong word or action. Stigma is about disrespect. It is the use of negative labels to identify a child living with mental health needs. Stigma is a barrier and discourages families from getting the help they need due to the fear of being discriminated against. Did you know that stigma:

- Results in inadequate insurance coverage for mental health services?
- Results in fear, mistrust, and violence against families and children living with mental health needs?
- Results in families and friends turning their backs on people with mental health needs?
- Keeps people from getting needed mental health services and that people would rather tell employers they have committed a petty crime and were in jail, than admit to being in a psychiatric hospital?

Anti-Stigma Dos and Don'ts:

Do emphasize abilities and strengths, not limitations.

Do tell someone if they express a stigmatizing attitude.

Do use respectful language that puts the child first, such as:

- Child with emotional, behavioral, or social needs
- Child who has schizophrenia
- Child with special mental health needs
- Child who has bipolar disorder

Education and awareness are the most important actions toward eliminating stigma!

Don't portray successful children with disabilities as superhuman.

Don't use generic labels such as retarded, or the mentally ill.

Don't use terms like crazy, lunatic, manic-depressive, slow functioning, or normal.

Important to Remember:

- Every child's mental health is important.
- Many children have severe health problems.
- These problems are real, painful, and can be severe.
- Mental health problems can be recognized and successfully treated.
- By working together, caring families and communities can help.

This Information is adopted from a publication of the National Mental Health Services Knowledge Exchange Network: www.mentalhealth.org