

How to Promote Your Children's Mental Health

JUST as we are responsible for our physical health, we are equally responsible for our emotional health. It is up to us when we access support and what type of support we access, to enable us to manage our feelings and behaviour. Parents and professionals can play a major role in promoting positive mental health amongst young people. Such promotion starts with the basics of maintaining boundaries and follows by knowing how to communicate effectively.

Setting Boundaries

All of us follow certain rules or boundaries that are laid down by our society, culture, family and peer group. They enable us to have some idea of what others expect of us and allow us to function within certain defined limits. As with most rules, they can be broken or even dismissed. But as long as we know the consequences and risks of doing this, we can make decisions and choices as to whether to adhere to these rules or boundaries.

Children and adolescents often break rules and boundaries. Sometimes they may simply be unaware that they are doing this. Others know they are breaking rules, but are merely 'testing out' the limits of their behaviour. Some other young people may break rules and boundaries because they do not feel able to meet the expectations of others.

Parents and professionals can help to promote positive mental health in young people simply by communicating the limits of appropriate rules and boundaries and the risks of break them. If a young person knows the risks they could be taking by breaking a boundary or rule, it is far easier for them to recognise that they are ultimately responsible for their actions, decisions and choices. This is a crucial learning tool for young people who are making their way into the 'adult world'.

Although it may sometimes feel difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries and rules when these are challenged by young people, 'bending' the rules or 'overlooking' the boundaries, does little to empower young people and instil trust in either their abilities or those of others. This can impact on or delay a young person from being able to modify their behaviour and does little to discourage them from taking risks, which could negatively affect their health and wellbeing.

Maintaining consistency with rules and boundaries can help a young person keep themselves safe, be aware of what others expect of them and can encourage them to be responsible for their own behaviour.

The Power of Communication

Without speaking or telling someone how we feel, we all communicate how we are feeling through our behaviour and body language. In fact, 54% of all communication is non-verbal, only 7% is verbal. How we say something also communicates what we may be feeling – the tone of voice we use when we speak more accurately relays how we feel. Even though we may not actually be telling someone 'I feel angry' or 'I feel excited', the anger and excitement can be heard from the way we speak.

Body language, behaviour, tone of voice and what someone says or doesn't say are primarily what mental health professionals (such as therapists and counsellors) listen and look out for – they use total communication. Children and young people may find it difficult to let others know how they may be feeling – they may not have the words or feel able to express themselves verbally.

This is why some therapists use art, play, drama and music when working with young people. Parents and professionals can look at what a young person is communicating through their body language and behaviour - and listen to their tone of voice - to establish how they are feeling at any given time.

Emotional Literacy

Understanding why we feel the way we do can help us to learn how to manage our everyday life. Often, young people know how they are feeling,

but they may not always fully understand what has made them feel this way. This is often what causes young people to struggle with managing certain situations, and cope with difficulties when they arise.

By parents and professionals communicating how a young person appears to be feeling, as a result of what they communicate through their behaviour, body language or tone of voice, can often help that young person to feel understood and improve their emotional literacy.

For example, all the following responses can be made to a young person as a direct result of observing their non-verbal communication:

◆ Body language: “You look sad (or ‘happy’ or ‘confused’ or ‘frustrated’ etc).”

◆ Tone of voice: “You sound angry (or ‘disappointed’ or ‘excited’ or ‘hurt’ or ‘frightened’ etc).”

It can be easy to not to let a young person know what they are communicating – some people might be reluctant to do this in case they might be ‘wrong’ or even say something ‘wrong’, or because they feel responsible if the young person responds by disclosing a ‘whole can of worms’.

It is important for parents and professionals to be aware that not only do young people often let us know if we get something wrong, they will also only disclose information that feels safe enough to share.

Asking Questions

Once we have gained an accurate impression of what a young person may be feeling, we can go one step further and try to establish what has left them feeling this way by asking questions. However, there is also an art to doing this. Asking ‘closed’ questions, which can be answered with either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, are less useful than asking ‘open’ questions, which encourage a person to give a more detailed response.

Closed and open questions

- ◆ “Do ... (you like school)?”
- ◆ “How ... (you like school)?”
- ◆ “Did ... (you want that to happen)?”

- ◆ “What... (did you want to have happen)?”
- ◆ “Are ... (you going to speak with someone)?”
- ◆ “Who ... (could you speak with)?”
- ◆ “Have ... (you thought about going elsewhere)?”
- ◆ “Where ... (else could you go)?”
- ◆ “Would ... (you know if this is the right time)?”
- ◆ “When ... (would you know if this is the right time)?”

How a young person responds to questions, the tone of voice they use, their body language and what they say and don’t say, can give others a clear picture of how the young person may be feeling and what may be going on for them.

If parents and professionals communicate back to a young person what *they* have heard them say, and how *they* understand the way that young person may be feeling, this can help young people to *feel* understood.

Equally, communicating such empathy can also help young people to gain a greater understanding of how and why they feel the way they do. The more empathy a person can share with young people, the easier it can be to ‘walk in their shoes’ and be beside them as they attempt to resolve conflict in their life.

Exploring Options and Giving Advice

There may be times when young people ask others for advice on a certain matter, because they are stuck with what to do in a given situation. Young people often assume that adults are ‘experts’ on life issues, that they have all the ‘right’ answers. How else are young able to gain information about or find ways to manage difficulties they experience?

When young people have a problem, it can be so easy for adults to give them the advice they think the young person needs, based on what they would individually do in that particular situation. Although there is nothing particularly wrong with advice giving, care should always be taken not to assume that, just because a person resolved a problem in a way that worked for them, it will also work for others. If an adult were to give advice to a young person and it did not resolve their issues, it is likely that the young person would not seek support from them again.

Instead, try asking the young person what it is *they* think they could do to resolve their situation.

Talk through all the options that may be available to them – including the potential benefits and risks of each option – then allow the young person to make their final decision. Exploring options can be a useful strategy, as young people may not be aware of the range of choices available to them to resolve or manage a particular situation.

Challenging

There may be occasions when young people do or say something that lets people know they have a fixed or limited view of themselves, others or a particular situation, which could either be counterproductive or restrict them in managing a particular situation. By challenging a young person on their views or beliefs, showing empathy and asking open questions, we can enable them to have a clearer picture of the situation they are in. Some constructive examples of challenging a young person:

- ◆ "You say you are stupid, which sounds as though you're being hard on yourself. What are the reasons for you thinking you are stupid?"
- ◆ "Although you say you have no choice but to fight back, it sounds as though you know the risks involved in doing this. When would you know if the risks are not worth taking? or - What might be some other options available to you?"
- ◆ "You don't want to return to school because you don't want to get into trouble with Miss Brook. How do you think skipping school may help you avoid being told-off by your teacher?"

Giving Constructive Feedback

It can be easy to criticise young people for things they do and say that seem 'wrong'. However, if young people receive more criticism than they do praise, they can be left knowing only what they do wrong and remain unsure of what they do right!

Young people who are criticised and rarely praised often have low self-esteem and little self-confidence. Giving constructive feedback is therefore important to help young people maintain an awareness of what they do well and what they don't do so well.

Constructive feedback involves letting a person know what they do or say that is positive, followed by that which they do or say that is more 'negative'. For example:

- ◆ "I enjoyed speaking with you yesterday. Right now I feel hurt by the way you are talking with me."
- ◆ "The work you did yesterday was good – you concentrated well and put in a lot of effort. I know you can perform a lot better than you are at the moment."
- ◆ "I don't mind it when you ask me to help you out. In fact, I enjoy helping you. However, the way you are behaving now leaves me feeling reluctant to help you again."

The key to giving constructive feedback is remembering to 'own' how we feel and to compare previous positive experiences with current negative ones. It can also be helpful to reflect how the young person behaves or sounds – for example, "You look frustrated" or "You sound angry" - to help them express what they are really feeling. Encouraging open and honest communication teaches self-respect as well as shows respect for others.

Knowing Your Limitations

Parents and professionals can promote mental health in young people, simply by remaining aware and communicating the limitations of the support they can give.

Some people may find it easier than others to recognise signs of emotional distress, just as some people may find it easier than others to promote or safeguard their own mental health – everyone has limitations. Knowing when to access support and training is therefore crucial if parents and professionals are to safeguard and promote the mental health of young people with whom they live and work. ✕

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