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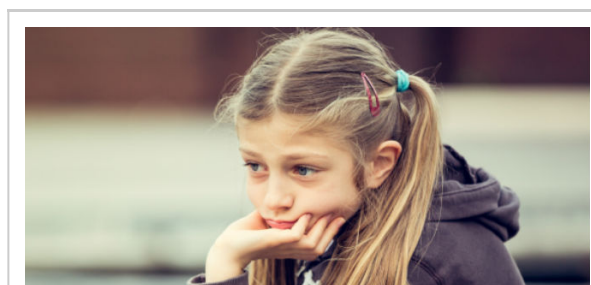
Talking to kids about mental illness is hard—so hard that many of us put it off indefinitely, not wanting to expose them to things like depression or overwhelming anxiety when they're so young and innocent. But rather than keeping kids in the dark, it's essential to learn how to talk about mental health with them to help them feel comfortable talking about their own worries and end the stigma before it begins.

“We know it is very important to talk openly and honestly to children about mental health,” says Jill Dennison, a mental health promotion and resilience facilitator at the Canadian Mental Health Association, based in Hamilton, Ont. She explains that kids should understand that mental health means having a balance in life, and this balance looks different for everyone. Learning about mental health at a young age can help them find their own equilibrium and recognize things in their lives that throw them out of balance.

Dennison emphasizes the need to start with conversations about mental *health*, not mental *illness*. “Mental health affects us all, no matter our age. If we have a brain, we have mental health and that is often how we discuss it with children.” Here are some expert tips to help you get the conversation going.

### **Bringing it up**

If you're feeling a little unsure about how to bring up the topic with your kids, try to find a conversation starter from



or a **celebrity** who has had a positive experience could make for good entry points. Kids hear all sorts of stereotypes in the school yard, so if you overhear your child or their friends using a derogatory term like “crazy,” use that moment as a way to start the conversation. Dennison also suggests using something your child is interested in, like art that depicts emotions, as a jumping-off point.



### **Anxiety disorders in children**

If your kid has witnessed an incident with a family member who has a mental health condition, this can be used as an opportunity to delve deeper into the issue. Start by asking her how she feels, and let the conversation grow organically from there.

### **Finding the words**

Use age-appropriate language when discussing any topic with your child, advises Jean-Paul Boudreau, professor of psychology and director of the Children, Health, Infancy, Learning, Development (CHILD) lab at Ryerson University in Toronto. He suggests trying to find a frame of reference they can relate to. “They may know someone who is sick or feeling very sad. Weave the narrative of mental illness into something *they* know or have witnessed,” he says.

Dennison explains that kids need to be reminded that there is no such thing as a stupid question. It’s important to listen to them without judgement, and to refrain from telling them how to feel. “Allow them the opportunity to express what they’re feeling,” she adds.

By making this comparison, children may be able to better understand how a family member is experiencing their particular illness and how they can be treated to get better.

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### **Tailoring it to their age**

There is no age too young to start the conversation, but, of course, how you talk to your 13-year-old will be different than how you talk to your toddler. “Don’t overwhelm young children with statistics and definitions,” says Dennison. “Describe symptoms in an age-appropriate way.”

One example Dennison shares is when talking about depression you can explain to your child that everyone feels sad at times in their life, but depression is when that sadness starts to interfere with daily life. The sadness becomes overwhelming and lasts for a longer period of time. “As a child ages, their knowledge and understanding grows, and their questions evolve,” she says. At that point, the conversation can deepen.

## Discussing suicide

When the worst happens and a loved one dies by suicide, many parents feel the impulse to protect a child from the news, but experts suggest talking to [kids who are old enough to understand death](#) to help minimize fear. “Be honest about the fact that it was a suicide, but that the child was not responsible nor could they have prevented it,” says Dennison. “You would much rather have your child know you are approachable and open to talking about tragedies, and that you will be there to support them,” she adds. “Talking about it will open the door to a positive relationship of understanding should they ever struggle themselves.”

### Read more:

[Children’s mental health: what you need to know](#)

[How to talk to your preschooler about death](#)

[I’m worried I’ll pass my depression on to my daughter](#)

