

Youth tips for parents: How to talk to your teenager about their mental health

Many parents may find it difficult to talk to their teenager. It can be even more of a challenge when the teen has a mental health or behavior challenge. The following suggestions are written by teens who are members of PACER's Youth Advisory Board on Mental Health.

Tips for engaging your child

- **Ask me if it is a good time to talk.** I may want to talk with you immediately when something is on my mind, or I may only share when there aren't any other distractions and it's just you and me.
- **Listen** to what I say without speaking or interrupting. Sometimes it is hard enough to talk about certain things interrupting me might discourage me from sharing.
- **Show you are interested** by looking me in the eye with real empathy. If I avoid eye contact, please understand it is just hard for me sometimes.
- Sometimes I would rather write you a letter than talk. **Allow me to choose my way to communicate.**
- **Be patient with me.** Sometimes I just can't follow or find the words; be ready to repeat your questions or statements if I ask you to.
- **Be calm.** I may be feeling emotions I can't control; being calm will help me.
- My mental health struggles are real. **Validate my feelings.** Let me know I am important to you and that you are here for me.
- **Give me time and space and allow me to approach you** when I am ready to talk.
- When I am struggling in school, **ask me about it in an understanding and calm way.** I am most likely already feeling bad about it.
- Make sure you **praise me** when appropriate. Otherwise I may think the only time you want to talk is when I have done something you don't like.
- I may not always be comfortable talking with you. If appropriate, **allow me to talk to another trusted adult** to get help.

- Recognize that I have **my own skills, talents, and ideas**.
- **Speak to me in a gentle manner.** When you yell or swear it hurts me, and I may act out or not talk to you.
- **Realize** that you don't always need to have the last word.

Resources for parents

PACER provides individual support, advocacy, and education for children and youth with mental health and emotional or behavioral disorders through its website at pacer.org.

Tips for talking to youth who are under stress

media.pacer.org/php/php-c234.pdf

Encourage your child's positive behavior and school success: Creating a home plan with schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports

media.pacer.org/php/php-c218a.pdf

Sample PBIS home plan

media.pacer.org/php/php-c218b.pdf