Talking about mental health with kids

Here are some tips on how parents can explore this important topic with their children.

The Star Malaysia · 8 Aug 2025 · 9 · By Assoc Prof Dr SILVIA PEREIRA-SMITH Dr Silvia Pereira-smith is a developmental-behavioural paediatrician and associate professor of paediatrics at the Medical University of South Carolina in the United States.

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Having conversations about mental health when things are going well is just as important as doing so when things are hard. — TNS

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MENTAL health is health.

We keep track of our child's physical growth and milestones such as learning to walk or talk.

But we also need to check in on their mental health and how they are feeling.

Talking about mental health can take practice; the more we do it, the easier it gets.

Having these conversations even while things are going well is just as important as doing so when things are hard.

It helps to start having these conversations when your child is young so they can learn early on that they can count on you for support.

By making mental health a part of daily discussions at home, it's easier for families to talk about it at any time.

Over time, you will be helping your child build resilience by nurturing the use of healthy mental and emotional coping skills.

Check out these tips on how to incorporate mental health talk into your everyday conversations.

> **Set a positive tone**

Parents and caregivers are a child's first and most important teachers.

Even before they can speak, children can read others' emotions and follow the example of adults around them.

Keeping this in mind, there are simple ways to adapt your tone to foster safe mental health conversations.

Speaking in a calm, neutral manner while being mindful of facial expressions and body language can help children feel secure.

> **Model your behaviour**

Help your child learn by modelling what you are doing as you manage your own feelings.

Talking about your feelings can help teach children how they, in turn, can talk about their own.

Take care to focus on modelling how to bring up feelings, but avoid oversharing with your child, which can make them confused or worried.

Use words and pictures to help them describe how they are feeling.

The way you talk about mental health is much like how you and your child pick out a book.

Choose what would work best for their age, development, and how they learn best.

Use words and phrases that your child will understand and are accurate.

Images can also help your child let you know how they are feeling.

Choose a favourite feelings chart online that shows pictures of many faces showing a variety of emotions.

Have your child match their feelings with the word and facial expression.

> **Compare**

Help your child identify their emotions by comparing them to something that they understand, such as stormy weather or a sunny afternoon.

Ask simple and open-ended questions.

With the help of guiding questions, children can learn to share feelings more easily.

Questions like "How are you feeling today?", "What has been on your mind lately?" and "What changes are you feeling in your mood or behaviour recently?" offer a starting place for you and your child to both share.

Provide reassurance and be proactive by letting your child know that it is OK to ask for help if they feel like they need more support.

If you plan to ask your paediatrician about your child's mental health, involve your child in the process.

Let them take the lead in the conversation, building their confidence and showing them their feelings and voice matter.

Prepare for the visit by thinking about what your child and you can share with the paediatrician, along with questions you want answers to.

Talking about a child's mental health is a regular part of their growth and development.

When your child and you feel comfortable talking about mental health, it makes sharing mental health concerns and challenges easier for everyone.

Your paediatrician cares about your child's mental health and can talk with you about concerns or help make a plan to get more help. – American Academy of Pediatrics/Tribune News Service

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