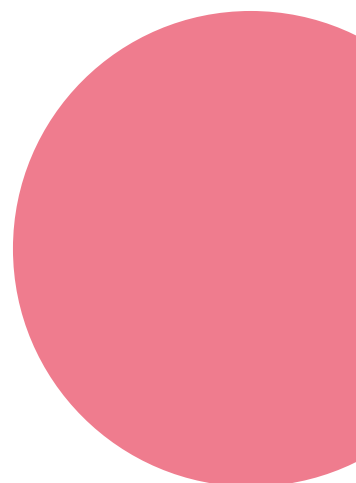


*Helping  
you to help  
your child*

# How to Listen so Children Who Need Help will Talk

A guide for parents, carers and other  
supporting adults




Do you want  
to help but you  
just don't know  
where to start?


## Introduction

When we're worried about a child, we often want to reach out to them and start a discussion about their mental or emotional wellbeing – but we can sometimes find ourselves unsure how to start.

A frequent concern is that we might make things worse or push them away in our attempt to draw them closer. To help you feel more confident starting sensitive conversations, I spoke to children and young people and asked them to reflect on what they'd found most helpful.



*She wanted to talk. I wanted to listen... but we spent ages dancing around the topic as neither of us knew quite how to jump in*



# Focus on listening

It's worth remembering that often we don't need to find the right thing to say, we simply need to provide a safe space, a little time and some unjudgmental listening to enable a child to open up about what's on their mind.



*“She listened, and I mean REALLY listened. She didn't interrupt me or ask me to explain myself or anything, she just let me talk and talk and talk. I had been unsure about talking to anyone but I knew quite quickly that I'd chosen the right person to talk to and that it would be a turning point.”*



-2-

## Don't talk too much

This isn't your story to tell. Let the child tell their own story, in their own words and in their own time, even if that feels slow or disjointed. Don't be tempted to fill the blanks – you may get them wrong and you're denying the child the chance to engage in a process which will help to clarify how they're thinking and feeling.

*“Sometimes it's hard to explain what's going on in my head – it doesn't make a lot of sense and I've kind of gotten used to keeping myself to myself. But just 'cos I'm struggling to find the right words doesn't mean you should help me. Just keep quiet, I'll get there in the end.”*

# Priority Number One

It's not always possible to rearrange our plans for a child in need – but we can do small things that send a message to the child that this conversation matters and that it's our sole focus right now. Turn off screens and spell out the fact that you're focused and listening and that right now, they are your number one priority.

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*"My Mum never tears her eyes away from her phone so that moment when she powered it down and looked up at me and said 'I'm listening' I knew she meant business. It was kind of scary, but I finally felt like this was the time to talk to her about what had been going on for me."*



4

## Offer support

Working with a child to think up some practical steps that could be taken as swiftly as possible to help make their day feel more manageable can feel very positive for both of you. A good framework for this is to think through a typical day and to explore typical triggers and stressors and discuss how these might be alleviated and who you could approach together for help with this.

*“I was worried how she’d react, but she just listened then said ‘How can I support you?’ – no one had asked me that before and it made me realise that she cared. Between us we thought of some really practical things she could do to help me stop self-harming.”*

# Acknowledge the Challenge

Remember that however difficult this conversation feels for you, it is probably ten times harder for the child. This might be the first time they've opened up about their issues. That takes real bravery and also shows a great degree of trust in you – acknowledging that can help them understand that you don't underestimate the significance and challenges of this conversation.



-5-

*“Talking about my bingeing for the first time was the hardest thing I ever did. When I was done talking he looked me in the eye and said ‘That must have been really tough.’ He was right, it was, but it meant so much that he realised what a big deal it was for me.”*



6

## Persevere

A child may not be ready to talk the first time you offer to listen – telling them that you’re happy to listen when they’re ready is helpful, but it can be hard for children to take that step and ask for your help. They’re far more likely to open up to you if you proactively offer support.

Alternatively, you could also ask if there is anyone else they’d feel comfortable talking to and facilitate that conversation.

*“I think she thought I would never open up. It was probably after she’d stretched out a hand of support about eight times that I finally began to talk, falteringly. If she hadn’t have kept trying and trying I’d probably still be sitting in that deep pit of depression now.”*




The best time  
for the  
conversation  
is now. Just  
do it.


## Final Thought

Don't wait until you feel ready to have tough conversations with your child. If you wait until the perfect moment or until you feel absolutely prepared then the conversation will never happen.

Instead, just do it. The imperfect conversation that has happened will have a lot more impact than the perfect conversation that you never get around to starting.



It was awkward and kind of embarrassing to start with, but we soon found our flow and we both felt a lot better for having spoken.



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- Thank You! -

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Pooky x

