



Having a conversation with parents and carers about mental health

A Beginner's Guide for Schools

Developed with YoungMinds' Teachers' Insights Group, May 2019

Introduction

Mental health is a very emotional subject to talk about. This is especially true of conversations between teachers and parents and carers, whether they have approached you, or you have encouraged the them to think about their family's mental health yourself.



As a staff member, you can play a vital role in being supportive to the parent or carer and reducing some of their worries as they open up. It is essential for a school to have had a discussion about how they respond to parents and carers on this topic. Some parents and carers may want to talk about their child's mental health and for others it might be their own mental health needs that are worrying them or the school.

This guidance suggests some ways in which you can have those first conversations in the most constructive way.

Things to consider

What are the issues?

We know that one in eight 5 to 19 year olds have a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2018), and schools are trying to support these children and their families. School staff tell us that the main topics are:

- Engaging and supporting parents and carers with their children's mental health needs.
- Providing families with strategies and resources to support them at home.
- Supporting parents and carers with their own mental health needs.
- Fostering a positive culture within schools towards supporting parents and carers and understanding challenges they might face.



One in eight 5 to 19 year olds have a mental health disorder (NHS Digital, 2018)

Who should talk to parents/carers?

It's important for staff to know the school's expectations to responding to conversations about mental health.

There might be a Wellbeing Lead or pastoral team who has this role within their remit. However, all staff members should feel able to respond to parents and carers' concerns, even if it is a very short conversation and the policy is to explain to them who they can get support from, from within the school.

How might the parent or carer be feeling?

Parents and carers might worry about what people think or whether they are at fault.

Confused: Is this a phase? Is this 'normal'?

Anxious: I feel so helpless - I'm scared it will get worse

Worried: Why is this happening? Why now?

Self blaming: Have I done something wrong, is it my fault? Am I a bad parent?

Angry: I'm so annoyed with my child. I just want things to go back to how they were.

Isolated: I'm the only one with this problem



Creating the right conditions

Making sure the time is right (for them and you)

You don't want the parent or carer to feel rejected or closed down, as this may make them change their mind about talking to someone about this issue and might add to their anxiety.

You also don't want to have a sensitive conversation when you might be feeling upset or vulnerable about something that you are dealing with.

It is sometimes hard to judge when the time is right.

1. Is the parent or carer in distress and needing to talk to someone now?

You could say:

'Thank you for coming to see me with this. I can see that you are very worried about it and need to talk now. Let's go and find somewhere/Can I take you to ... (senior leader)?'

2. Is it an on-going situation that you may be able to postpone until a better time?

You could say:

'Thank you for coming to see me with this. I can see that you are very worried about it. I want to give you enough time to talk properly about this, but at the moment I can't. Can we arrange to meet later/tomorrow?'

Making sure the place is right

Parents and carers will often feel sensitive about sharing their concerns, so talking discreetly is important. Are there quieter areas/rooms in the school where you could have this conversation? Offer to move into this quieter place to talk.

You could also use informal spaces if that feels more comfortable, e.g. take a walk or sit on a sofa.

Making sure you know what the school can provide

The whole staff should be aware of what support there is for parents and carers and their children.

When someone is distressed it is very tempting to over-promise resources or suggest things that are not possible or likely. If you are referring the parent or carer onto a colleague, make sure they are available and able to help.



Safeguarding

The normal safeguarding procedures apply when you are having these conversations.

If you are in any doubt about the safety of a child or adult, you should seek advice from the Designated Senior Lead in your school.

You should also not encourage the disclosure of sensitive details and explain to the parent or carer what your duty is to share information.

It's important to maintain your regular professional boundaries in these discussions as well.



Looking after yourself

Acknowledge your limits – the chances are that you are not seeing the parent or carer in a clinical context or as a trained mental health practitioner.

You may want to help, but you may not be the best person or in the best position to provide the right support at this time.

Sometimes these conversations can feel difficult and overwhelming. Pass the conversation on to a colleague if it feels too much for you.

Talk to a colleague afterwards or if possible take a few minutes for yourself if the conversation was upsetting or challenging for you.

Some schools have developed 'Reflective Practice' spaces or invested in coaching training for staff. It would be ideal to bring along anonymised case studies to these spaces, in order to ensure that staff are being well supported after these conversations.

The conversation:

Here are some tips and some example sentences to help you start:

Do	Say
Begin with a kind word and a warm smile	<i>Hello there, how are you feeling?</i>
Don't worry about not having all the answers	<i>I'm not an expert in this, but I am very happy to talk to you about it</i>
Validate the parent/carer's feelings	<i>I can see you are upset by this</i>
Build trust	<i>This sounds difficult for you</i>
Listen actively without judgement and allow them to talk	
Reflect back to them paraphrasing their words	<i>You said you feel overwhelmed by this</i>
Check the details if you are unclear about what they mean	<i>So, you have said that...</i>
Be positive about the conversation	<i>I'm so glad that you managed to come to me about this</i>
Decide together what the next steps are. You might want to refer the parent/carer on to another colleague or professional	<i>How would you feel about going to your GP</i>
Give them information about other support (see Signposting section)	

A few other ideas:

Try to	Try not to
Show empathy and sincerity	Offer opinions or judgements, e.g. 'That's odd/weird'
Help the parent/carer see that they are not alone	Show horror or disgust in facial expressions or body language
Use 'we' to show you are working together	Catastrophise or diagnose, e.g. 'That sounds really serious. I think it's PTSD'
Ask open questions (e.g. How? When? What?)	Assume there is a mental health problem
Reassure that this is the first positive step to get the right support	Use personal experiences
Probe sensitively	Give patronising advice, e.g. 'You should...'



Parents and carers really appreciate the support they get from school staff. These are some quotes directly from them:

“As a parent you just feel a bit lost and want some help from someone.”

“The information leaflets from parents evening have been so useful.”

“Because she is so clever and is excelling in school, they don’t see a problem but they don’t see her at home where she feels safe enough to let go and release all her emotions.”

“She has utilised the help offered, and the good news is she has been in school for the whole of the past two weeks. Hooray! The relief of her emerging from her bedroom each morning brings a relief like a tidal wave!”

“Neither of us have had experience of dealing with someone with severe anxiety, just knowing there are people in school to talk to, helped us to manage our own feelings of helplessness. It has given us greater confidence in our approach. Over the last week our daughter has shown improvement, her panic-attacks are less severe and she seems a bit more in control again.”

“Talking it through made me feel confident that I wasn’t being unreasonable. It made me feel a bit stronger.”

“His teacher was listening. My son needed somebody to listen because obviously everybody else in the family was in as much of a panic as I was.”



For more help:

For schools

For more resources and information on our training, visit youngminds.org.uk/360schools

For parents

For lots of fun activity ideas and resources to make talking easier, visit youngminds.org.uk/take20

YoungMinds' Parents Helpline: 0808 802 5544

For young people

YoungMinds' Crisis Messenger (for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis): Text YM to 85258



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