

Ask the Pediatrician: How can parents talk to their children about mental health issues?

February 28 2022, by Dr. Jeffrey D. Shahidullah and Dr. Rebecca A. Baum



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Q: What are the best ways to talk to my children about mental health concerns, and should I bring this up with their pediatrician?

A: Children, teens and families are navigating difficult times. Sometimes it can be hard to tell when something serious may be going on. Talking with your child's [pediatrician](#) is a great place to start.

Many pediatricians check for [mental health concerns](#) at well-child visits. The doctor may ask your child questions or ask them to fill out a questionnaire that checks how they're doing. As your child gets older, it's important for them to have the opportunity to talk privately with their pediatrician. This also lets them practice talking with the doctor, which is a skill they'll need as a young adult.

As a parent, you can also bring up concerns about your [child's mental health](#), either at a well-child visit or whenever concerns arise. It's often a good idea to talk with your child ahead of time. Consider starting the conversation by assuring, "I care about you and want to make sure I understand how you're feeling. Your doctor is someone who can help."

It's normal for your child to experience difficult thoughts, feelings, and emotions. When these issues occur more than usual and begin to get in the way of regular functioning, it could be a sign of something more serious. Here are some signs to look for that may signal the need for additional support:

- Feeling "on edge" or "wound up" most of the time
- Worrying about things for no reason or having negative thoughts that are hard to control
- Feeling panicky or having physical symptoms like headaches, stomach pains, rapid breathing, fast heartbeat, or diarrhea
- Avoiding activities because of fear or anxiety

- Changes in sleep habits (trouble sleeping or being tired during the day)
- Changes in eating habits (eating too much or too little)
- Being quick to give up on challenging tasks
- Struggling with schoolwork
- Spending more time alone
- Feeling sad or irritable
- Feeling guilty about things
- Talking about death or suicide

Talk with your child's pediatrician if you have noticed signs or symptoms that concern you. Even if you're just wondering if something is normal for your child's developmental level, your child's pediatrician is an ideal source of support. You can also talk with the nursing staff or do a telehealth visit.

Your child's pediatrician can also help you sort out whether talking with a mental health professional may be a good idea. They can help determine which issues they can support in their office versus when to see other mental health professionals, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker or licensed professional counselor.

Even though mental [health](#) concerns are common, they may still carry stigma in our society. Help fight this stigma by letting your child know that you love and support them, no matter how they're feeling. Let them know that we all sometimes struggle and that help is available.

Your child's pediatrician is a trusted source of information who can help you and your child through difficult times.

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