

# Gizmos Tip Sheets: How to Talk to Kids About Mental Health

Talking with kids about mental health can feel intimidating or scary. To help with this we have created *Gizmos Tip Sheets* to provide adult companions with more information and help direct you through how to talk with children about taking care of their mental health, especially when they feel sad, mad, or worried.

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## Seven Super Skills

1. **Calmness:** Remember that these conversations can be just as intimidating or scary for kids. Staying calm makes them feel calmer too.
2. **Honesty:** Being honest is important. It's okay to let children know feeling sad, mad, or worried is human, even adults feel it too.
3. **Non-judgement:** As adults it may sometimes be hard to understand how children could be struggling with stress or complex emotions. Children can feel deeply. Something that may not seem like a big deal to an adult may be a big deal to them. Be open minded and remember children are still learning how to process big feelings.
4. **Empathy:** Everyone has things in life that make them sad, mad, or worried. Children have these too. They may be upset they didn't get picked for the dodgeball team in gym class. Put yourself in their shoes, think of a time when you were picked last. How did that make you feel? What would you have wanted someone to say to make you feel better?
5. **Resourcefulness:** Use role playing, puppets, toys, or comfort items to help make the conversation more playful and less scary for both of you.
6. **Reassuring:** Let children know it's okay to feel sad, mad, or worried. Remind them that you are there to listen and its good they chose to talk with someone about their feelings.
7. **Encouraging:** Support children by telling them you are glad they shared how they were feeling with you. Prompt them to use their Mental Health Plan to find an activity that could help them feel better.

## Helpful Positivity

Sometimes we aren't sure what to do when our kids are upset, and we want them to stop their behavior but can forget to acknowledge their feelings first. Sometimes shutting down negative feelings can be harmful.

- **Instead of:** "It will be fine", **Say:** "This is hard. But I'm here to help."
- **Instead of:** "Calm down" **Say:** "I'm listening, take deep breaths so I can hear what you're trying to tell me"
- **Instead of:** "Don't cry" **Say:** "It's okay to cry, but you also need to use your words to tell me what's wrong"
- **Instead of:** "Don't do that" **Say:** "It's not okay to throw things, but you can use a squeeze toy when you're mad and need to let it out" then hand them a squeeze toy.

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## Role Modeling

Kids learn a lot from watching adults. Kids not only listen to what you say but watch what you do, this is why role-modeling self-care is important. When we role-model, we act things out and do them, so children know how to do them too.

- **Breathing together:** “Woah, this situation is really hard. Let's take some deep breaths together, then figure out what to do next”
- **Naming feelings:** “I'm feeling sad there's no cookies left. How are you feeling?”
- **Modeling:** “I am feeling so angry I could scream. But I know screaming won't help me. I think I'm going to go for a walk instead. Want to join?”

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## Find time to Check In

**Find time in the day to talk to children about how they may be feeling and check in on them.** This could be in the car ride home from school, during dinner time, while coloring or playing together, before bedtime, or another time that works in your family's schedule.

**You can ask:**

- What was one thing that was hard for you this week?
- Is there something you've been thinking about a lot?
- Who's someone that's made you feel good this week?

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## Additional Resources on How to Talk to Kids

- Dr. Becky Kennedy - Good Inside
- [MentalHealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers](https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers)
- [www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults/Kids/How-to-Talk-to-Your-Child-About-Their-Mental-Health](https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults/Kids/How-to-Talk-to-Your-Child-About-Their-Mental-Health)
- [https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Kids-About-Mental-Illnesses-084.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Kids-About-Mental-Illnesses-084.aspx)

