



Mental Health Matters: Listening to our children ...

How was your day? Are you ok?

To date our MHM posts have been about adult mental health but this post considers how we can start talking about mental health with our children and young people.

“ What was the biggest problem you had today? ”

“ What was the best and worst bit of your day?”

“ If your life was a movie which one would it be? ”

“ Even if I don't understand, know that I want to”

#Young Minds: Starting the conversation

A Mum's story

Busy life – 3 children, supportive husband, responsible job, helping with homework, getting supper, taking children..., picking up children...., having friends to play. Sounds familiar. That Mum was me some thirty years ago. At the end of the day, always asking *How was your day?* or *Are you ok?*, I sometimes wonder if I always listened to the answer. Hold on a minute, my job involved listening to children and young people... but did I always know **how** to listen to my own? My children are now amazing adults but the insecure parent re-emerged during lockdown when I began to wonder what it would

have been like if I had that time to talk and listen to my children all over again? Of course no family is perfect but around Bradninch during the day time in lockdown I observed, with a little envy, parents playing with their children in the nature reserve, a Dad cycling with his daughter talking about the day, families walking together to the Spar and lots of new young helpers at the allotments. Of course life is not always as it seems but time was available to talk and time available to listen. Some of your children will have found that time a positive experience, make sure they hold on to it as they go back to school.

Listening after Lockdown

As children and young people return to school post lockdown, it is an even more important time to ask *How was your day?* or *Are you ok?* only when you have the time to listen and engage in conversation. Many children will be happy to return whilst others may be apprehensive. The most recent Covid19 survey by Young Minds showed that the young people surveyed were concerned about school, college or university work and a break down in their routine. When asked what the main pressures were during the current lockdown, respondents mostly spoke of loneliness and isolation, concerns about school, college or university work and a breakdown in routine. “Many young people also expressed fears about the future, and although some were optimistic about the vaccine rollout, others were concerned that easing restrictions too soon could lead to further restrictions in the future” (February 2021). Schools are making mental health a key part of the returning to school curriculum and it is being recognised that a positive approach to mental health is a core part of learning. As partners in your children’s learning, how can you continue those conversations about mental health at home? Through effective listening we can model the importance of taking care of our physical and mental health as part of our overall wellbeing.

How do we start the conversation?

Starting a conversation can be difficult, especially if you're worried that your child is having a hard time. It doesn't matter what topic the conversation starts with - it's about the opportunity it gives you both to talk about feelings and to provide reassurance if needed. Young Minds #Take 20, recognises that conversations about feelings can be hard so start. By taking 20 minutes to do an activity that both you and your child enjoy (remember the dad cycling with his daughter and the family playing in the nature reserve?), you can create a relaxed space to start the conversation with your child, making it an easier to talk and to listen. For many of us talking about mental health with our children is not part of our daily conversation and maybe something that we avoid. "If discussing mental health isn't every day and ordinary in your house, you're not alone. It's really important though, and just being open to speaking and listening as a parent can make a real difference" (Time to Change #Make Time 2021).

What if something concerning comes up in your conversation? Try not to show any worry but instead do your best to restate the concern as you see things and talk about any actions you are going to take that will help. Your child will want the comfort and reassurance that you understand, are open to further dialogue or even finding external support.

Finally, these three key points may help you to start that important conversation with your child :

- Be open and honest.
- It is ok not to have the answer, there are places to find out more together.
- A short conversation can make a difference, it is a beginning.

Further support

Maybe starting conversations about mental health, listening and continuing dialogue seems a challenge? There are a range of resources to support you and your children. I wish they had been available thirty years ago!

Time to Change

A growing social movement working to change the way we all think and act about mental health problems. A range of resources including parent leaflets, videos of parents and young children telling their stories and ten top tips for talking to children and young people about mental health.

<https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

Young Minds

The UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. A range of resources for children, young people and parents.

Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs

Reports looking at the impact of coronavirus on the mental health of young people and find out what we're asking of Government.

<https://youngminds.org.uk>

Childline

A free and confidential service for children and young people. A range of resources and information available.

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

Young Devon

Making quality relationships with young people to make them thrive.

<https://www.youngdevon.org/>

Take care

All good wishes from

Kate, Glenn and Sophie for

BradTog MHM