

EMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION:

A Cheat Sheet for Parents

In moments of vulnerability—whether a child is sharing their identity, expressing their concerns about school, or discussing potential mental health issues—it’s important for you to respond with empathy and understanding. The following table provides examples of common phrases that may unintentionally minimize a child’s feelings or experiences, along with more constructive alternatives that will help your child feel more heard and supported.

| DON'T SAY... | INSTEAD, SAY... |
|--|--|
| "There's nothing wrong with you. You're fine." | "What's been going on for you lately? It's okay to not be okay sometimes." |
| "Don't be sad, this is just normal." | "It's understandable that you're feeling that way." |
| "You'll be fine, it's not that big of a deal." | "I can see that this is really hard for you right now. Let's talk about it." |
| "Aww, don't cry." | "It's okay to cry. I'm here if you want to share what's bothering you." |
| "Everything happens for a reason." | "I'm sorry this is happening to you. It's not fair, and I'm here to help you through it." |
| "Things could be worse." | "Your feelings are valid, and it's okay to feel upset." |
| "Other kids have it much harder than you." | "Everyone's challenges are different, but what you're going through is important too." |
| "Just think positive thoughts." | "It's hard to stay positive when things feel tough. Let's figure out how to make things a little easier." |
| "You just need to toughen up." | "I know you're strong, but it's okay to ask for help when things feel overwhelming." |
| "I don't like your friends. You need to find better people to hang out with." | "It seems like your friends get into trouble a lot; I just want to make sure you are making good choices." |
| "Drinking will ruin your life. If I see you drinking, I will..." | "Do you know anyone at school who uses drugs/alcohol/cigarettes? Are you curious about them?" |
| "I think you should..." | "Would you like my help trying to solve this problem?" "Can I suggest something?" |
| "That outfit is too revealing. You can't wear that to school." "You won't fit in if you wear that." | "I see you have your own style. How do you feel in that outfit? Let's talk about what you want to wear." |
| In response to a child who is struggling with school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my day, ADHD wasn't a thing! • "You just need to try harder to focus." • "You're just being lazy." | "Many people have similar experiences with schoolwork and trying to focus, and there are ways to manage it. Let's talk to someone who can help." "I know it's tough to concentrate. I'm here to support you in figuring it out." |
| In response to your child coming out to you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you sure? You're just confused. • What will people think? | "Thank you for trusting me with this. I love you and I always will. Let's talk about this." |
| In response to self-harm: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Did you do this just to get attention?" • "Don't think about suicide." • Staying silent, because of worries that talking about suicide will cause the child/youth to think more about it | "I can see you're going through something really painful. I want to understand what you're feeling and how I can support you." "I'm really concerned about you. Can we talk about what's going on and find a way to help you feel better?" "I'm really glad you shared this with me. Let's talk more about what's going on." (If your child is contemplating suicide, call 911 or go to your local emergency room. You may also call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 988.) |

MILESTONES IN MOTION:

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

Are you wondering what to expect as your child grows and how you can best support their emotional and social development? This guide offers a clear breakdown of what behaviors to expect at each age range and provides practical, research-backed tips for supporting your child's emotional and social health. Whether you're experiencing new milestones or familiar hurdles, use this resource to better understand your child's needs, strengthen your connection, and guide them through each stage of development with confidence and care!

| AGE | WHAT TO EXPECT | TIPS FOR PARENTS/CAREGIVERS |
|--------------------|---|--|
| 18 mos– 2 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Have more temper tantrums and become more defiant as they try to communicate and be independent · Start simple pretend play, like imitating what adults or other kids are doing · Become interested in having other kids around, but are more likely to play alongside them (parallel play) than with them (cooperative play) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Encourage “free play,” where your child can follow her interests, try new things, and use things in new ways. · Provide consistent, firm, appropriate discipline without yelling or hitting. · Let your child have a choice when possible: for example, say, “Do you want a banana or an orange?” · Provide out-of-home social experiences. Playing with others helps your child learn the value of sharing and friendship. · Set a few simple and clear rules that your child can follow, such as using gentle hands when playing. If he/she breaks a rule, show him/her what to do instead. Later, if your child follows the rule, recognize it. |
| 3–4 Years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Start to show and verbalize a wider range of emotion · Are interested in pretend play, but may confuse real and “make believe” · Are spontaneously kind and caring · Start playing with other kids and separate from caregivers more easily · May still have tantrums because of changes in routine or not getting what they want | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Help your child be ready for new places and meeting new people. For example, you can read stories or role play to help him/her be comfortable. · Take time to answer your child’s “why” questions. If you don’t know the answer, say “I don’t know,” or help your child find the answer in a book, on the Internet, or from another adult. · Encourage your child to use “his/her words” to ask for things and solve problems but show him/her how. For example, help your child say, “Can I have a turn?” instead of taking something from someone. · Let your child do as much as possible for himself or herself when getting dressed, brushing teeth, and combing hair. · Talk about and label your child’s and your own feelings. Read books and talk about the feelings characters have and why they have them. · Your child might start to “talk back” in order to feel independent and test what happens. Limit the attention you give to the negative words. Make a point of noticing good behavior. “You stayed calm when I told you it’s bedtime.” |

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| 5-9 Years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Have increased ability to manage their emotions · By age 8, know how to mask emotions and use coping strategies; begin to understand what it means to feel embarrassed · Have knowledge of how their actions affect others · Want to behave well, but aren't as attentive to directions · Try to express feelings with words, but may resort to aggression when upset · Be able to "step into another's shoes" · Form peer groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Increase the child's self-esteem with warm, positive parenting and reinforcement. · Minimize comparisons among children and help them overcome failures. · Give advice and encouragement when he/she comes across moral questions such as lying, cheating, stealing, etc. · Help your child think about how to handle feelings of anger and similar emotions in safe ways. · Talk to your child about school, friends, and feelings regularly. |
| 10-12 Years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Commonly have emotional swings · Begin to rely more on same-age friends · Value friends and others' opinions more and more · Still rely on bonds with parents though it may not be demonstrated; may start to develop own identity by withdrawing from family activities and conversations · Question rules and values, often will say things are "unfair" · May begin to have body image issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Listen to the preteen and take his/her feelings seriously. Don't minimize the issues they stress out about. · Work together for solutions when problems arise. · Schedule time for family connectedness (shared meals, weekend activities). · Be involved in social media activities. · Give room for independence and identity exploration. · Be mindful of their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. · Talk openly about teasing, bullying, and similar problems and the appropriate actions to take when these issues arise. |
| 13-15 Years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Struggle with sense of identity; worry about being normal or "fitting in" · Feel awkward or strange about self & body image · Develop more friendships with opposite sex · Are introspective and moody and need privacy · May return to childish behavior, especially when stressed · Still rely on connectedness with parents but not in an open manner (become rude to parents in front of others) · Complain that parents interfere with independence · Realize that his/her parents are not perfect and identifies their faults · May start to experiment with sex and drugs · Develop intellectual interests, which become more important | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Talk about difficult issues early on (bullying, sex, drugs, gangs, etc.). Don't wait until they initiate the conversation. · Provide an open line of communication. · Be a friend · Set clear expectations and limits. · Get to know your teenager's friends. · Don't overreact to changes in clothing style or appearance. · Be sensitive to identity issues. · Communicate and model your values about issues such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility. · Provide positive feedback. · Be honest about your experiences to help them make wise decisions. |

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| 16–18 Years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Exhibit an increased interest in the opposite sex · Choose role models · Peers are still important but move towards their own identity/ thoughts · Increased stress and anxiety about future choices (work, school) · Start trying to discover strengths and weaknesses, at times seeming self-centered, impulsive, or moody · Strive to be independent and may start emotionally distancing from caregivers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Provide an open line of supportive communication. · Don't be judgmental and disregard their ideas and plans for the future. · Provide space for exploration of new interests. · Don't overwhelm them with talks of the future. · Talk regularly about difficult issues (sex, drugs, gangs, etc.) · Set expectations and limits with room for independence. · Provide positive feedback. · If you suspect a problem, ask your teen what is bothering him/her and then listen. |

REFERENCES:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, May). Milestone checklists. https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/LT-SAE-Checklist_COMPLIANT_30MCorrection_508.pdf
2. Children's Hospital of Orange County. (2021, May). Developmental milestones. <https://choc.org/primary-care/ages-stages/>
3. Mental Health America (ND). Healthy mental and emotional development. <https://mhanational.org/sites/default/files/BACK%20TO%20SCHOOL%202014%20-%20Healthy%20Mental%20and%20Emotional%20Development.pdf>



WARNING SIGNS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN (<12 YEARS OLD)

- Frequent wild, despairing tantrums or inconsolable irritability
- Fearfulness or worry, or are extremely upset when left with another adult
- Easily startled or alarmed by routine events
- Complaint about frequent stomachaches or headaches with no known medical cause
- Are in constant motion and cannot sit quietly
- Chronic eating or sleeping difficulties
- Are not interested in playing with other children or have difficulty making friends
- Excessive hitting, biting, and pushing of other children, very withdrawn behavior, or flat affect
- Experienced a sudden or recent decline in grades
- Engages in compulsive or repetitive actions, such as repeatedly checking to make sure a door is locked, for example, or repeating words silently

FOR OLDER CHILDREN (>12 YEARS OLD)

- Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Low energy; sleep too much or too little
- Periods of highly elevated energy and activity and require less sleep than usual
- Spends more and more time alone and avoids social activities with friends and family
- Diets or exercises excessively
- Engages in self-harm behaviors such as cutting their skin
- Smokes, drinks, or uses drugs
- Engages in risky or destructive behaviors alone or with friends
- Have thoughts of suicide
- Says that they think someone is trying to control their mind or that they can hear things that other people cannot hear

IF YOU SUSPECT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN YOUR CHILD, REACH OUT TO THE FOLLOWING:

- Your child's school psychologist or guidance counselor
- Your child's pediatrician
- Local mental health clinics or community behavioral services (<https://findtreatment.gov/locator>)
- As needed:
 - National Suicide Prevention Hotline (988)
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline: (1-800-662-HELP)

Mental Health Resource Sheet

“Let’s Talk Mental Health: How Can I Help My Child.”

Emergency Contacts

U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Now 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline):

- Phone: 988 (Available 24/7)
- Text Line: Text “HELLO” to 741741 (U.S. only, for children, teens, and adults)

International Crisis Resources:

- Befrienders Worldwide: Offers free support for people of all ages, including children and teens. Find your country-specific hotline: www.befrienders.org
- Samaritans (UK): Free helpline 116 123 (Available to anyone, including children and teenagers)
- Lifeline Australia: Free helpline 13 11 14 (Open to all age groups)

Crisis Support and Counseling

U.S. Specific:

- Crisis Text Line: Text “HOME” to 741741 (Free 24/7 support for children, teens, and adults)
- The Trevor Project (LGBTQ+ Youth): Phone: 1-866-488-7386
- Text: “START” to 678-678 (Free and confidential support specifically for LGBTQ+ youth)

Global Support:

- 7 Cups of Tea (Teen Section): Free online emotional support chat for teens: www.7cups.com/teen
- IMAlive: Free online crisis chat for anyone in crisis (including teens): www.imalive.org

Therapy and Mental Health Services

U.S. Specific:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):
- Offers free peer-led support groups for children, teens, and families. Find local resources: www.nami.org
- The Jed Foundation: Free mental health resources for teens and young adults, with a focus on suicide prevention: www.jedfoundation.org

Global Resources:

- Befrienders Worldwide: Provides free listening services for youth in multiple countries: www.befrienders.org
- Kids Help Phone (Canada): Free support for children and teens in Canada: www.kidshelpphone.ca

Community Support

Peer Support Networks:

- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness): Free online and in-person support groups for children, teens, and families: www.nami.org
- OK2Talk: A free online community where teens can share experiences and seek peer support: www.ok2talk.org

Online Forums:

- 7 Cups Teen Forum: Free peer support forum specifically for teens: www.7cups.com/teen
- TeenMentalHealth.org: Provides educational tools and resources for teens and their peers: www.teenmentalhealth.org

Faith-Based Mental Health Resources

U.S. and Global:

- Grace Alliance (Thrive for Kids): Free Christian mental health resources specifically for children and teens: www.mentalhealthgracealliance.org
- Mind & Soul Foundation: Provides free Christian mental health resources, although primarily focused on adults, with some content that could be relevant for teens: www.mindandsoulfoundation.org

Self Help Resources

Apps:

- Smiling Mind: A free mindfulness and meditation app designed for children and teenagers: www.smilingmind.com.au

Websites:

- Mind (UK): Offers free mental health information and resources for young people: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people
- Mental Health America (MHA): Free online mental health screenings and information specifically for youth: www.mhanational.org/mental-health-children-youth

Tips for Finding Local Mental Health Support

- **Check Local Directories:** Use free national and regional mental health directories (like NAMI, local hospitals, or schools) to find services tailored to children and teens.
- **School Counselors:** Schools often provide free counseling services, or can refer you to local free or low-cost services.
- **Community Centers:** Many local religious or community centers offer free or sliding scale mental health support, especially for youth.

