



## Children's Mental Health Week 2024: Helping Children Express Themselves

Children's Mental Health week takes place this year between the 5th to 11th February and the theme this year is 'My Voice Matters.' This week is marked each year to raise awareness of the importance of mental health in children and young people and serves as a reminder that prevention is so important when thinking about mental health in children – if we take the time to boost our children's mental health and wellbeing now, it reduces their chances of suffering mental health conditions later in life.

This year's theme was created alongside children and teenagers and is a subject I often hear about in my sessions with children. Young people want to feel that their voices are heard, that they can express their feelings, say what is on their mind and offer their opinion. As the mental health charity, Place2Be states, "evidence shows that empowering children and young people can have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing... Children and young people who feel that their voices are heard – and that what they say makes a difference – have higher levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem."

So, with this in mind, what can we do to help our children express themselves?

### **Emotional Expression in Children: What Do Young People Want?**

Place2Be carried out a survey on the views of young people and found that children and young people want:

- **Conversations about their mental-health and well-being to be low-key and casual.** Pressured and serious conversations turn young people off and discourage them from engaging in emotional expression. Try opening up a conversation on a car journey, a walk or whilst engaged in a fun activity together.
- **To talk and express feelings without being interrupted or judged for how they feel.** Take the time to validate their experience which can really help a young person to feel listened to. Try phrases such as "I'm sorry you're going through this" or "I'm sorry to hear you've been feeling this way. That must be really hard."
- **To have their feelings heard without parents comparing their experience to their own when they were a child.** This is a really hard one as it's such a natural instinct for a parent to share this and help our own children learn from our mistakes. Research though shows that young people want to find their own way as much as possible. As parents, we constantly walk such a fine line between guiding our children and letting them learn from their own mistakes, being there for them when they fall.
- **To express feelings and be listened to without giving advice.** It's so tempting to jump in with solutions when our child has a problem but often this is not what our children are looking for from us. Try asking "Do you want me to give advice or would you just like me to listen?" Often just knowing that they have been listened to and that you are there for them if they need you is enough. This also encourages emotional expression in the future.

- **For you to be open with them about how you feel.** When you are open with your children about your feelings, as much as is appropriate, it encourages your child to be open about their feelings and emotional reactions with you too.
- **To not feel forced to talk.** Young people often will talk when the time is right for them. When we allow them the space to explore their own feelings, they will often open up to us. When a young person feels pressured to talk about a problem, often it has the opposite effect!

#### 4 Tips to Boost Mental Health and Wellbeing in Children

If your child is finding it hard to open up right now, here are a few of my Youth Fairy tips to boost their mental health and wellbeing:

1. **Keep track of the good things.** Encourage your child or teen to keep a positive journal of the good things that happen in their day, every day. It can be the smallest of things from enjoying something nice for lunch, to laughing with a friend or spending time with a pet. The key here is *repetition* – the more children focus on the good things, the more they exercise their pre-frontal cortex. This is the part of the brain responsible for feelings of positivity, problem-solving and focusing on solutions. In fact, research has shown the more people engage in activities such as this, the happier they are! It's all down to the neuro-chemicals that are released in the brain (such as serotonin) when we engage in these kinds of mentally-healthy behaviours.
2. **Keep up with hobbies and the things that interest them.** Even during busier and stressful times, it's so important that children and teens have time carved out for the things that interest them. Not only does it often provide opportunities for social interaction (another serotonin boost!) but it boosts levels of self-confidence, positivity and creativity – all of which are key for good overall mental-health and wellbeing.
3. **Allow them some element of choice in everyday decisions.** This might be from giving them a choice of what to wear or providing more controlled choices. For example, asking "would you like to wear this or this?" or "would you like this or that for dinner today?" This can help children learn to make decisions and develop a healthy sense of self by having a point of view, learning their own preferences and dislikes.
4. **Check they know who they can go to for help.** As parents, whilst we might hope our own children will come to us for help and advice, sometimes we are the last person our children want advice from! After all, as a parent, we are often too close to help them deal with a bigger problem. Ask them who they would go to for help or advice if they needed. This could be a grandparent, a teacher or a trusted friend, who they feel comfortable to express feelings and issues with.

**There are also charities such as SHOUT, which is a text messaging service for people of all ages struggling with their mental health. Just text SHOUT to 85258 for free.**