

HOW TO BE ATTUNED TO YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

ADVICE FOR PARENTS - YOUNG MINDS

BE THE FAMILY ANCHOR

Your child may be feeling lost and, as a parent, you will be equally frightened. But normality and routine provide comfort for children with mental health problems, so be their rock. Show them you can be upset, but still move on and thrive. You can't avoid challenges in life, like divorce, bullying and bereavement, but explain to children that you can overcome them.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

As a parent going through a child's mental health problem you have to be OK. Too often parents are so focused on holding it together for their children that they don't look after themselves. Make sure you eat well, sleep enough and lean on those around you. Talk about how you're feeling and cry if you need to. This also helps your child because they may eventually model your coping behaviour.

WRITE THINGS DOWN

If you decide to see your GP, which you can do alone or with your child, arrive with a list. Many parents go to their GP at the end of their tether and feeling tearful and may be dismissed as over anxious. Make a list of what happens, when it happens, how long it's been happening and how it affects your day-to-day lives. Quantify things to make a case

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Parents make a huge difference in their child's recovery. You are the expert in your child's eyes, so respond to those powerful parental instincts. Speak to your GP or to Young Minds. Ask questions and push for answers, and do it early. One in ten children has an issue that warrants a mental health diagnosis.

Of those, only one in four gets support. However, 20 per cent of children have a problem that won't develop. If your child is in that 20 per cent, get in early because you can do so much with emerging anxiety and depression.

LOOK OUT FOR RED FLAGS BY THINKING ABOUT AGE-APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

If your four year old clings to your leg at school drop off that's normal. If your eight year old does it, that's not right. Look out for big changes in mood, behaviour, eating and sleep. Are they withdrawing from things they used to find enjoyable? Are they becoming more aggressive or tearful?

CALL The Young Minds Parents Helpline on 0808 802 5544 or visit youngminds.org.uk

CHECK IN WITH THEM

Young Minds advise parents to check in with their children of all ages regularly, to find out how they are. Don't interrogate them, but listen and be supportive. And separate the behaviour from the child; making it clear that you love them regardless of how they're acting. Maintain communication and don't burn bridges.

DON'T BE TOO PRESCRIPTIVE

While it's helpful to glance around and look at your children's peers to determine age-appropriate behaviour, it's also worth noting that just like they hit walking and talking milestones at different times, they hit emotional milestones at different times too. So take your child into account. If they have never liked sport they may be withdrawn at sports day. However, if they've always loved sport and then they begin to withdraw from it, that's something to look out for. An ability to form and develop relationships and a well-developed sense of right and wrong is a marker for good mental health, as is being able to withstand some psychological stress.