



## Tips for Discussing Your Child's Mental Health with Your Primary Care Provider

**Treat mental health like physical health. Recognize we need to talk about it.**

Misinformation and stigma surround mental health because we do not understand it as well as physical health. If your child has a high fever for a few days, you probably make the call to your primary care provider for a sick visit without a second thought.

But what if you notice ongoing changes in your child's emotional well-being or behaviors? The first step is to recognize that your child is struggling and know you can turn to your primary care provider for support, just as you would with physical health.

**Understand how important mental health is to your child's well-being.**

Mental health, also known as emotional or behavioral health, is a vital part of your child's medical health and development. It affects how individuals think, feel, and act. All children and teens have periods of anger, frustration, and sadness. However, for some kids, these feelings can reach a tipping point and interfere with everyday life.

**It may be time to seek help from your primary care provider when:**

▶ **Your child has:**

- New difficulties at home, in school, socially, or within the family.
- Noticeable changes in appetite, sleep, mood, or behavior.
- Increased feelings of sadness, anger, stress and worry, low-self-esteem and grief.
- A hard time in situations that used to be okay.
- A need for more support, including avoiding activities, having frequent tantrums, stomachaches or headaches with no known medical cause, unable to sit still, using drugs or alcohol, or spending more time alone.

▶ **Your ability to parent has become very challenging and you don't know what to do.**

▶ **You hear from others, such as teachers, coaches, or family members, that they are concerned about changes they are seeing in your child.**

**If your child's behavior is unsafe, or they talk about wanting to hurt themselves or others, seek help immediately.**



# Tips for Discussing Your Child's Mental Health with Your Primary Care Provider

## 1 Step 1: Make the call

Call primary care provider's office to schedule an appointment. Make it a priority.

- Explain that you would like an appointment to discuss concerns about your child's mental health.
- Ask the primary care provider's office who should come to the appointment. More than one parent/caregiver if there is more than one in the home? Should you bring the child to the appointment? Can it be conducted via telehealth?

## 2 Step 2: Prepare for the appointment

Identify any new or concerning behaviors in your child. Write down your observations in real time and keep in mind:

- Any clear changes from prior behavior. What is different now? When did you first notice it?
- How often the behavior occurs and how intense it is (a little frustrating or highly disruptive?)
- Whether the behavior or emotion happens at a certain time of day or during a specific event.
- Any important life changes or events that may be affecting your child.

## 3 Step 3: Bring what you need

- Notes that you have about your concerns.
- Information or other family history that may be helpful (history of mental health, developmental concerns, relevant medical records, or learning differences).
- Any documents you may have that have noted concerns from others (notes from teachers, coaches, or others).

## 4 Step 4: Start the conversation

- Let your primary care provider know you are there because you are concerned about your child.
- If this conversation is difficult for you, let your primary care provider know this.
- Explain your observations and worries about your child.
- Be as honest and complete in your descriptions as you can be.
- Share any notes or other materials you have brought to the appointment.
- Remember you are there because you care about your child and are committed to doing everything you can.

## 5 Step 5: Be aware of what might happen during this appointment

- Your primary care provider may have you complete a questionnaire about your child.
- Some primary care offices now have mental health providers on staff, but if your primary care provider suggests your child see a more specialized provider, ask for a referral.
- Specialists may include psychiatrists or psychiatric nurses, social workers, licensed professional counselors, psychotherapists, or neuropsychologists.
- Ask about ways to manage your child's mental health concerns and what interventions are available.
- Ask how and when you should follow up with your primary care provider.

## 6 Step 6: Trust your gut!

- If you think there is a problem, explain why and be persistent in seeking care.
- You can always seek out a second provider for an additional perspective.
- You know your child better than anyone else. Trust your instincts.
- Having another family member or close friend come with you to an appointment can be helpful reassuring and provide another person's perspective.



## If You Need Immediate Help, You are Not Alone.

If you, your child, or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, the following confidential hotlines are available 24/7 in English and Spanish:

### 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

- ▶ Dial 988
- ▶ Chat with the Lifeline Chat

### Trevor Lifeline for the LGBTQ community

- ▶ Call 1-866-488-7386
- ▶ Text START to 678678

## Additional Resources:

- ▶ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- ▶ Children's Mental Health Matters Campaign
- ▶ American Academy of Pediatrics
- ▶ National Institute of Mental Health Tips
- ▶ National Institute of Mental Health Kids