

Getting Kids to Talk About Feelings*

- Start by listening: even if you're tired, or it's an inconvenient time, or you are really tempted to give the child a solution to the problem right away...just listen!
- Don't take it personally if your child grunts in response to the question "How Was Your Day?" (sometimes the question is too general; some kids need time to unwind after school)
- Try talking informally in a neutral location, for example while driving to an activity, or walking the dog, or playing a game
- Don't try talking about feelings when the child is upset...it just escalates the negative emotions. Offer comfort or just allow time to pass, and talk when everyone is calm again.
- Don't try to force the conversation...even if well-meaning, interrogation makes kids feel threatened and will shut them down
- Be patient, especially when it comes to vulnerable feelings (anxiety, sadness, embarrassment, etc.) as most people only share these in their most trusting relationships, and not easily; expect the less vulnerable feelings (e.g., joy, anger) to come first
- Model talking about feelings (e.g., "I'm worried we're running late again", "This is so frustrating", etc.)
- In younger children, don't ask them how they're feeling, tell them as this builds a vocabulary for feelings (e.g., You look sad, That must be scary, etc.)
- In teens, don't make assumptions without checking them out...e.g., "I would find that pretty upsetting...do you?"
- Specific questions often work better than open ended ones in starting the discussion (e.g., "Who did you have lunch with today?" "Was your teacher back, or did you still have a substitute?")
- Show an interest in your child's friends and activities, not just his/her academic success or other parental interests
- Be positive when your child shares something personal (e.g., "That probably wasn't easy to say. I appreciate you being so honest.")
- When things go wrong, let the child know it's not the end of the world, you want to help, and you have his/her back...getting upset and assuming it's the child's fault will almost always shut down the discussion; children who feel supported by parents share more of their feelings
- For the same reason, when things go well, offer specific praise regarding the child's part in the success (e.g., you included such nice details in that geography project...no wonder you got an A!)
- Some people are more reserved than others: respect individual differences, and ask yourself "Do I want this conversation for the child's benefit, or for the sake of alleviating my own anxiety about the child?"
- Some teens share nothing with their parents for long periods of time, usually because they need to assert their autonomy from the family—if the teen still looks healthy and is doing well at school, wait for him/her to come to you (they usually do eventually); if you suspect illness (physical or mental) or drug use, or grades start to drop, seek professional guidance

***Also see "How to Talk so Kids Will Listen, and Listen so Kids Will Talk" by Faber & Mazlish**