

How to Speak with Your Child About Their Eating Disorder

Navigating what and how to say the right thing to your child with an eating disorder can be extremely difficult. Saying the wrong words, even if unintentional, can be harmful to your child and discouraging to you. Every child is unique and may react differently to certain words, phrases and approaches. However, the following nine ideas and talking points may offer you some insight and confidence in improving your ability to effectively communicate with your child.

Listen more than you talk

Actively listening to your child without judgment or comments is one of the most effective communication techniques. Try not to be critical or overly inquisitive by asking too many questions. It is important to check in at a frequency that feels right, while not seeming like a helicopter parent. Adopt a “listen mode” more than a “talk mode.”

Don't ignore the problem

Acting as if your child is not going through a difficult time and recovery journey because you don't want to say the wrong thing can be more damaging than saying the wrong thing. Talk to your child as it feels appropriate, but do not ignore the problem due to fear of making it worse. Chances are they will appreciate you checking in and expressing your concerns.

Use mindful language

Pick your words carefully. Some words and phrases may be triggering to your child, such as: “Have you gained weight?”, “You look skinny”, “You look healthy”, “You should go on a diet”, “You just need to eat”. Instead, compliment them on their successes and avoid comments on their appearance. Remind your child that you love, care about and support them.

Present yourself with empathy

You alone cannot fix the problem for your child. However, you can absolutely show your child that you support them and are always there for them. Work on being approachable, be present and non-judgmental. Doing so will make your child more likely to open up and share what they are feeling.

“How would you like me to support you?”

This question demonstrates vulnerability on your part and empowers your child to consider how you can help. If they say there is nothing you can do, that's okay. Simply let them know that you're always there and you welcome any ideas they may have for how you can help and show support.

“Have I said/done anything in the past that hurt you?”

Acknowledging that you may have made mistakes demonstrates your vulnerability and shows your child that you care. By opening the conversation, it gives your child permission to offer constructive feedback to help you be more effective in the future with accelerating their recovery.

“Is there anything I do that is beneficial to your journey?”

There could be actions you do or something you say that is already helping your child's recovery. If they can identify and share beneficial things you already do, keep doing it! Also, inquire about why they find it helpful.

Practice what you are going to say

If you practice what you want to say to your child, you are more likely to have productive and positive dialogue. For instance, check your words and phrases for appropriateness, sensitivity and potential effectiveness. Is this mindful language and dialogue? It can also be helpful to practice with someone else that is part of the recovery process, such as a spouse, family member or friend so you are on the same page.

Play the role of supporter rather than educator

Many kids who describe their parents as being more harmful than helpful during recovery state that their parents try to educate them on their disordered eating behaviors. Playing the role of supporter rather than educator increases your effectiveness in helping to accelerate your child's recovery.



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