



Conversation Starters

Starting and supporting conversations about mental health with children and young people: a detailed guide for parents, carers, education staff, and practitioners in Somerset.

Talking to a child or young person about their mental health can feel daunting. You might worry about saying the wrong thing, opening up something you don't know how to handle, or making their feelings feel worse. These worries are very common.

This guide is here to support you. You don't need special training or perfect words. What matters most is being present, listening with care, and showing the child or young person that they are not alone.

Mental health conversations don't have to be one big talk. They are often most helpful when they happen little and often, as part of everyday life.

Before you start: a few things to remember

- You don't have to fix everything straight away.
- It's okay if the child or young person doesn't want to talk at first.
- Listening is more important than problem solving.
- It's normal to feel unsure — you're not doing anything wrong.

Sometimes, just knowing that you are willing to listen makes a big difference.



Gently opening the conversation

Starting small can help the child or young person feel safer. Try to choose a calm moment, such as during a walk, while driving, or whilst cooking.

You could try saying:

- "It's been a while since we checked in. How are things feeling for you at the moment?"
- "I've noticed you've seemed a bit quieter or more tired lately. Is anything on your mind?"
- "I've been wondering if things have felt a bit hard recently."
- "How are things going at school / college / with friends right now?"
- "How are you feeling about...?"

Try to keep your tone gentle and curious, rather than worried or urgent.

How this might feel for the child or young person

They care about me. They've noticed. I might not be ready to talk yet, but I know the door is open.



Using everyday conversations as a bridge

Some children and young people find direct questions about feelings difficult. Everyday chat can help ease into deeper conversations.

You might ask:

- “What was the best part of your day?”
- “What was the hardest part?”
- “What made you laugh today?”
- “How did that lesson / activity go?”
- “What are you looking forward to this weekend or over the holidays?”

These moments often lead naturally to bigger conversations without pressure.

How this might feel for the child or young person

I feel comfortable talking about every day things.
I don't feel rushed.



Listening and helping them say more

If the child or young person starts to talk, try to give them space. Short silences are okay — they may be thinking or working out how to explain something.

You can gently support them by:

- Reflecting what you hear:
“That sounds really frustrating.” or “It sounds like that felt unfair.”
- Inviting them to continue:
“Can you tell me a bit more about that?” or “What was that like for you?”
- Checking your understanding:
“Have I got that right?” or “Is that how it felt for you?”

Avoid interrupting or rushing to respond.

How this might feel for the child or young person

They're really listening to me. I don't have to rush.
I feel understood.



When the child or young person shares something difficult

If the child or young person tells you something upsetting or worrying, it's important to show that you believe them and take their feelings seriously.

Helpful responses might include:

- "I'm really glad you told me."
- "I'm sorry you've been dealing with this."
- "That sounds really hard."
- "Thank you for trusting me."
- "It makes sense that you'd feel that way."

Try to resist the urge to immediately give advice or solutions. Feeling heard and believed helps children and young people feel safer to keep talking.



How this might feel for the child or young person

I'm not wrong for feeling like this. I'm not alone

Exploring what's going on (when they're ready)

The child or young person may not want to think about solutions straight away — and that's okay. Sometimes they just need you to listen or distract them for a while.

When they do feel ready, you can gently explore things together.

Some children or young people find it helpful to:

- Draw or write their worries down,
- Think about which part feels hardest right now.
- Talk about different parts of their life (home, school, friends, online),

You could ask:

- "What feels hardest at the moment?"
- "Is there anything that helps, even a little bit?"
- "What would you like to be different?"
- "How can I support you with this?"
- "What do you wish could change?"

Keep the focus on small steps rather than big solutions.

How this might feel for the child or young person

I am heard. I don't have to deal with all the big things. I can do it one step at a time.



Offering reassurance and hope

When children and young people are struggling, it can feel to them like things will always be this way. You can help by gently offering reassurance, without dismissing their feelings.

You might say:

- “We don’t have all the answers yet, but we’ll work this out together.”
- “This won’t always feel this bad.”
- “You don’t have to deal with this on your own.”
- “I’m here whenever you want to talk.”



How this might feel for the child or young person

Things can get better. I can ask for help.

Knowing when to get extra support

Sometimes children and young people need support beyond what family can offer — and that’s okay. Reaching out for help is a strength, not a failure.

If you’re worried about the child or young person’s safety, wellbeing, or mental health, consider speaking to:

- A GP
- School or college staff
- Local mental health services
- Trusted voluntary or community organisations in Somerset
-  [*Help! My Friend Has Asked Me... project resources*](#)

You can support the child or young person by involving them in these conversations and explaining what will happen next.



How this might feel for the child or young person

I know that there is support for me. I know where to find support. It’s ok to ask for help.

Looking after yourself

It’s important to look after your own wellbeing too.

Whilst being mindful of confidentiality try to:

- Talk things through with someone you trust
- Take breaks where you can
- Seek support for yourself

