

How to Talk to Your Child About Addiction and Mental Health

A practical guide for parents, carers, and families.

Talking to your child about addiction and mental health can feel daunting. But these conversations are among the most important you can have. Honesty, warmth, and age-appropriate language help children feel safe, build understanding, and reduce the stigma that keeps people from seeking help.

You do not need to have all the answers. What matters most is that your child knows they can come to you.

1. Create a Safe and Open Environment

Before beginning the conversation, ensure your child feels safe, supported, and comfortable discussing difficult topics.

- Choose a quiet, private setting where they feel free to express themselves.
- Approach the topic with calm and reassurance — your tone matters as much as your words.
- Ask open-ended questions and validate whatever they are feeling.
- There is no perfect moment. A calm, ordinary setting is usually enough.

2. Use Age-Appropriate Language

Children at different ages understand the world differently. Tailor what you say to where they are.

Young Children • Ages 4–8

- Keep explanations simple and reassuring.
- Focus on the idea that some things make people feel sick, and that people can get help.

"Sometimes people take things that aren't good for them because they feel sad or sick inside. If that happens, they can get help and feel better."

Preteens • Ages 9–12

- Introduce basic facts about how addiction affects the brain.
- Draw the parallel between physical illness and mental health struggles.
- Invite questions and answer them honestly.

"Addiction is when someone's brain gets so used to something that it becomes very hard to stop — even when they want to. Just like our bodies can get sick, our minds can struggle too."

Teenagers • Ages 13+

- Use more detailed explanations about addiction, mental health, and brain development.
- Discuss peer pressure, stress, and healthy coping strategies.
- Share relevant family history or personal experience if it feels appropriate.
- Be honest. Teenagers can usually tell when they are not getting the full picture.

3. Address Stigma and Misconceptions

Children often absorb negative messages about addiction and mental illness from the world around them. These conversations are an opportunity to offer something more accurate.

- Addiction is not a character flaw or a lack of willpower. It is a complex condition that affects how the brain works.
- Mental health struggles are common, normal, and treatable. They happen to people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.
- People living with addiction or mental health challenges deserve kindness, not judgement.

Modelling this attitude in your own responses will teach your child more than any single conversation.

4. Reassure and Provide Emotional Support

- Let your child know clearly: they are not responsible for anyone else's addiction or mental health difficulties.
- Validate whatever they feel. Sadness, confusion, fear, and anger are all understandable responses.
- Reassure them that help exists, that people do recover, and that things can get better.
- Check in again after the conversation. One conversation is rarely enough.

5. Teach Coping Skills and Healthy Choices

Use these conversations to begin building your child's emotional toolkit.

- Encourage healthy outlets: talking, journaling, movement, creativity, time in nature.
- Discuss how to recognise and manage stress before it builds.
- Help them think about the friendships and environments that support their wellbeing.
- Normalise asking for help as a sign of self-awareness, not weakness.

6. Lead by Example

Children learn as much from watching you as from listening to you.

- Demonstrate healthy ways of coping with stress and difficult emotions in your own life.
- Model open, honest communication — including when you do not have all the answers.
- Let your child see that seeking support is something adults do too.

7. Keep the Conversation Going

This is not a single conversation to complete and move on from. It is an ongoing dialogue that grows with your child.

- Return to the topic at natural moments — a news story, a film, something they mention from school.
- Make it clear they can bring questions or concerns to you at any time, without fear of judgement.
- Consider age-appropriate books, documentaries, or resources that open further conversation.
- If your child seems to be struggling, do not hesitate to seek support from a qualified professional.

A note from Jenora

The most powerful message your child can receive is a simple one: *you can come to me with anything*.

You do not need to have all the answers. Your willingness to stay in the conversation — honestly, calmly, and without judgement — is what they will remember.
