

Helping Hand

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Twenty Questions to Ask About Your Child's Behavioral Health

Children may be vulnerable to a variety of emotional or behavioral concerns. Unlike adults, they cannot readily identify problems or seek treatment. Parents and teachers may find it helpful to compare responses to the following questions. If you answer "yes" to any of the following, your child may benefit from assessment by a mental health practitioner. None of these questions alone imply a diagnosis of any behavioral disorder. These behaviors may simply mean that your child is working through a difficult transition and needs additional support or skill building.

Educational – *Does your child ...*

- Disrupt classes?
- Focus too hard on getting perfect grades?
- Seem bored frequently?
- Struggle to complete assignments or not turn them in?
- Cheat on exams or homework?
- Frequently express feeling overwhelmed by assignments?

Social – *Does your child ...*

- Frequently get into arguments?
- Bully others physically or online?
- Frequently become the target of bullies?
- Seem uninterested in other children?
- Struggle to fit in?
- Struggle to make decisions in response to peer pressure?
- Frequently drop out of team activities?
- Do things frequently that fall outside social norms?

Mood/emotions – *In comparison to other children, does your child ...*

- Become irritable or tearful more frequently?
- Have more difficulty calming down?

Safety – *Does your child ...*

- Cut or burn him- or herself?
- Talk about not wanting to live anymore?
- Run away or threaten to run away when upset?
- Have frequent temper tantrums?



If you or your child's teacher have concerns, consult the school student assistance program or counselor (and contact 911 immediately if your child is in immediate danger of harming self or others), or contact your employee assistance program or health insurance carrier to request a referral to a qualified mental health counselor. If you do not have insurance, community mental health agencies may also be sources of further help. Many counselors offer services based on ability to pay.

Teaching Responsibility Skills

Teaching young people responsibility is an important task. Children aren't born with the ability and must learn to be accountable and act independently in ways that show respect and compassion.

These skills are acquired through practice. Children are aware of, and understand more than we often give them credit for; they are good observers and learn about the world based on the things they witness. How we act as parents is the strongest lesson for children about how to behave.

Children can also learn responsibility through daily tasks or chores.

Give them tasks appropriate to their intellectual, emotional and physical abilities. When possible, let children be self-directive: This increases their sense of ownership for the job. If they don't finish, show how their actions affect others. Understanding the consequences of their behavior shows children their connection to a larger world; they are one part of a greater whole that can be influenced, good and bad, by their choices.

It's important for children for things to be fair; they find security in rules that have clear limits. Make a handful of sensible rules and explain the consequences for breaking them. Children need concrete examples of their role in being responsible.

Many situations come up every day which offer teachable moments. Ask open-ended questions about situations and how they would act. Let children be creative, and discuss their answers. Prompt them to ask questions; when we answer with thought and caring, they begin to understand us, and we them. Knowing each other, and having a positive relationship, is a key to instilling values of good character and responsibility.



Reducing the Dangers of Prescription Medications

Most parents are aware of the dangers of firearms, knives, but prescription and over-the-counter medications can be as deadly. Small children can mistake colorful pills for candy, while teens may experiment or be coerced by peers into sharing or selling medications. Teaching children how to safely manage medication is an important life skill. While toddlers and small children need to be protected from any access to medication, consider the following:

- Start with awareness. Always know what medications – and how much – you have in the home. Follow the instructions about completely using up certain medications and for safely discarding any medications you don't need. Do not keep old medication.
- Limit available quantities. It is much harder to overdose when only a small amount of medication is available.
 - Keep your local poison control number handy. Write it and other important numbers down in a central place. Teach your children how to call 911 and/or poison control.
 - Consider your child's vulnerabilities. If your child or a friend has a history of drug use, use extra caution around medication access.
 - Teach your child to be a good patient. Show children how you remember to take medication and how you make follow-up appointments for refills. Let them know you follow up with your prescriber when you have questions or concerns.
 - Be aware of the dangers of over-the-counter medication and vitamins. Your child may be in as much danger from taking too much over-the-counter medication as he or she is from taking too much prescription medication.
 - Don't give one family member pills prescribed for another family member, and always administer medication as prescribed.
 - Teach your child healthy attitudes about medication - Don't joke in front of them about abusing medication or using pills prescribed for a medical condition to numb emotional pain.

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1270 Rankin Dr., Suite F
Troy, Michigan 48083-2843
248-588-7733; 1-800-453-7733
www.PRPOnline.net

Editor: Julie Flaming
Contributors: Julie Rhea, Julie Flaming, Matthew Barnes
Graphic Designer: Lisa LaGrou
Publisher: Jane Adams

Please send suggestions or contributions to the editor at the above address or through your student assistance program.

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Help Your Child Cope With a Move

The best way to support your child when relocating is to think like your child. Think about what might be fun or feel helpful. This may help your child cope, and just might make the move easier for you.

Create an itinerary. Children respond favorably when they know what to expect. Together, map out a plan for the move. Allow your child to help pack so he or she feels like part of the action. Your child can reserve a box of special toys to bring in the car or plane.

Investigate new territory by researching your new town in advance. Together, search the internet for information and examine maps of the area. Once you've moved in, take time to explore before unpacking. Go on walks around the neighborhood, check out playgrounds, and help your child meet possible playmates.

Go on a scavenger hunt around your new home. Hide “treasures” for your child to find or send mail to the new house before you leave. That way, something special will be waiting upon arrival. Also, line up activities before you move. Whether it's soccer or dance lessons, any activity will provide an avenue for new adventures and friendships.

Children are affected by their parents' moods. While stress is inevitable, do your best to express excitement and curiosity. A positive attitude is guaranteed to rub off, especially on young children. Anticipate some sadness, but don't push your child into grief. Everyone has different emotions and transitions at different speeds. Moving is a lengthy adjustment, and the sooner you can involve your child in the process the better. Every once in a while, look at the situation from your child's perspective and don't forget that sense of adventure.



Parenting a Child with Autism: Tips for Managing Stress

Parenting an autistic child, who needs constant care and attention, can be overwhelming. Parents' expectations are formed prior to birth and change as the child grows. Children with autism often interact with the world and the people around them in unusual and unpredictable ways. How you interpret your child's behavior, based on your expectations, influences how you feel.

Learning about autism and creating a safe, structured environment is helpful for adapting to your child's needs. Many national organizations, and your family doctor, can point toward resources for creating behavior and safety plans.

The stress of parenting a child with autism can leave you feeling angry, anxious, isolated, and sad. For these reasons, taking care of yourself is of the highest importance. Consider the following tips:

- Learn to recognize and accept your feelings. You may feel stretched to the breaking point, angry with your child, or resentful toward family members who don't help as much as you'd like. It's normal to feel these ways sometimes. Share your feelings with family, friends or other people you trust. Find a counselor if you need to, or a support group of people who are dealing with the same issues. There is no shame asking for help.
- Celebrate your child's successes. It is easy to get bogged down in negativity, especially when your expectations for how the child “should be” are not realistic given his or her abilities. Watch for daily victories, no matter how small.
- Be flexible. Traditional ways for rearing a child often don't work for a child with autism. Don't take your child's behavior personally when something doesn't work, and try not to worry about what other people think; your child has his or her own unique needs. Going with the flow, and understanding something doesn't “have to be” a certain way is much less stressful.
- Stay in touch with friends and family. Getting out and participating in social activities keeps you feeling connected and lowers stress.
- Find time for exercise. People in stressful situations often neglect their health. Be active, eat right and see the doctor when needed.

Starter Science: First Explorations

Play activities can inspire children to explore and develop an interest in science. Beginning at a young age, we can teach them by using everyday objects and experiences.

Science is about observing the world around us and recording what we see. We use sight to navigate our environment and interpret what we encounter. Even though we have four other senses (taste, touch, smell and hearing), the information we use first comes primarily from sight. Often, we don't fully appreciate how much input our other senses give us. In this activity your child can experiment with using their senses to identify familiar objects and explore the home.

Cover your child's eyes with a blindfold and guide them through your home, introducing them to different objects. How does the furniture feel? What does that tell your child about what kind of room it is? Do the sounds or smells in the room give any clues? Go outside and explore the yard, too. How do different plants feel, smell or even sound?

Next, seat your child at a table. Place common things, like a toy, spoon, or book, on the table and see if your child can guess what they are. You can also test different foods, encouraging them to feel, smell and taste the various items.

Ask questions about what they find; have children describe what they come across. This is good practice for boosting verbal skills and may help them identify an object they are having trouble recognizing. Above all, have fun — you may even change roles and let your child be the guide.

Keys to Preventing Suicide

Sorting out when a child is simply seeking attention or genuinely at risk can seem like an overwhelming task. It takes courage to intervene, and knowing when — and how — to effectively help is also a concern. Young children and teens can be at risk for suicide, and for “parasuicidal” behaviors like cutting themselves. Children often have not developed skills to manage painful and scary emotions. They sometimes lack the understanding that death is final. They can also be very impulsive and act without consideration for consequences.

Children who attempt suicide may be depressed. Signs of depression include insomnia, lethargy, low moods, irritability, changes in educational performance, changes in behaviors toward other students, becoming withdrawn, and losing interest in favorite toys or activities. Other factors leading to suicide attempts may include drug use, impulse control issues, the suicide attempt of a friend, or grief. The most obvious sign is if a child says he or she does not want to live anymore. Take it seriously! Other signs of increased risk are a child who draws pictures of self-injury or death, gives away prized possessions, or writes a farewell note.

Take any threat seriously and contact 911 immediately if you believe danger is imminent. Contact a mental health professional immediately if a child makes a suicidal statement even if the child is safe under your supervision. Partner with the mental health professional to make a safety plan until the child can be seen, and follow up with any recommendations he or she makes to protect the child while treatment occurs. If your child repeatedly makes threats, work with his or her counselor to help your child develop other ways to handle painful emotions.

For teachers, know your school's safety policies and who is available for consultation if you believe a child is at risk.

For more information, contact: