

Break through and be heard



A parent's guide to opening up mental
health conversations with their child



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Use the left and right arrows to navigate.

A large circular image showing a young boy with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt, looking off to the side. The background is dark with bright, out-of-focus lights, suggesting a night scene or a city street. The image is framed by a light blue circular border.

**“I feel like I’m stuck in a bubble.
We’re not as close”**

Remember growing up?



All the ups and downs you experienced, the changes to your body, thoughts and emotions? It could be tough at times, couldn't it?

It can be stressful for parents too. When your child starts wanting a bit more independence, it can feel like you're living in separate bubbles.

And that can make it difficult to spot the signs of a mental health condition. No parent wants to think of their child struggling with their mental health. But nearly 20% of 7-16 year-olds have a mental health condition.* So it's important to know what to look out for and what to do if you think your child is struggling.



Danielle Panton
Clinical Case Manager
Children and Adolescent
Mental Health Nurse

This guide will help you break through those separate bubbles and be heard. You'll find practical information for parents, guardians and carers on opening up conversations around mental health. Showing you how to spot early warning signs and where to turn for help.

We hope it will support and reassure you that you and your child are not alone.



Harriet Finlayson
Clinical Case Manager
Children and Adolescent
Mental Health Nurse

*Source: NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People, 2022;
Children's Society (2008) The Good Childhood Inquiry

Children's mental health



Our children's mental health needs more attention, earlier.

70%

of those who have mental health problems, did not receive appropriate intervention at a sufficiently early age

50%

of all mental health problems start by age 14

18%

of 7 - 16 year-olds have a probable mental health condition



The pressures of growing up



Conforming to 'ideal' body images and lifestyles

Fitting in with new friendship groups

Self-confidence

Homework and exams

'Always on' social media

Puberty and hormonal changes

Continuing brain development

Changes at home like divorce, bereavement or moving house

Emotional growth

Developing sexual identity

No wonder children and young people often shut themselves away in their own bubbles. This can make it harder for parents to tell what's 'normal' for their child and what could be something more serious.

But help is at hand.



How to spot signs early



Is my child just growing up or should I be worried?

It's one of the most common questions we get on our Family Mental HealthLine, and for good reason. Spotting the signs of mental health conditions can be tricky. That's because some of the symptoms can be similar to the signs of growing up.

We're going to focus on anxiety and depression in this guide. But there are other mental health conditions that may have similar, or very different signs. Your child may experience a few, or more, of the symptoms we talk about here and they might change over time.

With all mental health conditions, there are two main things to look out for. First, is it interfering with my child's day-to-day life, things like going to school or clubs, socialising, eating or sleeping? Then, is the issue lasting a long time, we usually say more than a few weeks?

You'll find lots more information and advice later in this guide.

**"I'm worried
that I'm missing
things"**

76%

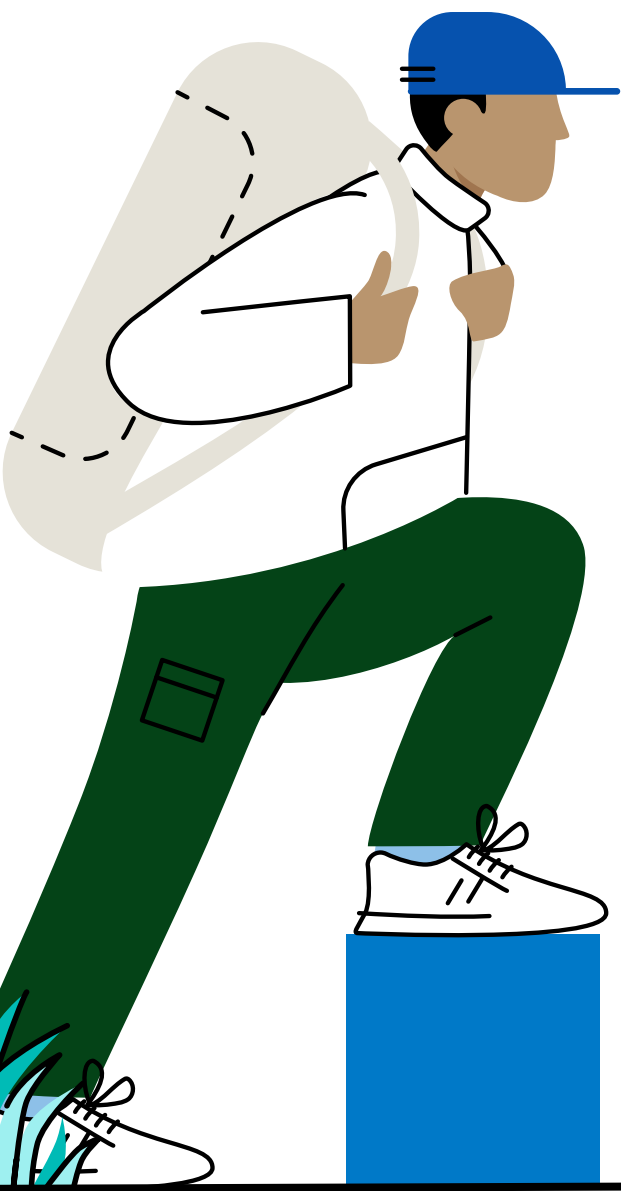
of parents we surveyed say
they wouldn't feel confident
they'd spot the signs of a
mental health condition*

*Research conducted by Censuswide with 3,004 UK parents
and 2,001 children/young people ages 8-18

Anxiety

What to look out for

We all feel anxious from time to time.
Often these worries go away by themselves.
But there are also different types of anxiety disorders that anyone, including young people, can develop. Each has its own unique symptoms, but general signs can include...



**Feeling
excessively
anxious
most days**

**Difficulty
controlling
these
feelings**

**Anxiety
interfering
with everyday
life**

Three common types

	Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) Feeling very worried about things most days. It affects how someone feels, thinks and goes about daily life	Social anxiety disorder A fear of social situations (more than shyness)	Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) Unwanted thoughts or images (obsessions) and behaviours that try and get rid of them (compulsions)
<p>How might my child feel?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Worried about everyday things ■ Uncontrollable worry ■ Restless or nervous ■ Seeks regular reassurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Very anxious about being around other people ■ Very self-conscious ■ Afraid people will judge them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Needing things to be done in a particular way ■ Concern about germs and dirt ■ Feeling like something terrible is going to happen ■ Fear they will hurt themselves, someone else or do something bad
<p>What are the physical signs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Feeling sick ■ Being out of breath ■ Heart palpitations ■ Sweaty palms ■ Tense muscles ■ Tiredness ■ Unexplained or worsening aches and pains ■ Frequent headaches 	When faced with social situations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Blushing ■ Sweating ■ Trembling ■ Feeling sick ■ Heart palpitations ■ Panic attacks 	The physical signs of OCD mostly relate to the compulsions parents might notice. You'll find these below.
<p>What behaviours might I notice?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Self-doubt and self-criticism ■ Seeking reassurance ■ Going to the toilet more often ■ Trouble sleeping well ■ Trouble concentrating ■ More argumentative or angry outbursts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Avoiding places where there'll be other people ■ Cancelling social activities ■ Mumbling when speaking ■ Not making eye contact ■ Worried about what others think ■ Finding it difficult to do things when others are watching 	There's not always a clear link between the compulsion you might see and the obsession that causes it. Some examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Frequent handwashing ■ Not treading on pavement cracks ■ Tapping or counting ■ Arranging or touching objects ■ Doing things in a particular order ■ Checking and re-checking things, like locks or switches ■ Hoarding or collecting items ■ Seeking reassurance more than usual



Want more info on anxiety? [Dr Michele McKenner](#) answers lots more questions about anxiety in young people in her JAAQ conversation.




Depression

What to look out for



Feeling low from time to time is part of growing up. But, if your child feels down or hopeless for longer periods of time, it's possible they may have depression.

Just remember that everyone will experience depression differently.

Depression A mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of low mood or sadness. It affects how someone feels, thinks and goes about daily life.	
 <p>How might my child feel?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sad a lot of the time or not enjoying any of the things they usually would ■ Guilt, shame or worthlessness ■ Numbed emotions ■ Low self-esteem or self-confidence ■ Feeling like life is too hard or painful ■ Thoughts of running away or escaping ■ Thoughts about harming themselves
 <p>What are the physical signs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aches and pains ■ Crying in situations where they wouldn't normally cry ■ Low energy and feeling tired ■ Appetite changes that can lead to gaining or losing weight ■ Frequent headaches ■ Restlessness or agitation
 <p>What behaviours might I notice?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Avoiding family and friends or cancelling plans ■ Withdrawing or isolating themselves ■ Difficulty remembering things ■ Poor concentration and finding it difficult to make decisions ■ Avoiding things they'd usually enjoy ■ Irritability ■ Trouble sleeping or sleeping more than usual



Want to know more about depression? There's lots more information and helpful advice about depression in children and young people from cognitive behavioural psychotherapist, [Carly Francis](#)

A problem heard can be a problem halved




As a parent, it can be difficult to know how to talk to your child about mental health, especially if you suspect they might be struggling.

Here we share some tips for **breaking through the bubble**, and having positive conversations about mental health.

59%

of parents we surveyed say they wouldn't feel confident talking to their child about mental health*



"I have to change and engage with a different way of speaking to her"

*Research conducted by Censuswide with 3,004 UK parents and 2,001 children/young people ages 8-18

Help your child feel HEARD



How are you?

Start a conversation with some icebreaker questions. But first, put your phone down and avoid distractions. It sounds obvious but it's easy to forget! Ask your child how they are, what's been the best part of their day, or what they found difficult? Try to keep things informal and relaxed. Children often find it easier to open up if they're not facing you directly, so try talking in the car or on a walk. Your child might find it easier to say how they feel by writing or texting it, or they might want to talk to another adult they trust.

Empathise

Explain that you're here for them. Remain calm and listen without judging. Think about putting yourself in their shoes, rather than becoming visibly upset if they tell you they're struggling with stress. Avoid using phrases like 'There's no need to worry', which can undermine your child's feelings. And try to avoid unhelpful comparisons such as 'Your older sibling never struggled with X'.

Acknowledge

When your child shares how they feel, acknowledge it with simple phrases such as 'I hear what you're saying'.

Their concerns may seem small to you, but the important thing is that they're big to them. Give little cues to show you're listening, like nodding and saying 'I see'. Allow time for silence and pauses. It's tempting to fill the gaps, but allow your child to talk and feel heard.

Reflect

As the conversation develops, play back what you've heard them say, so they know you've really been listening. Let your child know you're there for them and happy to talk, whenever and wherever they want. Ask follow-up questions, like how did they feel during a particular part of their day, or is there anything they wish had been different?

Direct

Direct the conversation towards the next steps. But avoid jumping too quickly to your own solutions. Ask your child about things they think they could 'do' to help themselves, or come up with some ideas together. Explain that help is available if they feel they need it, or if they want to talk to someone outside the family.

Our Bupa nurses answer your questions



Danielle Panton and **Harriet Finlayson** are trained mental health nurses, supporting families through the Bupa Family Mental HealthLine.

Here they answer some of the questions they often hear from parents.



Q

What's involved in your day-to-day role as a mental health nurse?

A

We speak to Bupa members and share ways to help manage their child's mental health symptoms. We also help them get the specialist treatment they need.

Q

What concerns do you hear most often from parents?

A

There's a huge range, but more recently we've spoken to parents a lot about concerns around body image; risk-taking behaviour; and how to have conversations about mental health with their children.

We also speak to many parents who are seeking advice about whether they're doing things 'right or wrong'. Sometimes some reassurance and gentle guidance can be all a parent needs!

Q

How can parents open up a conversation with their children about their feelings?

A

First try to build your own knowledge about your child's mental health. Doing some research online about different mental health conditions can really help.

Try to avoid making the conversation feel too serious. Speaking to your child while you're doing an activity can make the conversation feel more relaxed. Also, try talking when you're side-by-side rather than facing each other, like in the car or on a walk. If your child struggles to open up when speaking, you could always try a text message or written note.



What would your advice be for parents who are worried about getting further support for their child?

A

Start by trying to understand where your worry is coming from. Is it from not knowing enough about mental health? Have you experienced a negative response previously from mental health services? Are you worried about being judged?

We often remind parents that they should not feel solely responsible for supporting their child's mental health — there's no shame in asking for professional help, it's what we're here for!



If a parent thinks their child needs professional help, what steps should they take?

A

Speaking to your GP is the best starting point. This can be an NHS or private health GP if you have access to one.

They'll be able to give some initial support and advise you on the best next steps. If you've got Bupa health insurance, you can also call the Family Mental HealthLine and speak to a mental health nurse. We'll be able to give you advice over the phone about what to do next. You might also want to speak to your child's school. And look at some children's mental health charities to see if there's any support they can offer.



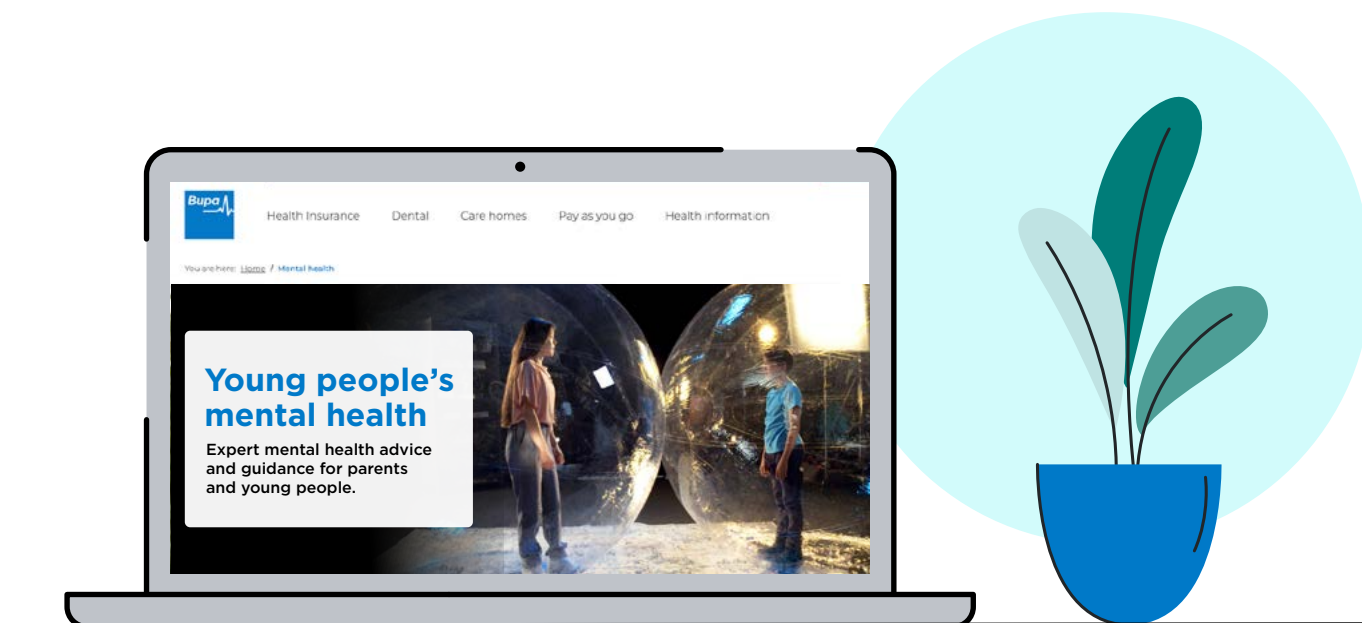
How can parents bring up the subject of therapy or professional help with their child?

A




If you've reached the point of getting professional help, hopefully you'll have had earlier chats with your child about their mental health. So it should be a natural next step for the conversation.

Reassure your child that getting professional help doesn't mean there's something 'wrong' with them. It just means that, as a parent, you're not an expert and there's only so much you can do to help. Explain when and where sessions will take place (face-to-face or online) and if you can, share a photo of the therapist. Explain how long sessions will take, how many they'll need to go to, and if you or someone else will go with them.

Bupa's support for families



On the Bupa website you can find professional advice on young people's mental health. There are also practical insights to help you have those breakthrough conversations with your child, and get the right help if they need it.

 JAAQ Q&As with clinical experts	<p>Bupa has partnered with the online mental health platform JAAQ (Just Ask A Question). Helping to get the conversation started about young people's mental health.</p>	 Articles and advice on a range of mental health topics	 Details of further Bupa support including Bupa Family Health Insurance
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Our children always come first. But it's important that parents are also heard. You may find it helpful talking to a friend, family member or someone who's experienced something similar.

Health insurance for the whole family



Whether it's the big things, the little ones, or the unexpected, being a parent can feel overwhelming at times. But with Bupa Family Health Insurance, you don't have to do it all on your own.



Family Mental HealthLine

Connects you with expert advisers for guidance and support



Anytime HealthLine

Unlimited health support from our nurses any time of the day or night



Digital GP

Lets anyone in the family talk to a doctor by video or phone, with appointments 24/7

Plus, when you pay for one of your children, we'll cover the others for free*.

We also offer a 10% discount for families.**

"I want him to feel like he can talk to me, and that I'm hearing him"

*Only pay for the eldest child, up to 20 years old. New Bupa By You customers only. Terms and conditions apply.

**When compared to buying individual policies for each family member.

Further support for families



JAAQ

Free access to conversations with leading experts, celebrities and real people sharing their own stories across 100 mental health topics.

Rethink Mental Illness.

A mental health charity in England providing information, local support groups and services.

SAMARITANS

A charity that provides support to anyone in emotional distress or struggling to cope.



A mental health charity in England and Wales.



A UK-wide service with local teams of nurses, therapists, psychologists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, support workers and social workers.

YOUNGmINDS

A UK charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

THE MIX

A support service for young people, providing teenagers and young adults with support on a range of mental health topics.



If you or your child are in an emergency, call 999.

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