



How Children Tell Their Troubles

Encouraging kids to share their troubles is a delicate interaction for most adults. One wrong word or look can cause a young person to clam up and say no more. It also requires adults to become aware of, and suspend, their usual ways of communicating with kids.

The techniques used by counsellors at Kids Help Line provide useful strategies for all adults.

Provide Space and Time

At the beginning of conversations, kids often use many pauses, "umms and ahhs" as they gather their thoughts. This leaves room for counsellors to offer encouraging responses and acknowledgements such as "yeah," "mmm" and "OK" to show they are listening. These neutral responses are non-judgemental and respectful of the young person's pace, leaving space and time for them to look for the words to describe what's happening to them.

It can take a long time for a young person to get to the point, and sometimes even longer for an adult to grasp the meaning and dimensions of a young person's troubles. When given the opportunity and time, children and young people are competent at communicating their troubles.

Listen Rather Than Talk

Listening for how a young person wants to be heard is a crucial skill and is helped by closely matching their pace and tone, their intensity or casualness, and by repeating some of the words they use.

This is a very different style to that usually used by adults in their conversations with young people. Adults frequently use advice, and control the pace – in other words, speaking rather than listening; telling the young person what to do; and speeding up the interaction by filling in the gaps and pauses.

Young people also have different ways of indicating the size of their problem or distress, for example "oh everything is wrong" to "I'm just a bit worried." As counsellors attempt to identify the severity of the problem, they do not directly agree or disagree with the child's assessment of their issue. Often adults respond with phrases such as "it can't be all that bad" or "don't worry, it will be fine" – effectively dismissing, minimising or trivialising the young person's problem. The counsellor's approach lets the young person's assessment stand for the moment, showing respect for their interpretation of the situation.

Help Young People Find Their Own Solutions

It is important to listen, not for the problem, but for how the young person wants to be helped or supported. The trouble (for example, being in strife at school) may be different to the reason for seeking help (for example, not knowing what to do or needing some advice). When they have heard why the young person is seeking help and what they want, the counsellor can proceed to focus on these areas.

Counsellors avoid giving advice directly, responding rather by suggesting possible courses of action. This is accomplished through statements that provide information ("there are many different ways of starting a conversation, what do you think would happen if you said..."). This offers the opportunity for the young person to begin their own problem-solving process instead of solving their troubles for them.



How Children Tell Their Troubles **continued...**

Kids Help Line's counselling techniques capture an important philosophy of the service: "we care, we listen" rather than "we can solve your problems" – giving the caller the chance to retain control of the definition and management of their troubles. Frequently, all the young person requires is an adult to show they care by simply listening and only speaking to encourage them to go on and tell their story.

For all of us, having someone listen with respect is often all that is needed to understand and clarify the problem, thereby opening an opportunity to solve it ourselves.

How Can You Help Kids Talk to You?

- Give them time and space to talk – allow silences.
- Use small encouraging responses to show you are listening – mmm, uhuh, ok etc.
- Talk at the same pace as the young person.
- Listen twice as much as you talk (two ears, one mouth).
- Beware of dismissive responses such as "it can't be that bad" or "don't worry, it'll be fine".
- Help the young person come up with their own solutions.
- Withhold the urge to judge, give advice or tell them what to do.

What Can You do to Improve Communication in Your Family?

- Spend time together in work, play and travel etc.
- Role model calm and respectful communication.
- Ask children about issues that affect their lives.
- Speak respectfully to young people – ask for their opinions.
- Learn about developmental changes and how this affects their view of the world.

- Be clear about family roles and check expectations.
- Have clear family rules that are understood and discussed within the family. Back up rules with consequences.
- When giving explanations, provide examples.
- Set aside time for regular family meetings where each person takes a turn and family members listen for feedback.
- When emotions prevent constructive communication, call time-out. Remember to consult with all and make another time to re-convene.

How can Employers and Organisations Encourage Better Communication within Families?

- Determine employee needs through formal and informal discussions such as surveys, focus groups and briefing.
- Role model good communication and respect in the workplace.
- Provide training to all employees on communication techniques.
- Implement and promote family-friendly policies by:
 1. Developing an organisational change policy
 2. Allowing flexible working arrangements
 3. Ensuring managers have the skills, tools, and incentives needed.
- Invite speakers into the workplace to talk about parenting and family concerns.
- Keep family-friendly issues on the business agenda to ensure sustained interest, awareness and accountability.

Extracted from Kids Help Line article - "How Children Tell Their Troubles"

Available at:

www.kidshelp.com.au/research/Newsletters/Jun_02/KHL_NewsletterJun02.pdf