

# Communicating with Kids

## A Resource Guide for Educators & Parents

In this guide, you will find specific questions and answers about communication. Answers are provided by a variety of experts from Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, Boys Town Common Sense Parenting program, and Boys Town Hotline.



# Communicating with Kids

## A Resource Guide for Educators & Parents

### Grades K -3

#### **Rather than "good" or "fine," how do you get kids to open up about their day?**

If you don't want a closed-ended answer ("Fine," "No," "Yes," "I don't know"), avoid asking closed-ended generalized questions about their day - especially ones like, "How was your day?" Instead, ask them to share stories, events and even a "wish list" about their day. Use questions like:

- "What was the funniest thing that happened today?"
- "Tell me what caused you the most anxiety today."

These types of questions will lead to follow-up questions that help reveal to you your child or students interactions, both good and bad. It is important to listen without judgment.

*Bridget Barnes, Director, Boys Town Common Sense Parenting*

#### **What tips would you give to teachers and parents to recognize stress and anxiety in children?**

A key is to know how the child normally behaves. A noticeable difference in a child's behavior may indicate there is a problem. Keep in mind every child is different and their responses to stress will be different. When children are stressed or anxious, their behavior may look different from how adults react to stress. Some children giggle when they feel uncomfortable, others are instantly angry at everything, and some children withdraw and isolate themselves.

*Bridget Barnes, Director, Boys Town Common Sense Parenting*

#### **Do you have any tips for teachers or parents with concerns about kids who may be struggling with talking about what's going on?**

When children are struggling to talk about their feelings, it is important not to press them to share. Start by planting seeds to build a strong relationship. Use active listening, be comfortable with silence, and do activities that allow children to express their feelings in other ways (e.g., artistic expression, role-play, journaling, and meditation exercises).

*Bridget Barnes, Director, Boys Town Common Sense Parenting*

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## A Resource Guide for Educators & Parents

### Grades 4-8

#### **Rather than "good" or "fine," how do you get kids to open up about their day?**

First of all, kids dislike being asked questions like, "Tell me about your day" or "How is your day going?" This is especially true if there's been a history of trouble at school. It kind of sets them up, knowing that people are looking for problems or trouble.

So instead of asking questions like that, I would encourage teachers or parents to share a bit about their day and some of the ups and downs. Then, let silence do its job, be attentive and listen, and see what the child comes up with. Most likely they'll be willing to share, too.

Also, timing is really important. Some kids might not be ready or willing to share during certain parts of the day. Teachers try to get to know your students and when they are most likely to be talkative and open. Parents, you know your child so just keep this in mind when trying to get your child to open up about their day.

*Julie Almquist, Manager, Boys Town Behavioral Health Clinic*

#### **What tips would you give to teachers and parents to recognize stress and anxiety in children?**

Be on the lookout for changes in the fundamentals of how a child usually behaves. One huge sign is focus, meaning a child seems more distracted than usual. Other signs to look for include:

- change in academic performance
- increase in irritability, anger or reactivity
- not completing tasks or assignments
- being withdrawn or tearful
- being lethargic and fatigued (likely from lack of sleep)

All these are sudden changes in behavior and performance that signal stress and anxiety might be a problem for a child. Once detected, you can talk to the child or the child's parents to help resolve or lessen what is troubling the student.

*Julie Almquist, Manager, Boys Town Behavioral Health Clinic*

# Communicating with Kids

## A Resource Guide for Teachers & Parents

### Grades 4-8

**Do you have any tips for teachers or parents with concerns about kids who may be struggling with talking about what's going on?**

Some tips include:

- Adults are often quick to jump in with answers, to try to solve problems, and to give advice to kids. But we farther faster if we can be patient, listen, and validate the child's feelings and let them do the talking. A good approach to building relationships is to let silence provide an opportunity or a platform for the child to express themselves. So, instead of jumping in to try to solve problems, give kids an opportunity to get to know you and come to trust you and your opinion.
- Another good way to build rapport is to discover and talk about common interests like music, sports, books or other subjects or activities you both might be interested in.
- It's important to be genuine and authentic. Sometimes we want to put on our adult hat (teacher, coach, parent, etc.) when really what kids want and need is somebody to be authentic with them. They are pretty good at spotting somebody who's not being genuine and that can really hinder your relationship.
- On a more subtle level, communicate availability. Either with language or just being physically present. This helps to send a message to the child that you are available.
- It is important to acknowledge when you might not be the right person for a child. Sometimes we try to hang in there because we want to make it work and we know we can help, but it just isn't working. As a parent it is okay to reach out for help and as a teacher there are times when you might just need to find someone who is a better fit to help.

*Julie Almquist, Manager, Boys Town Behavioral Health Clinic*

# Communicating with Kids

## A Resource Guide for Teachers & Parents

### Grades 9-12

#### **Rather than "good" or "fine," how do you get kids to open up about their day?**

Ask open-ended questions. If you ask a yes or no question, you are likely to get a grunt or if you are lucky, a simple "Yes" or "No" answer back. Get creative with your questions and have fun with it.

Some examples of open-ended questions are:

- What is the coolest thing you learned today?
- Tell me what the latest scoop is with school, tv, friend group, sport team, etc.

Model good communication skills by opening up about your day. Share something funny, bring up an interesting piece of current news or connect with your teen on a common interest. If you know little or nothing about the sports team or club your child or student participates in, educate yourself, ask questions about it and get excited with your child. Kids might start offering unsolicited conversations if you make this a habit.

Finally, timing is everything. A barrage of questions first thing in the morning or evening will likely be met with annoyance.

*Laura K, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor*

#### **What tips would you give to teachers and parents to recognize stress and anxiety in children?**

Even before the covid-19 pandemic, many students were faced with issues far beyond the classroom and academic pressures that could cause them great stress and anxiety. Some tell-tale signs a teen might be struggling can include:

- A teen begins isolating. Instead of interacting with others, a teen might withdraw, become quiet, and seem distracted.
- A teen begins turning in assignments late or not at all when in the past they have been well done and handed in on time.
- The teen's body language - e.g., reluctance to give eye-contact or a posture that appears tired and weak.
- Sometimes self-care and hygiene are neglected.
- Emotions are very near the surface as evidenced by crying easily, angering quickly, and over-reacting to situations.

Catching signs of distress as early as possible is a key to helping teens get back on the right path.

*Pat T, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor*

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## A Resource Guide for Teachers & Parents

### Grades 9-12

#### **Do you have any tips for teachers or parents with concerns about kids who may be struggling with talking about what's going on?**

- Set expectations for the teen regarding communication. Teach them to take responsibility to communicate circumstances affecting performance, mood, and behavior.
- Encourage a variety of means to communicate -- email, text, in person, on the phone, etc.
- Check with other adults (teachers, parents, coaches, aides, etc.) to give all a heads up and enlist a team approach.
- Don't develop exclusivity with a teen as you may be in over your head and you will not always be available in their time of need.
- Build an action plan and discuss it with the teen.
- Even if it seems that the situation has been resolved, continue to check back.
- Design lesson plans and develop learning experiences that draw teens together as much as possible with technology that is available - video calls, online tools, conference calls, and etc.
- Praise approximations. Empathize.

*Linda M., Boys Town National Hotline Supervisor*