



## WHILE YOU WAIT FOR SERVICES: TIPS FOR FAMILIES

Deciding to seek mental health services for your child is the first step toward helping them to feel better. It can be frustrating and discouraging when therapists are not available right away, but there are things you can do in the meantime. These strategies are not a replacement for therapy, but can be helpful to implement while you wait.

### Talking With Your Child About Their Mental Health

Many parents and caregivers feel unsure of how to talk about mental health with their children. Starting a conversation will let your child know that you care, that you support them, and that you are willing to have difficult conversations with them. Make sure that you have private, uninterrupted time when everyone's emotions are calm to begin the conversation.

- **Start the conversation:**

Use open-ended, "I" statements such as, "I've noticed that you are spending more time alone lately," or "I'm worried that you seem really upset."

- **Maintain open communication:**

Reflect back any emotions or experiences that they share with you without expressing judgment or disagreeing with what they say. If they describe a situation, saying things like, "that sounds really hard" or just rephrasing what they have told you can be helpful. This helps children and teens feel heard and understood.

- **Schedule daily check-ins:**

For older children and teens, an easy 1 to 10 rating can be a nice way for children to quickly communicate to parents how they are feeling. Ask what they need in that moment and offer some ideas (e.g., a hug, just to sit quietly together, to talk or walk, a fun distraction).

### Encourage Routine and Self-Care

Changes in appetite, sleep, and activity level are common in people experiencing mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression. Do what you can to help your child stick to a usual routine. Writing down the daily schedule and hanging it on a wall can help everyone to know the plan. It is equally important that caregivers take time for self-care so that you are able to support your child.

- **Healthy eating:**

Keep snacking and mealtimes at relatively consistent times.

- **Ensure enough sleep:**

Not getting enough sleep can lead to even more difficulties with mood and behavior. Try to ensure that your child is getting enough sleep. This can be difficult, but encouraging usual wake-up times and avoiding daytime sleep can actually help with maintaining better nighttime sleep.

- [Keeping a sleep log](#) may help you better understand how much sleep your child is getting.

- The American Academy of Sleep Medicine offers age-based tips on improving sleep for children and teens ([sleepeducation.org/sleep-faqs](https://sleepeducation.org/sleep-faqs)).

- It is best to have children and teens sleep in a quiet, dark room, and to keep distractions such as phones and tablets unavailable and in another room during sleep hours



- **Engage in positive and enjoyable activities:**

Creating and encouraging small doses of movement and activity a few times a day can really make a difference for your child.

- Think of them as activity ‘snacks’ – brief 10 minute periods of doing something.
- Create a “menu” of activity choices together with your child. Activities could include going for a walk, taking a pet outside, playing a game together, coloring, baking, building with toys, using playdough, listening to music with someone, or going on a bike or scooter.
- Write down when the activities will occur each day so that they become a part of the daily routine and do not get overlooked.

## Teach and Model Coping Skills

There are many strategies you can begin to use with your child or teen that are known to have positive effects on mental health. There are many free apps that can help guide your child: *Smiling Mind* (younger children), *Mindful Powers* (older children), *Insight Timer*, *Let’s Meditate*, *eQuoo*, *MindDoc*. Or, you can use these simple ideas to guide your child through these practices together. Practice these strategies every morning and night when your child is not having big emotions. The more they are practiced, the easier they will be to use when your child is feeling distressed.

- **Relaxation breathing:**

Personalize relaxation breathing for your child: their belly is a balloon to be filled and then deflated; breathing in a peaceful color and slowly breathing out the stressful color; breathing in and breathing out enough air to blow out 100 birthday candles; smell a cookie and blow to cool it off.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation:**

Ask your child to tightly squeeze their fists as if they were squeezing a lemon. Then, ask them to drop the lemons as they let all their muscles in their arms relax. Repeat this three times. Have your child close their eyes and think about all the muscles in their body, noticing if any of them feel tense. For each part of the body, imagine tightening the muscles and then letting them relax. For younger children, have them use their imaginations (e.g., squeezing lemons in their fists, biting on a jawbreaker, pretending they are a turtle and shrugging their shoulders).

- **Guided imagery:**

Think of a peaceful, relaxing scene with your child. Help them to go that place in their mind by guiding them to imagine what they can hear, see, smell, taste, and feel in that relaxing place. Spend 5 minutes focusing on the characteristics of that place while also slowing breathing.

## The Caregiver-Child Relationship

- **Special time:**

Special time is one way that caregivers can connect with their children in a positive way. Schedule 5 minutes for special time that will not be interrupted by distractions or other demands. Provide age-appropriate creative, constructive toys (e.g., blocks, coloring, dolls, modeling clay, crafts) that do not have rules or instructions. Follow the child’s ideas in play, as long as they are appropriate and safe.

- **Encourage desirable behavior:**

Be sure to “catch your child being good” by paying attention and giving praise when good behavior occurs, no matter how small - “thank you for helping me,” “I’m proud of you for staying calm.” By catching these small moments, you may begin to change how a child or teen feels about themselves.

**If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, contact the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) at 988, or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting “START” to 741-741.**