



# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

WORDS: EV PETGRAVE

IT'S A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION, BUT ONE THAT WE NEED TO START HAVING WITH OUR CHILDREN—AND OURSELVES.

Out of all the tough conversations parents must have with their children, one of the most difficult can be discussing their mental health. Black families have often shied away from discussing mental health issues and mental illness, choosing instead to pray them away or ignoring its existence. But as police brutality against Black youth becomes more common, it's becoming increasingly important to sit down with your child or teen and have regular mental health check-ins.

**As one of the most systematically oppressed groups in America, African Americans are 20% more likely to experience mental health disorders compared to non-Hispanic Whites, according to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. Yet we are less than twice as likely to receive antidepressant treatment.** Antidepressants may not always be the most effective solution for every person, but starting the mental health dialogue at home will teach your child to communicate their feelings openly and freely and reassure them that they don't have to suffer through feelings of hopelessness alone.

Simone Singh is a University of Florida alumna and has received her masters of science in mental health counseling. She shares with us how Black parents should go about discussing the intricacies of mental health with their child.

## 1. CREATE A SAFE AND NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

Black children, perhaps more than any other racial group, need to feel loved and protected before we send them out into the harsh world. It is imperative that they are aware they can turn to us when they have any questions or just need to talk. Our attitudes toward mental health illness definitely molds our children's perceptions, so strive to be as understanding and approachable as possible.

## 2. USE AGE-APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Mental health illnesses aren't something that most people easily understand, but you don't have to try to get your child to understand on an advanced clinical level. Find children's books or programs that explain complex topics in an easy-to-understand format.

## 3. BE HONEST WITH YOUR CHILD AND WITH YOURSELF

Don't try to act like you have it all figured out. If your child asks a question you don't have the answer to, let them know. You will save yourself stress and your child will see that you too aren't perfect. It's also a learning opportunity for the both of you.

## 4. PATIENCE IS KEY

While all parents must master the art of patience, raising a child with a mental illness brings forth unique challenges. If your child senses that you are becoming frustrated with them, it provides more reason for them to become frustrated with themselves, which can exacerbate any mental health issues. Take an adult time-out if you need to.

Mental health may be a hard conversation to have around the dinner table, but as we continue to discuss it and embrace the ones we love who suffer from mental illness, we all grow to become more understanding and considerate—which is exactly what your child needs.

*Ev Petgrave is a poet and writer currently living in Houston, Texas. Being a mom, minority, and techie, she enjoys writing about social issues affecting these groups.*