

Helping Kids Be Healthy Inside and Out

The healing power of conversation

by Rona Maynard

Ever since your child began to speak, the two of you have been talking about health. You've been a tireless advocate for broccoli, sunscreen and a good night's sleep. But chances are there's one topic that could use more attention.

When it comes to mental health, a communication gap divides Canadian parents from their kids.

More than half of Canadian parents never discuss their child's mental health with anyone, according to the 2012 RBC® Children's Mental Health Parents Poll¹—most often because they think it's not an issue. Of those who do talk about it, 51 per cent never raise the subject with their child. Yet parents overwhelmingly believe that if their child did have a problem, they'd be the first to know. They're very likely wrong.

Who would kids tell about a mental health concern? RBC asked the real experts: kids. In a companion poll of 115 children who visited the website of Kids Help Phone, a free and confidential counselling service for youth, friends topped the list of confidantes, with Mom a distant second. Twenty per cent of kids would not open up to anyone.

"Kids who suffer in silence can obsess over what are often solvable problems to the point of becoming dysfunctional," says Dr. Ian Manion, advisor to the RBC Children's Mental Health Project and Executive Director of the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health. "The potential consequences range from plunging marks and broken social ties to substance abuse, self-harm and suicide."



Dr. Ian Manion

You can do a lot to promote mental wellness in your child and to equip them with tools for better coping. With every day to day conversation about feelings, you show

that it's okay to talk about them. Here is Dr. Manion's advice:



- **Set a good example** If you're feeling tired and grumpy after work, admit it. You might tell your child that you'll be ready to play after a cup of tea. "Parents sometimes think they have to be role models of mastery," says Dr. Manion. "It's equally important to be a role model of coping when things get tough."
- **Talk to your child at his level** A three-year-old doesn't need to know that Cousin Joey has Asperger's syndrome. She does need to understand that Joey can't help his puzzling behaviour. One way for parents to put it: "I'm glad you asked me about Joey. He's different from you and me because his brain works differently."

Praise your child for bringing concerns to you

- **Encourage openness** Praise your child for bringing his concerns to you. Remind him that you're always ready for his questions. If you don't have the answer, the two of you can find it together.
- **Problem-solve with your child** Suppose she's in a funk because she didn't get the

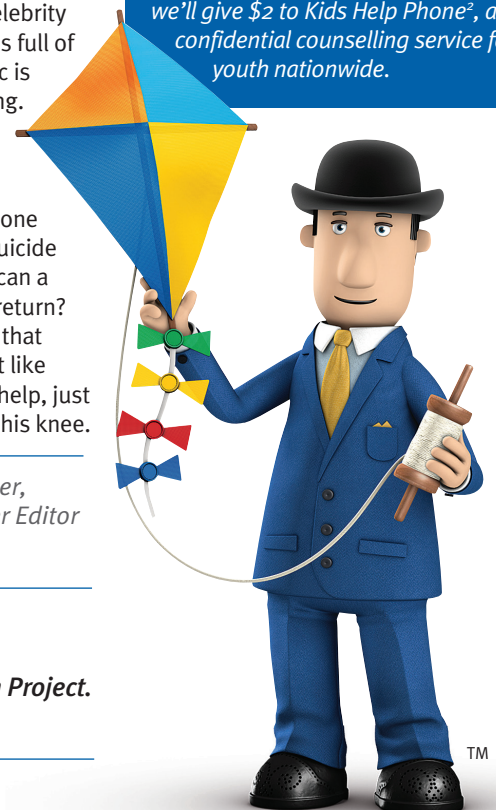
part she wanted in the school play. Let her tell you how crushed she feels. Point out that while disappointment is okay, beating herself up is not. Would she like to try out for the next play? Meanwhile, how can she use her strongest skills to feel successful now—perhaps in sports or music, or in some other contribution to her school community?

- **Watch for conversation starters** A TV character who's being bullied, a celebrity with an eating disorder...daily life is full of opportunities to show that no topic is off limits, even the most challenging. If your teen mentions that a local youth has died by suicide, that's your cue to express your sorrow and concern. Has your child or anyone he knows ever felt so desperate, suicide looked like the only option? What can a young person do if those feelings return? Make sure your child understands that emotional pain can be treated, just like physical pain. And you're there to help, just as you were when he first skinned his knee.

Rona Maynard is an author, speaker, mental health advocate and former Editor of *Chatelaine*.

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