How to talk to your child about learning differences and ADHD

Having open and honest conversations with your child is important. Use this discussion guide to talk with your child about learning and thinking differences.

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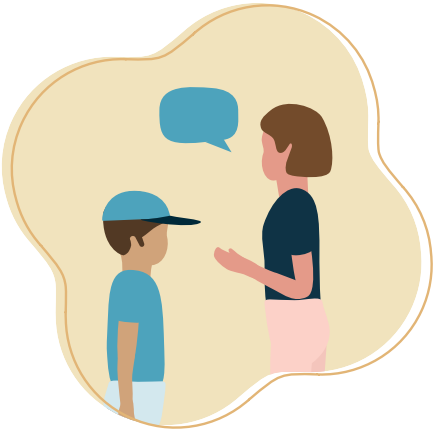

General tips

Starting a dialogue with your child about learning and thinking differences may be tricky. But the more you talk, the easier it'll be. Here are some tips to get started.

1. Look for a good time to talk.

Find a time when your child is calm and neither of you is in a hurry. For example, does your child tend to open up at the end of the day? Or is bedtime too late to focus on important conversations? Also, think about whether it'll help your child to know ahead of time or if advance notice will add to your child's worries.

2. Consider doing a kid-friendly activity while you talk.

Your child may have an easier time opening up to you while doing an activity, like going for a walk, drawing, working on a jigsaw puzzle, or playing a favorite video game. These kinds of activities can help ease tension while you're talking about an important topic.

Remember that you don't want your child to feel like they're in trouble when you have this talk. Sitting face-to-face can be stressful for some kids. Offer a relaxing side-by-side activity that can help your child focus on the conversation.

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3. Talk often about differences.

Some differences are easy to see, and some aren't. Talk often with your child about all kinds of differences, including learning and thinking differences. One goal is to help you and your child stay connected. Another goal is to build positive self-esteem and make the right messages "stick."

4. Prepare what you want to say.

Think about what you want to say ahead of time. Being prepared can help keep you steady if emotions run high. Try writing your ideas down, recording voice notes, or practicing with a friend or family member.

5. Try to keep things simple.

Adjust what you say based on how old your child is, how mature they are, and how open they are to talking about things in general. Using clinical terms or diagnoses can come later, if it feels right.

6. Don't say you're sorry.

Frame the conversation by talking about how everyone has strengths and challenges. Talk about how common learning and thinking differences are, and validate your child's concerns. But don't say you're sorry. This can reinforce negative ideas about these kinds of differences.

7. Be ready to talk about your own challenges.

It might help your child to hear you talk about something you've struggled with. Try to include an example of a time you figured out a helpful solution. Be open about your challenges, but also try to help your child feel optimistic about the future.

8. Be ready to listen.

Kids need to feel heard, especially when you're having tough conversations. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your child's concerns. Listening can lead to deeper conversations. It also encourages your child to confide in you.

Show you're listening by nodding, repeating back what you've heard, and asking questions. You can also validate your child's feelings by saying things like "I understand why you feel that way."

If you think your child may have a learning difference or ADHD

You've noticed your child is struggling with learning or behavior. What can you ask or say to your child? Use these tips.

Tips	What you can say
Jot it down. Before talking about differences for the first time, write down what you've noticed about your child. Jot down a few examples to mention during your talk.	"I've noticed you seem frustrated when you have to read. Can you tell me what is frustrating you?" "I've noticed you seem anxious when you work on math problems. Have you noticed this, too?" "I haven't seen you spend much time with friends recently. How are you feeling about your friends?"
Show empathy. If you're noticing that your child is struggling, your child probably notices it, too. Empathize and let your child know that everyone struggles with something.	"We all have some areas that are tricky for us. And that's OK. We all have strengths, too." "These kinds of challenges run in our family. For example, [your uncle, grandmother, etc.] has trouble with [what] and works around it by...."
Be your child's partner. It's OK to not have the answers right away. Be honest and tell your child that you'll find the answers together. Remind your child how much you care.	"Let's talk to your teacher about what's been happening at school. Maybe there are things each of us can do to help. How does that sound?" "I love you. We're going to work together to find strategies that help."

Get more tips on how to talk with your child about signs you're noticing.

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If your child was recently diagnosed

Talk openly with your child about a diagnosed learning difference or ADHD. Talking sends the message that there's nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about. It also shows your child that you care. These tips can help guide the conversation.

Tips	What you can say
Use the word "differences." Your child might worry about being "stupid." Talk instead about "differences." Let your child know that people can be really smart or even gifted and still need support to thrive.	"Everyone is different in some way." "Everyone's brain is wired differently. It's what makes us unique." "You are smart. We all benefit from support to be our best in school and life."
Talk about "disabilities" if your child asks about this word. Depending on your child's interest level, you may want to talk about how this can be a helpful word when seeking more support.	"A disability is a difference that can make it hard for a person to do important things like seeing or hearing or learning how to read." "For instance, some people have disabilities that make it hard to walk or stand. They may use a wheelchair to help them move around." "There are laws that protect the rights of people with disabilities. In school, this can mean things like giving kids with ADHD more time on tests or special reading instruction to kids with dyslexia."
Talk about how a diagnosis can help. Explain how a diagnosis can help you learn about supports that can help at school and at home.	"Your diagnosis gives us a really clear picture of what's going on." "This information can help us get you the right kind of support so you can make more progress."

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If your child was recently diagnosed (continued)

Tips	What you can say
Point out your child's strengths. Try to be specific. But don't overdo it. Kids know when you're not being honest.	"There's so much more to you than what you're struggling with. Your challenges don't define you. You have lots of things you're good at. One of your strengths is...."
Make clear that you know your child is trying. Your child might worry that people think they're lazy. Your child might be trying as hard as they can but still struggling.	"I know you're trying hard." "I notice all of the hard work you put in." "Your teachers and I can give you more support to help you make more progress."
Listen. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your child's questions and concerns.	"I'm glad you asked that question." "Good question. I don't have an answer for you right now, but I'll work on finding out more." "I hear you, and I love you." "I'm always here to listen if you want to talk."

Success stories

It can help your child to hear success stories about people who learn and think differently. Look for examples that will resonate with your child:

- Actors
- Musicians
- Athletes
- Business leaders
- Scientists
- Elected officials

Talking to your child's siblings

When one of your kids has a learning or thinking difference, it can be hard for their siblings to understand what's going on. Use these tips to help open up conversations.

Tips	What you can say
Be proactive. Start talking early on, even if your child hasn't been diagnosed yet. Help siblings feel informed and supported.	"I'd like to talk with you about some challenges your brother's been having." "Your sister needs extra support with a few things. I'd like to talk with you about that."
Ask questions. Find out what your child's siblings are curious about. This can be open-ended, or you can guide the conversation.	"Have you heard of ADHD?" "Do you know what an IEP is? It's short for Individualized Education Program. It's how students get the support they need at school."
Use the word "noticed." Open up the conversation by sharing what you've noticed. See if questions emerge from there.	"You may have noticed that your brother needs more help with his homework." "I noticed you seem upset when I spend a lot of time helping your sister with her math."
Validate feelings. Make sure your kids know it's OK to feel confused, concerned, or even jealous.	"It might seem like I'm more patient with your sibling about some things. I understand that feels really unfair."
Offer other points of view. Give specific examples to help kids see things from another perspective.	"Imagine if you were trying really hard to read, and it just wouldn't happen. What do you think that would feel like?"
Be honest if you don't have an answer. Emphasize that you'll all learn more together.	"I don't know the answer to that, but I'm always trying to learn more about how you and your sibling think and what you need. We're all still learning."
Listen. The most helpful thing you can do is listen to your child's questions and concerns.	"I'm glad you asked that question." "I'm always here to listen if you want to talk."

Learn more about how to talk with kids about sibling challenges.

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More resources

Ready to learn more about learning differences and ADHD? Explore these resources from Understood.org, a free, nonprofit resource vetted by experts and not associated with any pharmaceutical companies.

- Signs and symptoms
- Through My Eyes
  - Simulations that show what it feels like to have learning differences and ADHD
  - Discussion guides to help you talk with your partner or co-parent, pediatrician, and teachers
  - Interactive resources for kids
- Take N.O.T.E., Understood's step-by-step tool to help you spot signs of learning and thinking differences and talk to other people who can help
- More tips for talking to kids about learning and thinking differences
- Podcasts for parents:
  - In It focuses on the joys and frustrations of raising kids who learn and think differently.
  - The Opportunity Gap tailors advice for parents of kids of color.
  - Parenting Behavior with Dr. Andy Kahn offers bite-size tips for all kinds of parenting challenges.
  - Understood Explains: Evaluations for Special Education
  - Understood Explains: Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

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