



## Wellness Today *For Parents & Families*

### Warning Signs of Emotional Struggles

*Early recognition is key to overcoming challenges. Signs your child may be struggling emotionally include:*

- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Mood or behavior changes including appetite and sleep
- Withdrawing or isolating
- Taking excessive risks or behaving recklessly
- Repeated unexplained body aches and pains
- Anxiety interfering with activities
- Frequent anger, irritability, criticizing, or tantrums
- Change in academic performance
- Preoccupation with death or dying
- Talking about wanting to die or being a burden

### When to Get Help

*If your child is not responding to support being offered, not improving, or worsening, seek help by consulting with a medical or mental health professional. If having thoughts of suicide or feeling unable to keep self safe call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Room.*

### Teaching When Your Child was Mean to Someone

Understanding why children and teens misbehave aids in effectively intervening with mean behaviors. Children and teens misbehave for some of the following reasons:

- They were impulsive
- They lacked information or understanding of appropriate behavior for that situation
- They were angry, sad, excited, bored, or stressed.
- They did not think of others (empathy is developing)
- They wanted attention
- They were copying others
- They wanted independence
- They had an unmet need
- They wanted power and control
- They found the behavior effective

### Helping Your Child Learn

After recognizing the reason for your child's choice(s), help them recognize the problem with their behavior, develop empathy, and know how to move forward. Many children and teens can struggle to see other perspectives. Try the following in talking with your child.

### Describe the situation with "and."

Reduce defensiveness and increase the ability to look at the situation by using the word "and" rather than but (i.e., "He hurt your feelings but you hit him."). Share the facts of what occurred in a noncontroversial or insulting way.

Examples: "You wanted to play inside and your friend wanted to play outside. You two disagreed and you hit him." Or, "You wanted to go out and I wanted you to come home. You chose to stay out without permission."

**Develop empathy by explaining how the other person was affected or feeling.** As parents talk about feelings, children and teens increase their ability to imagine someone else's perspective. Describe how the choices made affected others involved.

Examples: "When you hit your friend he feels sad." Or, "When you don't come home like we discussed I feel worried, sad and angry."

### Brainstorm ways to make amends and make different choices in the future.

Teaching ways to move past mistakes and bad choices can help children and teens develop healthier self-esteem and life skills. If your child is resistant to considering ways to make amends and move forward, be patient. Some children and teens become overwhelmed in this process. If your child becomes overwhelmed help them calm down through taking deep breaths or counting to 10, and reminding them of their ability to make a positive impact and make kind choices. Then continue with trying to identify solutions. If they are unable to identify what to do, provide two options they can choose from.

## How to Get Help

If you or someone you know is struggling emotionally or behaviorally, support is available. Begin by talking with a medical doctor or a mental health professional.

Below are resources available in the community to help:

**Hope4Utah** provides resources for parents on talking with children and teens about suicide and mental health, as well as offering practical guidance for accessing help. [www.hope4utah.com](http://www.hope4utah.com)

**SafeUT**  app provides real-time crisis intervention through a phone call, chat, or submitting confidential tips to school administrators on bullying, threats, or violence.

**National Alliance on Mental Illness** (NAMI) offers information regarding mental health conditions and support groups for families. [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (English and Spanish) 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress. 1-800-273-8255

**Crisis Text Line** is the free, 24/7, confidential text message service for people in crisis. Text HOME to 7417414.

## Teaching Children Assertive Responses to Unkindness

### Handling Teasing

Regardless of age, everyone will be teased in life. Teach, that if needed, ask an adult for help in navigating the situation. Help your child learn to:

1. Decide if it is friendly or unfriendly teasing, unaware or intentional unkindness. If it is friendly teasing (the person is having fun with you) or unaware/unintentional unkind behaviors help your child learn ways to move forward, and speak up to the person if needed.
2. If it is unfriendly teasing (making fun of you) or intentional unkindness or bullying choose if you want to confront the person teasing. Getting help from an adult can be helpful.
3. Stay calm. Take a deep breath to stay calm, tell yourself "I'm calm and in control," or count to 10 inside your head.
4. Walk away. Do not insult or tease the person. Just keep walking.

### Teaching Children Responses to Unkind behaviors

Brainstorm with your child things to say to someone teasing them. Rehearse or role-play the response(s) together until they are more confident in applying it on their own. While one strategy will work well for one person it might not for another. Explore lots of options. Below are a few ideas of things to say:

- Question it. "Why would you say or do that?" "Why would you want to tell me I am stupid or ugly and hurt my feelings?"
- Send a strong "I Want" message. "I want you to leave me alone" or "I want you to stop teasing me."

The trick is to say the message firmly but not in an unkind way.

- Turn teasing into a compliment. "Hey, thanks. I appreciate that!" "That was really nice of you to notice." "Thanks for the compliment."
- Respond to teasing with "So what? "So?... Whatever." "So?...Who cares." "So?...And your point is?"
- Use manners. "Thanks." "Thank you for that comment." "I appreciate that." Say in a way that sounds sincere, and then keep going in the activity, change the conversation or walk away.
- Ignore the behaviors/comments. Walk away, glance at something else and laugh, look completely uninterested or pretend you did not hear it. This may work better if your child struggles with providing a verbal response. It tends to work best if they also have the option to leave the setting if needed.
- Express displeasure. "I feel mad when you do that or tease me." Or "I don't like it when you make fun of me in front of the other kids. It's not funny to me." "If you want us to continue being friends, stop teasing me." If this really is a friend who is causing such distress, and not an unsafe situation, encourage your child to voice their displeasure and concern.

*Disclaimer—The information in these articles are for general educational purposes only. It does not constitute and should not substitute for individual professional advice, psychotherapy, or the provision of psychological services.*

*This newsletter is produced by Hope4Utah, a nonprofit organization providing trainings, resources and supports to prevent, intervene, and respond to suicides and to improve mental health. Articles contributed by Jessica Williamson, LCSW, who specializes in mental health treatment of children, teens and adults at her a private practice in South Jordan, Utah.*