

Youth Voice Tip Sheet

Communication Between Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist & Youth

10 Tips to Improve the Conversation

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This Tip Sheet was developed to provide guidance for how child and adolescent psychiatrists can more effectively communicate and partner with young people.

1. **Learn how to talk to us, and get to know us:**

- Learn our names, and talk to us with interest and respect.
- Show us genuine concern, so we know that what we say really matters to you.
- Learn about our lives, and have a conversation with us as people.
- Look at us and not just our file, when you talk to us.
- Use words we understand, not jargon.
- Ask us questions, to help us become active during our meetings.
- Remember that we notice your tone and your reactions to us, not just what you say.

2. **Be youth-friendly, and learn about youth culture and other aspects of our culture:**

- Put things in your office like games and magazines to help us feel comfortable.
- Ask us about our interests, and show us you know something about what we like to do.
- Ask us how we would like to communicate with you.
- Learn about Facebook and other social media, and consider creating your own website.
- Learn about our religion, ethnicity, race, gender, and other parts of our culture.

3. **Listen to us, because we typically don't feel heard:**

- Understand that it takes time for us to trust, and we may not say too much at first.
- Be patient with us, and try to understand where we are coming from.
- Remember that we know what's going on in our lives better than anybody else, and we know ourselves best.
- Take what we say seriously, even if you don't agree.
- If you don't understand something we say, ask us to explain.
- Recognize that we won't always say what you want to hear.
- Don't be judgmental, because this will shut us down.
- Try not to make us feel rushed – spend time with us.

4. **Provide us information:**

- We have a right to information, and we believe that information is power.
- We can't make informed decisions if we don't understand what is going on with us.
- Explain our diagnosis, and how our condition can be treated.
- If you believe that medication will help us, explain this to us in plain language.
- Use drawings and pictures to show us how medication works.
- Give us written material that we can read, in the office and at home.
- Tell us about other treatments to consider – in place of, and in addition to, medication.

5. Understand that we are likely to be afraid, and we may get frustrated and angry:

- We have problems. Take the time to find out the best way to help us, because we are not all the same.
- We don't like having a mental health problem, and we don't like having to be a patient.
- We don't want to feel different from everyone else, and we don't want to be rejected because we are different.
- While we believe that you can help us, we'd rather not have to see you at all.
- We're afraid of what you will think of us.
- We're afraid you will believe our family and not us, when our stories are different.
- We worry about being sent straight to the hospital when we see you, or being placed in a residential facility away from our friends and family.
- If hospitalization is necessary, communicate clearly that it is not a punishment, it is not our fault, and you will not abandon us.

6. Understand our concerns about medication:

- Even if we need medication, we'd prefer not to have to take it.
- We're concerned about being over-medicated, and we're afraid of possible side effects.
- Taking medication is very personal, and we don't want the whole world to know our business.
- We need reassurance that taking medication doesn't mean that we're crazy.
- We also need to know that we are in charge of our bodies, not the medication.

7. Give us choices, and offer alternatives:

- We'll be more open to treatment if you let us know that there is more than one way to move ahead.
- Explain the various alternatives, with medications and with other treatments, and help us understand the pros and cons of each.
- You can tell us if you think a treatment is really important, but understand that we may or may not be ready and we have a right to refuse.
- Explain our legal rights to us, throughout treatment.
- Give us information about other respected providers, in case we want a second opinion.

8. Offer us hope:

- We need your encouragement and support.
- We need you to reassure us that things can get better.
- Tell us about others you've treated who have gotten better.
- Understand how important our friends are to us, and help us stay involved with them.
- Encourage us to seek out community supports.
- Encourage us to stay involved in our treatment and not give up hope.

9. Learn to deal effectively with our parents/caregivers and with us:

- Don't forget that you are our doctor, not our parent.
- Talk to our parents/caregivers, but maintain our confidentiality and let us know what you will be talking with them about.
- Be clear about the limits of our confidentiality, such as limitations due to concerns about our safety.
- Don't always believe the adult over us. It may just be that we have different opinions or perspectives.
- Try to bring us and our parents/caregivers closer together, when there is disagreement or conflict.
- Give our parents/caregivers information, and offer them hope.
- Inform them of resources in the community.

10. Treat us the way you would want your own child to be treated:

- Don't blame us for our problems.
- Remember that we are more than our diagnosis, and we are more than just a patient.
- Teach us coping skills.
- Help us manage our own lives, without lecturing or telling us what to do.
- Work with our therapist, the school, and others involved in our lives.
- We need you to be part of our team.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

www.aacap.org
www.activeminds.org
www.thebalancedmind.org
www.bringchange2mind.org
www.chadd.org www.friendshipscount.org
www.inspireusafoundation.com/reachout.com
www.lets.org
www.mha.org
www.MIKID.org
www.NAMI.org
www.ppal.net
www.youthmovenational.org

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