Parenting

Connecting with children at different ages: Part 2

Parenting works best when it matches the child's age and needs. Read the following tips to get ideas on setting appropriate limits for a child and talking to them about personality disorder when things aren't going so well.

Setting Appropriate Limits

Infants Saying "no" using a stern tone (without getting angry or yelling) can help an infant learn to refrain from engaging in dangerous, harmful or destructive behaviour. It is important that parents then follow through with their own safety behaviour and explanation. This will help lay the groundwork for future limit setting.

Pre-schoolers Saying "no" (and explaining your reasoning as to why) can help pre-school age children keep safe, assists them to learn to regulate their own emotions and behaviour and reinforces to them that their parent is a safe adult who can be trusted to care for them.

Primary school aged children Limits can be set by giving clear instructions of expectations, providing reasoning that can be applied to other situations and following up with logical consequences for positive and negative behaviour. Parents should engage in limit setting to protect children from physical harm in their exploration, and to show respect and care for themselves, their property and others in their social world.

Adolescents As adolescence is a time of rapid change, setting boundaries can help young people understand acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. By setting boundaries together, parents create a set of expectations or a 'contract' that can be used to avoid conflict. Setting boundaries helps adolescents gain independence, remain safe and make appropriate decisions.

Young adults Parents are encouraged to set boundaries with young adults using a calm, firm and collaborative tone. Setting appropriate boundaries in a supportive and collaborative way can help young adults learn independence and self-reliance.

Talking about Complex Mental Health

Parents don't need to explain personality disorder and complex mental health to an infant; however, it is important to be aware of how symptoms may influence behaviour, facial expressions and tone of voice, as these changes will be noticed by an infant. Take time to listen and watch an infant's way of communicating and find ways to connect with them to help them feel safe.

Pre-schoolers use their parent's faces, tone, and their increasing language skills to make sense of their experiences. It is important that parents communicate with a child using simple language to let them know that they are unwell and that it is not the child's fault or their worry, and encourage spending quality quiet time together.

An important first step when preparing to talk to a child about personality disorder is to reflect on the parent's symptoms, the behaviours their child sees and hears and how these may affect how a child feels. During conversations with children, parents should try to link their behaviours to how they are feeling in a way that is easy for the child to understand. Children at this age are very egocentric so it is important to remind them that they are not to blame for their parent being unwell and that their parent will be there for them if they have any questions or concerns.

Adolescents receive information from a number of different platforms. When talking to adolescents about personality disorder and complex mental health it is important that information shared is factual and helpful, and that they are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns. Parents may find it helpful to talk to adolescents about mental illness whilst doing something else (e.g., while going for a walk). It is important to remind adolescents that they are not to blame and to set them up with external support where appropriate.

Talking to young adults about personality disorder can be done honestly with clear and accurate information. Parents can talk about the impact it has on the parent and about how their mental health is separate from their role and feelings as a parent. Parents should check understanding and be prepared to answer any questions.

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