



Inclusion and Wellbeing from Kristy



Talking to children about challenges, disorders and diagnoses:

6 things to say (and what to avoid)

10% of young people are diagnosed with a physical disability and up to 20% with a mental health diagnosis during their childhood and adolescence.

There is a lack of research in this field (there is some related to the disclosure of medical diagnoses like cancer on children, and some which looks at the effects of discussing psychological diagnosis with *parents* - but little about what to say to children themselves) – but what is available, along with my anecdotal experience in working in this area - suggests to me that how we talk to children about challenges may have a significant effect on their functioning - both positively and negatively.

When people talk **helpfully** to children about challenges and disorders they can potentially assist them to better understand challenges in themselves and others, feel less blame and isolation, help them understand the need for adherence to treatment (when applicable), help them act in kind and compassionate ways towards others, reduce bullying/unkind behaviour and empower children to ask them for what they need.

When talking about challenges or diagnoses is done **unhelpfully**, children may experience more distress (both in the short and longer term) about their diagnosis, experience stigmatism and discrimination, feel isolated/alone or developing a “learned helplessness” (I can't do that) response in which they avoid helpful situations or behaviours.

Here are 6 ideas about talking helpfully to children about diagnoses:

1. Consider explaining diagnoses or disorders by explaining differences, strengths and challenges

For example, we might say something like (adapted for whether we are talking to the individual child or a class/group with a child in it):

We are all different. Everyone has parts or systems in their brains and bodies which work well (sometimes we might call these “strengths”). We all have parts or systems in our brains and bodies which don't work so well, and many people have some parts of systems of their brain and body which don't work very well at all. Sometimes we call these challenges. When people have the same kind of challenges for a long time, sometimes we call this group of challenges a disorder or a disability.

For example: Child/X's/Your body/brain is very good at (list a child's potential strengths) However the parts of Child Y's/your body/brain which help you (list some of the symptoms/key challenge the child has) don't work as well as some people's. This is a challenge for them/you and has been for a while now. Some people/sometimes we call these challenges a word called “Condition Z” (list a diagnosis if appropriate).

2. Explain to children that diagnoses and disorders are not their fault

For example, we might say something like:

Sometimes parts and systems of our brains and bodies don't work well from the time we are born – and some break down or stop working because of something which happens to us. Either way, it is no-one's fault. There is nothing you've/Child X has done which has made this happen.



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3. Let children know it's normal to feel sad, tired, angry, jealous and worried sometimes when dealing with challenges (and that we will listen)

For example, we might say something like:

*People who have challenges will sometimes feel **sad or angry** about the fact they have to manage them. Sometimes they feel **worried** about how they will cope in the future. Sometimes they feel **jealous** that other people don't have to manage their challenges. Sometimes they feel **embarrassed** to have different challenges than other people. It's normal to have these feelings. If you /see child X have/ing them, would you please tell me? I'd like to be there for you/them. (If in a group – As a group/class how can we care for each other when we see people feeling like this?)*

4. Reassure them they are not alone in having challenges

It's important to know there are lots of kids/young people who have disorders/challenges and you/child X is not alone. For example in every school of 100 kids, there will be X who have (state diagnosis if appropriate or say "your/Child X's challenge with XX). And for those kids who don't have those particular challenges, there will be lots of others who have other kinds of challenges - like not being able to understand people very well, having a hard time seeing, hearing, understanding ideas, running, using their body and managing pain.

5. Let them know there are things they (or others) can do to either manage, work around or even reduce their challenges

We know that a sense of hope for the future is essential for good mental and physical health – in both adults and children/young people. While we shouldn't make promises to children/young people about the future, we should still provide them with optimism and hope. There are many ways in which we can provide this. For example:

You should know that just because you/Child X have/has these challenges right now and they make life different for you/them in some way, doesn't mean life will always be exactly the same for you/them in the future as it is at the moment. Life often changes in ways we can't predict. Your/Child X's body or brain systems may change as you/they get older, there may be different ways to manage your challenges or you might find they bother you less when you are older.

6. (Empathically) Let them know there are positive things about having challenges

For example:

It can be helpful to remember that even when challenges seem mostly like hard work, there are sometimes some good things about having challenges. Can you think of anything you've learnt, any way you have changed or anything good which has happened for you because of the challenges you have?

REFERENCE: <https://www.calmkidcentral.com/>



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