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How to ask kids about their health

We all know the different feelings that come with being unwell. As adults, we can quickly diagnose ourselves with a cold, stomach ache or sore throat. We usually know when we need to curl up with a paracetamol and a hot drink, or when we need to call the doctor. But working out whether our children are unwell can be very difficult.

Avoid leading questions

If a child complains of [stomach pains](#) or seems generally unwell, it's easy for a loving parent's mind to race to the worst-case scenario. But when questioning our children, it's important not to ask leading questions, where the child may sense what we expect the answer to be.

"We know we have to ask specific questions sometimes to find out what's wrong," agrees Dr Sophie Niedermaier-Patramani, Paediatrician and founder at [Little Tummy](#). "But it's important not to ask leading questions. For example, try not to say *but it didn't hurt in the morning, right?* Instead, simply ask when they first noticed a pain."

Keep it simple

When you're trying to build a complete picture about what's wrong with a child, try asking questions that can be answered simply and specifically. "For example, rather than ask them how long they've had a pain, ask them did they wake up with it?" explains Niedermaier-Patramani. "Can they point to the place where it hurts? When did they last go to the toilet?"

Keeping the information simple can help a child to explain their symptoms more clearly.

Join the dots

As well as keeping questions straightforward, if you suspect your child hasn't been feeling well, it may be useful to ask them general questions about their day. This way you can help to build a picture of how they've been feeling.

"Try asking how their day was, what different lessons were like, how they felt at lunchtime," suggests Niedermaier-Patramani. "This will help you to put the pieces together."

Observe their behaviour

While you can find out some information from speaking with our children, more can perhaps be gained by looking at them. If a child is engaged and able to play, it is unlikely that they are seriously ill. Are they making more trips to the toilet than usual? Are they able to eat and drink as normal? All of these questions will help you to quickly work out the severity of a health problem.

"Try to watch them to see if they are able to walk around and play normally? Are they sitting down a lot? Holding their stomach?" says Niedermaier-Patramani.

Keep them comfortable

When children are unwell, they may well feel quite anxious, especially if they pick up on any parental [anxiety](#). So do what you can to keep them as comfortable as possible. "Perhaps speak to them in a favourite corner where they like to sit," suggests Niedermaier-Patramani. "Or give them their favourite cuddly toy to hold. Creating a safe environment will help your child to open up."

Show understanding

When children are in pain they can feel very frightened, which may make them reluctant to speak. Put them at ease by showing understanding and patience. "Speak about their feelings and tell them that it's OK to feel frightened and to cry. Showing them that you understand can really help them feel at ease," says Niedermaier-Patramani.

Keep it short-term

You also may wish to talk to your child about health when they're not ill - to encourage them to adopt healthy habits such as regular [teeth-cleaning](#) and eating their [vegetables](#). When talking on these topics, parents sometimes explain that without keeping healthy in this way, children may become unwell in future years, or may lose their teeth. However, focusing on short-term goals is far more likely to encourage your child to comply.

"Children can't imagine very far into the future," agrees Niedermaier-Patramani. "So rather than tell them *eat your greens so you'll be healthy*, try making it more fun in the moment. Perhaps tell them that someone they look up to always eats their vegetables - a friend or a favourite teacher.

"When brushing teeth, make it fun. Have a song you enjoy while you brush - encouraging them in that way will yield better results."

It can be tricky to talk to children about their health, but addressing the topic without leading questions and keeping the conversation straightforward will help you to discover more about how your child is feeling.

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