How you can talk to your toddler to safeguard their well-being when they grow into a teenager

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As parents, we all hope our teens will be healthy and happy.

Our new research shows one way to help is to have positive conversations with children about everyday events as soon as they start to

talk.

Most teens experience a dip in their well-being. This adolescent malaise is not new. Over a century ago, child psychologist G. Stanley Hall wrote of the "reflectiveness" in adolescence that "often leads to self-criticism and consciousness that may be morbid."

But this pattern has intensified in recent years all around the world, including in New Zealand, exacerbated by the pandemic.

For some teens, this dip in happiness becomes a precipitous drop. Serious mental health problems can emerge for the first time in adolescence.

Led by clinical psychologist Claire Mitchell, our research shows that parents can act earlier in their children's lives to prevent this dip from becoming a dramatic drop-off in well-being.

Talking together from toddlerhood

Our research is based on a longitudinal study of adolescents whose mothers had received special coaching when their children were toddlers in "elaborative reminiscing"—rich and validating conversations about past events—grew up to tell more coherent stories about turning points in their lives. These adolescents also reported fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than adolescents whose mothers had simply conversed with their toddlers as usual.

The study investigated the life stories and well-being of 93 of the 115 adolescents whose mothers had originally participated in a randomized controlled trial 14 years earlier, when the adolescents were toddlers (1.5 years old). See my book [Tell Me a Story: Sharing Stories to Enrich Your Child's Life] for more details on the original study.

Over the following year (to age 2.5 years), researchers coached one group of mothers to converse with their children about everyday memories in a detailed and affirmative way. A control group of mothers simply talked to their toddlers as they normally would. At age 15, adolescents narrated turning points from their lives that we coded for coherence. They also reported on their well-being and personality traits.

The adolescents whose mothers had participated in the earlier coaching sessions told narratives about life's turning points (such as parental divorce or cyber-bullying) with more insight into how the experience had shaped them as people. These insights are a type of eudaimonic well-being—contentment achieved through the ability to live a meaningful life.

Adolescents in the coaching group also reported better hedonic well-being in the form of lower levels of depressive and anxious symptoms. These findings remained strong even after controlling for adolescents' personality traits, an established contributor to their well-being.

Our findings suggest brief coaching sessions with parents early in children's lives can have enduring benefits, both for the way adolescents process and talk about difficult life events and for their well-being.

An earlier finding from this same study showed mothers in the coaching group continued to have more elaborative reminiscing conversations with their children at age 11, the cusp of adolescence. The conversation techniques that we taught parents of toddlers are enjoyable and easy to use, which may be why parents kept using them as their children grew older.

How to talk about the past with toddlers

It's not easy to talk with a toddler. Here are the tips we taught parents in

our study.

1. Select events your toddler finds interesting

The best events are those your child brings up spontaneously. For example, a toddler might say "baa baa" when you're driving past a farm, referring to a farm visit the previous week.

2. Draw your toddler in with what, where, who, when questions

Each question, such as "what did you see at the farm?" can add a bit more detail. It's good to pause after a question to give your child time to respond: "Baa baa."

3. Respond warmly and enthusiastically to your toddler

Praise your child's responses: "Little baby lamb. Clever girl!" And follow up with related questions: "What did you do with the lambs?"

4. If your toddler doesn't respond

To keep the conversation going, rephrase your question with new information, for example: "What did you give to the lambs?" After a pause, you can ask: "Did you give them a bottle?"

5. Most of all, keep it fun

End the conversation when your toddler loses interest. As your child gets older, you can adapt these same techniques to talk about more significant

topics.

By practicing this technique early, parents and their young children develop healthy interactions from the beginning and start sharing stories and memories to protect their teenagers' future well-being. As my collaborator Claire Mitchell says: "As a parent of a toddler myself, I can confirm that these elaborative reminiscing techniques are enjoyable and easy to learn. Our study helps pave the way for future work with parents of young children to promote healthy interactions from the beginning that could have enduring benefits."

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