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ULTIMATE GUIDE ON HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR CHILD'S DEEPEST STRUGGLES WITH ANXIETY OR OCD

AT



**KIDS WITH ANXIETY
& OCD ARE OFTEN**

*Embarrassed and
uncomfortable to talk
about their true struggles.*

Getting Kids to Open Up

THE KEY TO HELPING KIDS WITH ANXIETY AND OCD IS KNOWING WHAT DRIVES THEIR STRUGGLES.

Do you Dig Deep Enough?

Natasha Daniels, LCSW Child Therapist

You can't help a child with anxiety or OCD if you don't understand their DEEPEST struggles. Knowing their core fears way beneath the surface is crucial. So even if you have a talker, you may not be getting to the depths you need to go.

So how do you discover their deepest struggles? Asking may not be that simple. Kids may feel embarrassed, closed off or too guarded. Luckily there are some verbal judo tricks that you can do to make your job a little easier.

Every week as an Anxiety & OCD therapist I talk to dozens of children who are going through major struggles. At first some kids aren't too forthcoming. I get shrugs. I get empty stares. Basically, I don't get much.

But, slowly many of these kids open up. They open up because I ask strategic questions. Questions that are meant to normalize their struggles, reduce even the smallest amount of perceived judgement and open up the conversation for further dialogue.

ARE YOU READY TO DIG IN?

Getting kids to open up is all about how you ask the questions.



I outline 15 questions to probe deeper and get more meaningful responses. I will use specific examples, but you can replace these examples for your specific situation.

IS YOUR CHILD SHOWING FEAR AROUND SOMETHING? ASK THEM THIS.

For this we will use the example of a child who is afraid of going to bed in their own room.

1. What's the worst part about going to bed in your room?

I purposely don't ask "Why don't you like going to bed in your room." When we ask kids "Why" questions it can inadvertently put them on the defensive. For sensitive kids the tone can feel condemning. When we say "what's the worst part of..." we are already accepting that it is hard and we are diving deeper. This can help minimize or even circumvent the denial phase and we jump right into discovering what's going on.

But don't stop there. Most kids will initially give you either a throw away answer like "I'm not tired!" Or they'll give you a surface answer like "It's dark" that requires further digging.

So dig. Go deep.

2. What's the worst part about your room being dark?

“Something can be in the dark!”

3. What does your anxiety say is in the dark?

Here I have purposely not said “What do you think is in the dark?” When we separate anxiety from our child they are much more likely to reveal their fears. If you get some resistance you can say...

4. I know you realize there is nothing in the dark, but sometimes anxiety doesn't make any sense. So even if we know something isn't scary, our anxiety doesn't. What does your anxiety think is in the dark?

When we explain to our children that it is okay if their fears don't make sense, they are much more likely to share them with us.

You can replace this conversation about the dark with anything your child is showing anxiety around. The quicker we get to their core fear – the sooner we'll be able to offer them skills to crush that fear.

You always want to dig and go way, way down the rabbit hole.



**SEPARATE YOUR
CHILD FROM THEIR
FEARS**

When your child names their anxiety or OCD it helps them to separate who they are from what they fear.

IS YOUR CHILD REFUSING TO DO SOMETHING? ASK THEM THIS.



For this we will use the example of a child who is refusing to go to school.

5. What's the worst part about going to school?

You will see that this is one of my favorite ways to word questions! You will get throw away answers such as "it's boring!" Or surface answers like "It's so hard!"

Get your shovel out. Dig deeper.

6. I know it's boring (or hard), but what's the worst part about it?

If you start to get some small answers pull at the thread and keep pulling at it until it is all the way out. If you aren't getting anywhere, try a new approach.

7. If you could skip any part of your day at school which part would it be?

Pay attention. There is meaning in what they picked. Was it lunch? What's the worst part about lunch? Was it gym? What's the worst part about gym? Get in that hole and climb all the way down!



WHEN YOU ARE HITTING
A WALL, CHANGE YOUR
QUESTION.
Be creative with your
questions.

Still Not Getting Answers?

UGGHH. KIDS CAN
BE SO TIGHT LIPPED!

Then Ask This...

8. If I had magic fairy dust and could change anything to improve the situation, what would you want me to change?

Answers to this question reveal a lot. Even if they answer sarcastically, there is truth behind sarcasm. That's where you will want to dig next.

Sometimes kids are going to get tired of your digging. Remember this is a marathon not a sprint. You don't have to get to the end of the rabbit hole in one conversation. Give your child space to breathe and revisit the topic on a different day. That can really pay off.

This example can be used for any behavior. Just replace school with whatever your child is avoiding and dig in!

DIVING DEEP INTO YOUR CHILD'S OCD



In these examples I am going to assume that your child is already aware that they have OCD and understand what it is. I recommend parents name OCD, so in my questions replace “OCD” with the name you and your child have picked.

IS YOUR CHILD EXHIBITING STRANGE BEHAVIOR? ASK THEM THIS.

For this we will use the example of a child who is tapping things three times.

9. I noticed that you've been tapping things three times lately, what is OCD telling you?

Notice I didn't ask the child IF it was OCD. I am not giving them an opportunity to quickly deny that it is OCD. OCD loves to hide and doesn't like to be identified. If we give our child the opportunity to say it is or isn't OCD, most kids will say it isn't. If it isn't OCD, kids will often correct you and offer up a rational explanation for their behavior.

Many kids will go into denial mode, even with the question carefully worded.

“OCD isn't telling me anything.”

Instead of arguing with the child at this point, I am going to move into normalizing the behavior and separate the OCD from them.

10. I know OCD makes people do lots of things that don't make sense. That is super common. It can be embarrassing. You might realize what OCD is telling you doesn't make sense, but the urge to still do it will be really strong. What is OCD lying to you about?

When we phrase the last sentence that way, kids are more likely to open up. They aren't doing the behavior, OCD is doing it to them.

Just like the other questions, we want to dig and dig until we get to the core fear behind the compulsion.

"OCD makes me feel like doing it."

11. That can be annoying for you. I'm sorry OCD bothers you. I know it must be hard to resist. If you didn't do the tapping what would happen?

In this question I am sympathizing before I move back into question mode. I am letting them know that they are not a failure for doing compulsions and that I get that it is a hard urge to resist. Then on with the digging!



LET YOUR CHILD KNOW
THAT OCD THOUGHTS
DON'T MAKE SENSE AND
THAT'S OKAY.

Helping your child realize that OCD is irrational and not a reflection of their intelligence can help them open up.

FINDING YOUR CHILD'S OCD THEMES



Based on the child's response I will hone in on the child's core OCD theme for this compulsion.

“I do it when I think you guys might die.” (Magical Thinking)

“I do it to even out my other hand.” (Symmetry OCD)

“I do it when I said a bad word in my head.” (Moral OCD)

As you can see, the same compulsion can be due to many vastly different types of OCD issues. That is why it is so important to dig all the way to the bottom and get to the core fear or reason behind the compulsion. Treatment will be different depending on the core fear/reason.



BE OBSERVANT TO YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIORS AND DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK.

Don't walk on eggshells and avoid talking about OCD. If you see new compulsions. Try and talk about it.

Is Your Child Avoiding Objects?

Then Ask Them This.

For this we will use the example of a child who refuses to touch the TV remote.

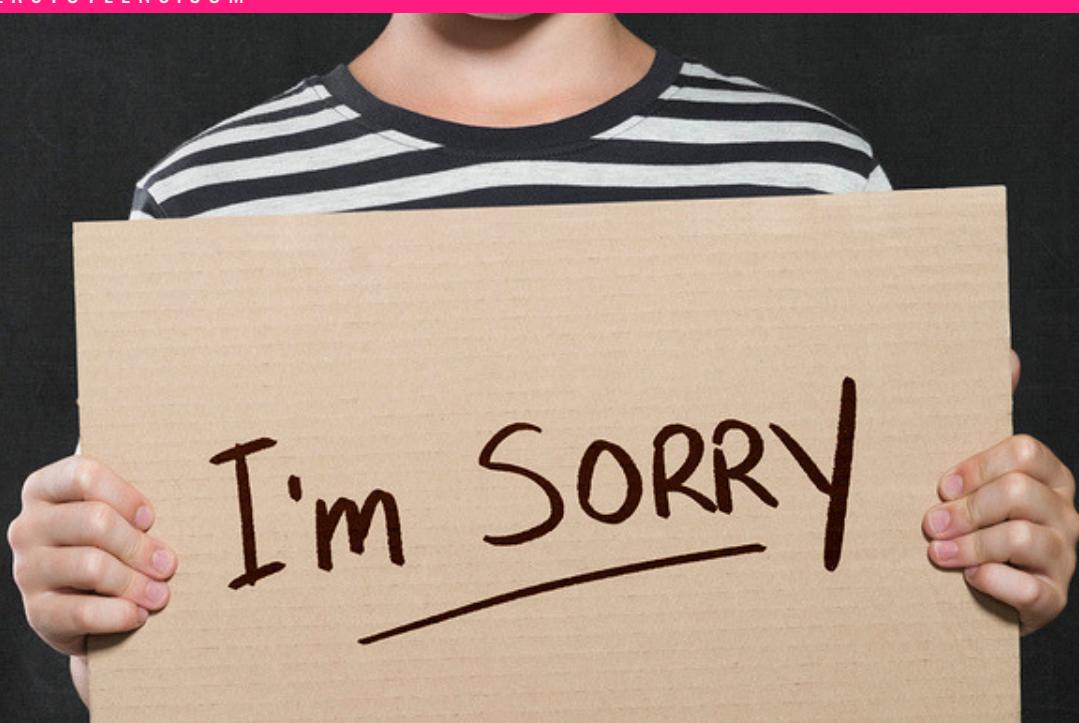
12. I noticed that lately you haven't been touching the remote. You've been asking us to change the channel for you. What is OCD telling you about the remote?

Many kids might not answer the first question, but it opens up the dialogue.

"I'll touch the remote. I'm not avoiding it."

13. Sometimes OCD will make us avoid things even when intellectually we know it doesn't make sense. That's not you, that's your OCD. The more we don't let OCD go undercover, the more power you'll have to defeat it. What does OCD tell you will happen if you touch the remote?

I didn't argue with them and give them examples of when they didn't touch the remote. I continued on with my support and questions. I went back into normalizing the behavior to lower the child's guard and separate them from their OCD. The last sentence separates them even further by saying "what does OCD tell you" and not what do you think is wrong with the remote.



IS YOUR CHILD EXHIBITING REPETITIVE BEHAVIOR? ASK THEM THIS.

For this we will use the example of a child who is repeatedly saying “I’m sorry” or “excuse me” out of context of what is going on.

14. I notice that you’ll often said “I’m sorry” or “excuse me” for no reason. What is your OCD telling you?

Again, I am moving right into labeling OCD and avoiding the step where they have to admit it is their OCD. This can help kids talk about it quicker. If it isn’t OCD, trust me – kids will be sure to correct you and tell you why they are doing it. Even if it is OCD, you might hear many smokescreen answers before you get to the core reason.

“I don’t say ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘excuse me’ often.”

15. You do and it’s okay. It doesn’t bother me, but the more we don’t talk about OCD, the more power it has. OCD loves to stay undercover, so when we don’t call out OCD, it gets stronger. I’m on your team and I want to help you crush OCD. We can do this by openly talking about your OCD and the latest things it is doing to you. So right before you say “I’m sorry” what OCD thoughts are you having?



You are Planting Seeds.

BE PATIENT.
PROGRESS CAN
TAKE TIME.

It is Important to Remember...

Getting kids to open up about these difficult struggles can be a challenge. Be patient. Stick with it. Don't give up. Getting a child to feel comfortable talking about anxiety or OCD can take time.

When you ask your child questions in these ways, you are stacking the deck in your favor and making it more likely that they'll eventually communicate their struggles.

Do you want more support?

Join my private Facebook for parents raising kids with anxiety or OCD

You can find us at:

[www.facebook.com/](https://www.facebook.com/Groups/ATparentinganxiouskids)

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