

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH WHAT EVERY CHILD NEEDS FOR GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

It is easy for parents to identify their child's physical needs: lots of good food, warm clothes when it's cold, bedtime at a reasonable hour. However, a child's mental and emotional needs may not be as obvious. Good mental health allows your youngster to think clearly, to develop socially and to learn new skills. Additionally, suitable playmates, encouraging words from adults and guidelines for behavior are all important for helping your child develop self-confidence, high self-esteem, and a healthy emotional outlook on life.

Your child's physical and mental health are both important.

Basics for a child's good physical health:

- Nutritious food
- Adequate shelter and sleep
- Exercise
- Immunizations
- Healthy living environment

Basics for a child's good mental health:

- Unconditional love from family
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem
- The opportunity to play with other children
- Encouraging teachers and supportive caretakers
- Safe and secure surroundings
- Appropriate guidance and discipline

Give Your Child Unconditional Love

Love, security and acceptance should be at the heart of family life. Your child needs to know that your love does not depend on his or her accomplishments. Mistakes and/or defeats should be expected and accepted. Confidence grows in a home that is full of unconditional love and affection.

Nurture Your Child's Confidence and Self-Esteem

- **Praise Your Child.** Encouraging your child's first steps or his or her ability to learn a new game helps your child develop a desire to explore and learn about his or her surroundings. Allow your child to explore and play in a safe area where they cannot get hurt. Assure your child by smiling and talking to him or her often. Be an active participant in your child's activities. Your attention helps build his or her self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Set Realistic Goals.** Young children need realistic goals that match their

ambitions with their abilities. With your help, older children can choose activities that test their abilities and increase their self-confidence.

- **Be Honest.** Do not hide *your* failures from your children. It is important for youngsters to know that we all make mistakes. It can be very re-assuring to know that Mom and Dad are not perfect.
- **Avoid Sarcastic Remarks.** If your child loses a game or fails a test, try to find out how he or she feels about the situation. Your youngster may be discouraged and need a pep talk. Later, when your child is ready, talk about a new way to play the game or study.
- **Encourage your child.** Not only to strive to do his or her best, but also to enjoy the process. Trying new activities teaches children about teamwork, self-esteem and new skills.

Make Time For Play!

- **Encourage Your Child to Play.** To a child, play is just fun; however, playtime is as important to your child's development as food and good care. Playtime helps your child be creative, learn problem-solving skills and learn self-control. Good, hard play, which includes running and yelling, is not only fun, but helps your child to be physically and mentally healthy.
- **Children Need Playmates.** Sometimes it is important for your child to feel like "one of the gang." By playing with friends, your child discovers his or her strengths and weaknesses and develops a sense of belonging and how to get along with other children. If there are no children in your neighborhood, you might find a good children's program through neighbors, local community centers, schools, or your local parks and recreation department.
- **Parents can be Great Playmates.** Join in the fun! Playing Monopoly or coloring with your child gives you a great opportunity to share ideas and spend time together in a relaxed setting.
- **Play for Fun.** Winning is not as important as being involved and enjoying the activity. One of the most important questions to ask your child is "Did you have fun?" not "Did you win?" In our goal-oriented society, we often acknowledge only success and winning. This attitude can be discouraging and frustrating to children who are learning and experimenting with new activities. It's more important for children to participate and enjoy themselves.
- **TV use should be monitored.** Try not to use TV as a "baby-sitter" on a regular basis. Be selective in choosing television shows for your child. Some shows can be educational as well as entertaining.

School Should Be Fun!

If your child is about to start school, "playing school" can be a positive way to give him or her a glimpse of school life. Try to enroll your child in a good pre-school, Head Start, or similar community program that provides an opportunity to be with other kids and make new friends. Your child should learn academic basics as well as how to make decisions and cope with problems. Teachers should encourage individual development and help children become competent, healthy adults.

Provide Appropriate Guidance And Instructive Discipline

Your guidance and discipline should be fair and consistent.

- **Appropriate guidance.** Children need the opportunity to explore and develop new skills and independence. At the same time, children need to learn that certain behaviors are unacceptable and that they are responsible for the consequences of their actions. As members of a family, children need to learn the rules of the family unit. They will take these social skills and rules of conduct to school and eventually to the workplace.
- **Discipline and punishment.** Physical punishment may lead to resentment and more disobedience. It is extremely important for parents to learn and develop disciplinary skills, other than spanking or hitting.

Suggestions On Guidance And Discipline:

- **Be firm, but kind and realistic with your expectations.** Your child's development depends on your love and encouragement.
- **Set a good example.** You cannot expect self-control and self-discipline from your child if *you* do not practice this behavior.
- **Criticize the behavior, not the child.** It is best to say, "That was a bad thing you did," rather than "You are a bad boy or girl."
- **Avoid nagging, threats and bribery.** Your child will learn to ignore nagging, and threats and bribes are seldom effective. Give your child the reasons "why" you are disciplining him or her and what the potential consequences of his or her actions might be.
- **Talk about your feelings with your child.** We all lose our temper from time to time. If you do "blow your top," it is important to talk about what happened and why you are angry. *Apologize* if you were wrong!

REMEMBER, THE GOAL IS NOT TO CONTROL YOUR CHILD, BUT FOR YOUR CHILD TO LEARN SELF-CONTROL!

Provide A Safe And Secure Home.

It's okay for children to feel afraid sometimes. Everyone is afraid of something at some point in their life. Fear and anxiety grow out of experiences that we do not understand. If your child has fears that will not go away and affect his or her behavior, the first step is to find out what is frightening your child. Be loving, patient and reassuring, not critical. Remember: the fear may be very real to the child.

Signs Of Fear

Nervous mannerisms, shyness, withdrawal and aggressive behavior may be signs of childhood fears. A change in a child's normal eating and sleeping patterns may also signal an unhealthy fear. Children who "play sick" or feel anxious regularly may have some problems that need attention.

Fear of school can occur following a stressful event such as moving to a new neighborhood or changing schools. Children may not want to go to school after a period of being at home because of an illness or having increased contact with Mom or

Dad during a summer vacation or a holiday break.

When To Seek Help

Parents are usually the first to notice if their child has problems with emotions or behavior. Your observations, and those of teachers and other caregivers may lead you to seek help for your child. If you suspect a problem, consult your pediatrician or contact a mental health professional.

Warning Signs Of A Child's Mental Or Emotional Disorder

The following signs may indicate the need for a professional evaluation:

- Decline in school performance
- Regular worry or anxiety
- Repeated refusal to go to school or take part in normal children's activities
- Hyperactivity or fidgeting
- Persistent nightmares
- Persistent disobedience or aggression
- Frequent temper tantrums
- Depression, sadness and irritability

Where To Seek Help

Information and referrals regarding the types of services that are available for children may be obtained from:

- Mental health organizations, hotlines and libraries
- Professionals such as the child's pediatrician or school counselor
- Other families in the community
- Family network organizations
- Community-based psychiatric care
- Crisis outreach teams
- Education or special education services
- Family resource centers and support groups
- Health services
- Protection and advocacy groups and organizations
- Self-help and support groups

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