



CHILDRENS MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS



Promoting children's mental health

Children's Mental Health Matters

Just as you can help prevent a child from catching a cold or breaking a bone, you can help prevent a child from having mental health problems. We know what it takes to keep a child physically healthy—nutritious food, exercise, immunizations - but the basics for good mental health aren't always as clear. The first “basic” is to know that children's mental health matters. We need to treat a child's mental health just like we do their physical health, by giving it thought and attention and, when needed, professional help.

Consequences of Mental Illness May Be Prevented

Although there can be a genetic or biological component to mental illness, and many children live in unsafe environments that put them “at-risk” of developing mental health problems, the consequences of mental illness may often be prevented through early intervention. At the very least, it is possible to delay mental illness and/or lessen symptoms. The best way to promote children's mental health is to build up their strengths, help to “protect” them from risks and give them tools to succeed in life.

Mental Health Promotion

Promoting a child's mental health means helping a child feel secure, relate well with others and foster their growth at home and at school. We do this by helping to build a child's confidence and competence - the foundation of strong self-esteem. This can be achieved by providing a child with a safe and secure home; warmth and love; respect; caring and trusting relationships with family, friends, and adults in the community; opportunities to talk about experiences and feelings; time to play, learn, and succeed; encouragement and praise; and consistent and fair expectations with clear consequences for misbehavior.

For more information, contact Mental Health America at

Know the signs

If there is concern that a child may be experiencing a mental health problem, it is important for adults to seek help from a doctor or mental health professional. Just like with physical illness, treating mental health problems early may help to prevent a more serious illness from developing in the future. Consider consulting a professional if a child you know:

- ☒ Feels very sad, hopeless or irritable
- ☒ Feels overly anxious or worried
- ☒ Is scared and fearful; has frequent nightmares
- ☒ Is excessively angry
- ☒ Uses alcohol or drugs
- ☒ Avoids people; wants to be alone all of the time
- ☒ Hears voices or sees things that aren't there
- ☒ Can't concentrate, sit still, or focus attention
- ☒ Needs to wash, clean things, or perform certain rituals many times a day
- ☒ Talks about suicide or death
- ☒ Hurts other people or animals; or damages property
- ☒ Has major changes in eating or sleeping habits
- ☒ Loses interest in friends or things usually enjoyed
- ☒ Falls behind in school or earns lower grades

What Parents Can Do

Care for your children's mental health just as you do for their physical health.

Pay attention to warning signs, and if you're concerned there might be a problem seek professional help.

Let your children know that everyone experiences pain, fear, sadness, worry, and anger and that these emotions are a normal part of life, encourage them to talk about their concerns and to express their emotions.

Be a role model—talk about your own feelings, apologize, don't express anger with violence, and use active problem-solving skills.

Encourage your children's talents and skills, while also accepting their limitations.

Celebrate your children's accomplishments.

Give your children opportunities to learn and grow, including being involved in their school and community and with other caring adults and friends.

Think of "discipline" as a form of teaching, rather than as physical punishment; set clear expectations and be consistent and fair with consequences for misbehavior; make sure to acknowledge both positive and negative behaviors.

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What Teachers Can Do

Think about mental health as an important component of a child being "ready to learn;" if a child is experiencing mental health problems, he or she will likely have trouble focusing in school.

Know the warning signs of mental illness and take note of these in your students and seek consultation from the school mental health professional when you have concerns; psychological and/or educational testing may be necessary.

Use the mental health professional(s) at your school as resources for: preventive interventions with students, including social skills training; education for teachers and students on mental health, crisis counseling for teachers and students following a traumatic event, and classroom management skills training for teachers.

Allow your students to discuss troubling events at school or in the community; encourage students to verbally describe their emotions.

What Doctors Can Do

Recognize that mental health is part of a child's overall health.

Be informed about mental health issues in children and know the warning signs of mental illness.

Become familiar with mental health screening tools. Use these when a "red flag" is raised or routinely screen for illness, asking both children and parents about a child's emotions and behaviors—especially substance use, depression symptoms, school performance, and talk of suicide.

Be familiar with the most effective pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic treatment options.

Make referrals for mental health care when appropriate and follow-up with parents after a referral is made.

For more information, contact Mental Health America at

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Help is Available

Mental disorders in children are treatable. Early identification, diagnosis and treatment help children reach their full potential and improve the family dynamic.

Children's mental health matters! To learn more, talk to a doctor, mental health professional or visit one of the websites below.

Mental Health America	800-969-6MHA	www.mentalhealthamerica.net
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry		www.aacap.org
American Psychiatric Association		www.psych.org
American Psychological Association		www.apa.org
Center for Parent Information and Resources		www.parentcenterhub.org
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health		www.ffcmh.org
Kids Mental Health Information Portal		www.kidsmentalhealth.org

