

What Every Child Needs for Good Mental Health

It is easy for parents to identify their child's physical needs: nutritious 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 children to think clearly, develop socially and learn new skills. Additionally, good friends and encouraging words from adults are all important for helping children develop self-confidence, high self-esteem, and a healthy emotional outlook on life.

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

Give children unconditional love.

Love, security and acceptance should be at the heart of family life. Children need 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 children's confidence and self-esteem.

- **Praise Them** - Your attention helps build their self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Set Realistic Goals** - Young children need realistic goals that match their ambitions with their abilities. Older children can choose activities that test their abilities and increase their confidence.
- **Be Honest** - Do not hide your failures from your children. It is important for them to know that we all make mistakes. It can be very reassuring to know that adults are not perfect.
- **Avoid Sarcastic Remarks** - If a child loses a game or fails a test, find out how he or she feels about the situation. Children may get discouraged and need a pep talk.
- **Encourage children** - To not only strive to do their best, but also to enjoy the process. Trying new activities teaches children about teamwork, self-esteem and new skills.

Encourage Children to Play. To children, play is just fun. However, playtime is as important to their development as food and good care. Playtime helps children be creative, learn problem-solving skills and self-control. Good, hardy play, is not only fun, but helps children to be physically and mentally healthy.

Children Need Playmates. Sometimes it is important for children to have time with their peers. By playing with others, children discover their strengths and weaknesses, develop a sense of belonging, and learn how to get along with others.

Parents Can be Great Playmates. Join the fun! Playing Monopoly or coloring with a 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 children is "Did you have fun?" not "Did you win?". In our society, we often acknowledge only success and winning. This attitude can be discouraging 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 children. Some shows can be educational as well as entertaining.

School should be fun! Starting school is a big event for children. “Playing school” can be a positive way to give them a glimpse of school life. Try to enroll them in a pre-school, Head Start, or similar community program which provides an opportunity to be with other kids and make new friends.

Provide appropriate guidance and instructive discipline. 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. 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.

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 children have fears that will not go away and affect his or her behavior, the first step is to find out what is frightening them. Be loving, patient and reassuring, not critical.

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

Warning Signs. The following signs may indicate the need for professional assistance or evaluation:

- Decline in school performance
- Poor grades despite strong efforts
- 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 or 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
- Other 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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