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# CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

PROMOTING SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING



C H I L D R E N ' S H O M E S O C I E T Y O F C A L I F O R N I A

Positive and nurturing relationships are important for children. Early Childhood Mental Health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of young children.

Children with positive mental health feel better about themselves, can manage their feelings, problem solve, are prepared to learn, and can have satisfying relationships with others.



Sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting helps children experience social and emotional well-being and positive mental health development. Family stress can put children at greater risk for mental health concerns and developmental problems. Parents that use tools and strategies to manage stress, provide emotional support, and identify problems early, can help a child achieve appropriate social, emotional, and mental health milestones. Early childhood development professionals can also help identify, prevent, and address childhood mental health difficulties.

As a child grows, supportive relationships with parents and caregivers provide the child with the resilience needed to face new challenges. Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in the development of positive childhood mental health.

#### WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO PROMOTE POSITIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH

How young children think, feel, and act is determined by both physical and mental health. Through interactions with sensitive, caring adults, young children learn the critical skills of cooperation, coping with frustration, and conflict resolution. Parents can:

- Nurture your child's mental health by helping him feel loved and protected. Children have an easier time learning to manage their feelings when they feel understood, nurtured, and secure.
  - Praise and encourage your child's efforts, accomplishments, and positive behavior.
  - Set reasonable limits on inappropriate behavior.
  - Learn how to understand and manage your own anger and emotions. Children learn how to handle difficult feelings from what they see and hear you do.
- Create a stable and predictable environment. Consistent daily routines help your child know what to expect and to feel secure.
- Young children need help from adults to help manage their feelings. Comfort your child when she feels scared, angry, or hurt. Talk about feelings and show your child how to understand and manage their emotions.
- Spend time having fun, laughing, and enjoying your child. Creating a positive, happy environment helps your child feel valued.
- Have age-appropriate expectations for your child's development and behavior.
- Show your child healthy ways to manage conflict.
- Learn how to manage and reduce your own stress through exercise, relaxation, support from family and friends, and other healthy lifestyle habits. Parents' emotional health and level of stress can affect their interactions and relationships with their young children. Seek help from a mental health professional if your own level of stress feels overwhelming.



**Social and emotional health is important for children to feel secure and confident, resolve conflicts, be prepared to learn, and form good relationships.**



Learn to identify early signs of possible emotional or mental health issues. Ask for help from your pediatrician or a childhood mental health professional if you are concerned about any of the following:

- Long, intense, and frequent tantrums
- Sleep problems
- Feeding problems
- Failure to thrive: child is not growing or developing at an expected rate
- Aggressive or defiant behaviors that happen frequently
- Impulsive and hyperactive behaviors that occur regularly
- Fussiness that occurs most of the time
- Child is unusually quiet or very uninterested in other people
- Child seems sad most of the time
- Child clings to the parent and almost never wants to leave the parent
- Child seems fearful and afraid most of the time
- Child takes a lot of unsafe risks, frequently putting herself in danger



**Sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting helps children have social and emotional well-being and positive mental health.**

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATION

If you and/or your pediatrician have concerns about your child's emotional development or mental health, getting an evaluation by a childhood mental health professional is a good next step.

An assessment or evaluation will be most accurate if it includes:

- Having parents stay with their child during the assessment, if possible. Young children, especially under age three, may be upset by a separation and not show their usual behaviors during the evaluation.
- An evaluator who is familiar to the child. Children will feel more comfortable and behave more naturally if the evaluator is not a stranger or someone they are meeting for the first time.
- Observations of parent-child interactions and child behavior in different environments, in addition to formal standardized tests. It is important to see how children and parents behave and interact in different contexts such as at home, school, and the evaluator's office. This will give the most accurate picture of the child and family.

**A developmental assessment helps parents better understand their child's strengths and areas of development that could use extra support.**

## TO LEARN MORE

### BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

**THE FEELINGS BOOK**  
Todd Parr

**LOTS OF FEELINGS**  
Shelly Rotner

**THE WAY I FEEL**  
Janan Cain

### ORGANIZATIONS

**CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH-AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION**  
[www.apa.org/pi/families/children-mental-health](http://www.apa.org/pi/families/children-mental-health)

**ZERO TO THREE**  
[www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

