

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.

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 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 - Encouraging children's first steps or their ability to learn a new game helps them develop a desire to explore and learn about their surroundings. Allow children to explore and play in a safe area where they cannot get

hurt. Assure them by smiling and talking to them often. Be an active participant in their activities. 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. 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 them to know that we all make mistakes. It can be very re-assuring 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. Later, when they are ready, talk and offer assurance.
- **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.

Make time for play!

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 learn self-control. Good, hardy play, which includes running and yelling, 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. Consider finding a good children's program through neighbors, local community centers, schools, or your local park and recreation department.

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 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 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. Children can also learn academic basics as well as how to make decisions and cope with problems.

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.

As members of a family, children need to learn the rules of the family unit. Offer guidance and discipline that is fair and consistent. They will take these social skills and rules of conduct to school and eventually to the workplace.

Suggestions on Guidance and Discipline

- Be firm, but kind and realistic with your expectations. Children's development depends on your love and encouragement.
- Set a good example. You cannot expect self-control and self-discipline from a 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. Children will learn to ignore nagging, and threats and bribes are seldom effective. Give children the reasons "why" you are disciplining them and what the potential consequences of their actions might be.

Talk about your feelings. 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 the child, but for him or her 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 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. 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 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, changing schools, or after a bad incident at school.

Children may not want to go to school after a period of being at home because of an illness.

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

Learn more about specific mental health conditions and children

- ADHD - attentional problems
- Autism - developmental delay
- Bipolar Disorder - depression and high energy
- Conduct Disorder - behavioral problems
- Depression - sadness
- Grief - coping with loss
- Psychosis - hearing voices or seeing things that aren't there
- Suicide - thoughts of death/dying
- Substance use - drinking and using drugs

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

Other Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

www.aacap.org

Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

Phone: 703-684-7710

www.ffcmh.org

Family Support America

Phone: 312-338-0900

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities

Phone 800-695-0285

www.nichcy.org

National Association of School Psychologists

Phone 301-657-0270

www.naspweb.org