

# 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. This can be achieved by providing a child with a safe home; warmth and love; respect; caring and trusting relationships; opportunities to talk about feelings; time to play and learn; and consistent and fair expectations with clear consequences for misbehavior.

## 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



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## What Parents Can Do

- Care for your children’s mental health just as you do for their physical health.
- Pay attention to warning signs. If you’re concerned there might be a problem seek help.
- Let your children know that everyone experiences 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.
- Encourage your children’s talents and skills, while also accepting their limitations.
- Give your children opportunities to learn and grow.
- 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.

## 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.
- Use the mental health professional(s) at your school as resources for preventive interventions with students; education for teachers and students on mental health.
- 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 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 non-pharmacologic treatment options.
- Make referrals for mental health care when appropriate and follow-up with parents after a referral is made.

## 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. To learn more, talk to a doctor, mental health professional or visit one of the websites below.

Mental Health America - [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry- [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

Center for Parents and Information Resources - [www.parentcenterhub.org](http://www.parentcenterhub.org)

Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health - [www.ffcmh.org](http://www.ffcmh.org)

Kids Mental Health Information Portal - [www.kidsmentalhealth.org](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.org)

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