

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.

What You Need to Know...



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:

- Poor grades despite strong efforts
- Regular worry or anxiety

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at 414.276.3122, or via Email: info@mhawisconsin.org.

Mental Health America is a United Way of Greater Milwaukee Agency.



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