

Healthy Mental & Emotional Development in Children and Teens

Just as you prepare your children for the start of a new school year, it's also important to think about their emotional health. Their emotional health is tied into their mental health and as their parent, you are the person they look to for support and guidance. It is important to engage with them on a regular basis so that you become part of the support system they look to when they are in trouble.

For example, a poll conducted by KidsHealth found that “kids said they were stressed out the most by: grades, school, and homework (36%); family (32%); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21%).” However, only 22% of these kids dealt with their stress by talking to their parents.

So, be prepared for the variety of issues that can “stress out” your children. Below are some pointers that can help you address the needs of children in various age groups.

Ages 5-9

What to Expect:

- Increased ability of their emotions, self-control
- Know how to mask emotions and their use of coping strategies (by age 8)
- Have knowledge of how their actions affect others
- Be able to “step into another’s shoes”
- Spend less time with parents and more time with peers

Tips for Caregivers:

- Increase the child’s self-esteem with warm, positive parenting and reinforcement
- Minimize comparisons among children and help them overcome failures
- Help the child think about how to handle feelings of anger/similar emotions in safe ways
- Promote respect and positive relationships between the child and others
- Expect that the child’s level of independence will change depending on the circumstance

Ages 10-12 (pre-teen adolescent, tween)

What to Expect:

- Commonly has emotional swings
- Begins to rely more on same-age friends
- Still relies on bonds with parents though it may not be demonstrated
- Has thoughts of independence but bonds with family are still clear
- Questions rules and values, often will say things are “unfair”
- May begin to have body image issues

Tips for Caregivers:

- Don’t minimize the issues they stress out about
- Work together for solutions to problems
- Schedule time for family connectedness
- Be involved in social media activities
- Give room for independence and identity exploration
- Be mindful of their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth
- Talk openly about teasing, bullying, and similar problems and the appropriate actions to take when these issues arise

Ages 13-15 (adolescent)

What to Expect:

- Struggles with sense of identity; worries about being normal or “fitting in”

Tips for Caregivers:

- Provide an open line of communication
- Be a friend but don’t forget you are the parent



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- Feels awkward about self & body image
- Maintains high expectations for self
- Complains that parents interfere with independence
- Begins testing rules and limits
- Develops more friendships with opposite sex
- Has increased exposure to sex and drugs
- Tries to find a group of peers where they fit in and are accepted
- Commonly experiences moodiness
- May return to childish behavior, especially when stressed

- Set clear expectations and limits.
- Talk about difficult issues early on
- Get to know your teenager's friends
- Don't overreact to changes in clothing style or appearance
- Be sensitive to identity issues
- Communicate and model your values about issues such as honesty and integrity.
- Provide positive feedback
- If you suspect a problem, ask your teen what is bothering him/her and then listen
- Be honest about your experiences to help them make wise decisions

Ages 16-18

What to Expect:

- Girls are more likely to be physically mature
- Exhibits an increased interest in the opposite sex
- Tests rules and limits
- Chooses role models
- May experiment with sex and drugs
- Peers are still important but moving towards their own identity/thoughts
- Commonly experiences moodiness
- Increased stress and anxiety about future choices (work/school)

Tips for Caregivers:

- Provide an open line of communication and supportive environment
- Don't be judgmental and disregard their ideas
- Provide space for exploration of new interests
- Don't overwhelm them with talks of the future
- Talk regularly about difficult issues (sex, drugs, gangs, etc.)
- Set expectations and limits with room for independence
- Provide positive feedback
- If you suspect a problem, ask your teen what is bothering him/her and then listen

Other Resources

The American Academy of Pediatrics: www.healthychildren.org

KidsHealth: www.kidshealth.org

National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health: www.ffcmh.org

National PTA: Emotional Health: www.pta.org/emotionalhealth

Sources:

http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/kids_stress.html#cat146

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/childdevelopmenttracker>

<http://www.ahaparenting.com/ages-stages>

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/>

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/families-with-teens/fact-sheets/whats-normal-for-teen-development...>

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/>

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