

## Risk Factors

Some things can actually increase a child's chance for developing a mental health problem. Often the factors are beyond a parent's control, as in the case of the loss of a caregiver. But other times a parent can reduce their child's risk, by avoiding harmful substances, for example.

### *Loss of a Significant Caregiver*

For very young children, the loss of a caregiver can be devastating. Children who experience such a loss often become extremely needy, withdraw, or express their emotions differently from before. Others may cry, call and search for the absent caregiver, and/or refuse to be comforted (see box).

### *Lack of Appropriate Stimulation*

Children who don't have enough physical and emotional nurturing may not grow at the expected rate, or they may show symptoms of depression. Physical delays are usually caused by problems such as reflux or a milk intolerance, but sometimes the cause is a lack of appropriate care. If your child experiences a delay, talk with your doctor to figure out the cause.

### *Toxins*

Parents can protect their child from many toxins by being aware of how the toxins affect their child's development both before and after birth. In addition to the toxins listed below, household cleaners, medications, and some house plants are harmful to children and must be avoided.

- **Lead** exposure can cause blood pressure to rise, which can damage a developing fetus. Sources of lead include paint in older buildings, soil, and water from lead pipes. **Mercury** exposure, which usually comes from eating contaminated fish, causes problems with speaking, thinking, and voluntary movement.
- There is no safe amount or safe time to drink **alcohol**. Children exposed to alcohol before birth suffer brain damage and often have difficulty with decision-making and self-control; they may also have stunted growth, facial malformation, learning difficulties, and problems of the heart or other organs.
- Prenatal **methamphetamine** (meth) use can cause slow overall growth, prenatal stroke, heart damage, and sometimes even death. After birth, meth babies are very fussy, hypersensitive, and have long periods of high-pitched screaming.
- **Marijuana** use during pregnancy can cause intellectual and developmental delays, hyperactivity and inattention, sleeping problems, and excessive crying. **Cocaine** use causes newborns to go through withdrawal characterized by fussiness, screaming, and rigidity; development may also be delayed.
- **Tobacco** use during pregnancy can cause low birth weight. Later a child may show signs of hyperactivity and inattention, asthma and other breathing disorders, and lowered immunity levels

*These things can help reduce the risk of a mental health disorder:*

- A caring adult
- High-quality childcare
- At least one secure attachment

*These things can put a child at risk for a mental health disorder:*

- Exposure to drugs, alcohol, or other toxins
- Living in poverty
- Loss of a caregiver
- Exposure to violence

### *Supporting a Child Who Has Lost a Caregiver*

- Allow your child to ask questions, even if it is painful.
- Answer all questions simply and honestly; use words your child can understand.
- If your child's grief is due to a death, don't refer to the person as sleeping—this may lead your child to become fearful of sleep or they may expect the person to wake up.
- Avoid using the word "loss"—some children think this means that the person is "lost" and they may be "found."

