

Mental Health and Children

What Is Mental Health?

Good mental health for adults means having a job, maintaining a home, and having healthy relationships. For young children, good mental health means being able to develop secure, trusting relationships, expressing emotions appropriately, and interacting with others—in other words: playing.

Can Parents Help a Child Develop Good Mental Health?

The first thing parents can do is to take good care of themselves. Even before her baby is born, a woman who eats well, exercises regularly, and avoids harmful substances like drugs and alcohol is helping her child develop good physical health and good mental health. After a child is born, eating well and getting regular exercise are still important, but parents must also make sure their child has the chance to develop trusting relationships.

From their first moments of life, your child is learning that they can rely on you for their physical and emotional needs. They are beginning to develop trust and that all-important sense of security. Children who develop this trust take risks, explore their world, and try new things because they know they can return to safety.

The Importance of Relationships

Most children thrive when they receive the right amount and right kind of stimulation. However, not all children have the same opportunities. Even something as seemingly harmless as TV viewing can reduce your child's opportunity to have the one-on-one human relationships that are so important during the early years.

Relationships are also important because they help children understand and relate to their world in emotional terms. To nurture this type of development, provide your child with an environment that offers emotional support and gives your child a sense of belonging (see box).

How Can I Know if My Child's Development is Typical?

The range of "what's typical" is very broad for young children. Some 1 year olds are fearful of strangers but others are not. By age 3, some children are able to show empathy, but for others empathy doesn't show up until age 5 or 6. (For general guidelines see the fact sheet titled "What You May See When.") If you do have a concern, discuss it with your child's doctor.

Is a Child's Mental Health Inherited?

According to Dr. Tonya White, pediatrician, psychiatrist, and mother of three, a child's mental health can sometimes be influenced by their parents' mental health. Research shows that 30 to 50 percent of children who have a parent with a mental illness are diagnosed with a mental health disorder. But Dr. White says that a child's environment also influences a child's mental health.

Ready Reference

Mental Health is sometimes referred to as **Mental Fitness**.

Feelings are sometimes called **Emotions**

Create an Emotionally Supportive Home

- Be sure your child has plenty of love, understanding, and support.
- Help your child talk about their feelings.
- Encourage your child to try new things.
- Provide a safe place for your child to learn independence.
- Show your child effective ways to solve problems and resolve conflicts.
- Allow your child to solve some problems on their own.
- Teach deep-breathing exercises to help your child reduce stress.
- Teach your child to appreciate and respect others.
- Encourage your child to help others.

Source: Early Childhood Indicators of Progress, Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services

