

How can I nurture my child's mental health?

Mental health determines how we look at ourselves, our lives and the people we know and care about. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, evaluate our options and make choices. In short, it touches on virtually every aspect of our lives.

A child's mental health affects their daily life and future. Schoolwork, relationships and physical health can be affected by mental health. Like physical fitness, mental fitness is important at every stage of life. Caring for and protecting a child's mental health is a major part of helping that child grow to become the best they can be. The following tips can help you promote your child's physical safety and emotional well-being:

- Set clear and consistent expectations for your child. It is important that these expectations are understood and enforced by anyone who is responsible for your child's care.
- Do your best to provide a safe home and community for your child, as well as nutritious meals, regular health check-ups, immunizations and exercise.
- Be aware of stages in child development so you do not expect too much or too little from your child.
- Encourage your child to express his or her feelings; respect those feelings. Let your child know that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger and anxiety. Try to learn the source of these feelings. Help your child express anger positively, without resorting to violence.
- Promote mutual respect and trust. Keep your voice down—even when you do not agree. Keep communication channels open.
- Listen to your child. Use words and examples your child can understand. Encourage questions.
- Provide comfort and assurance. Be honest. Focus on the positives. Express your willingness to talk about any subject.
- Look at your own problem-solving and coping skills. Are you setting a good example? Seek help if you are overwhelmed by your child's feelings or behaviors or if you are unable to control your own frustration or anger.
- Encourage your child's talents and accept his or her limitations.
- Set goals based on your child's abilities and interests—not someone else's expectations. Do not compare your child's abilities to those of other children; appreciate the uniqueness of your child. Spend time regularly with your child.
- Foster your child's independence and self-worth.
- Help your child deal with life's ups and downs. Show confidence in your child's ability to handle problems and tackle new experiences.
- Discipline constructively, fairly and consistently. All children and families are different; learn what is effective for your child. Show approval for positive behaviors. Help your child learn from mistakes.
- Love unconditionally. Teach the value of apologies, cooperation, patience, forgiveness and consideration for others. Do not expect to be perfect; parenting is a difficult job.

How can I help my child handle bullies?

According to statistics, as many as half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years, and at least 10 percent are bullied regularly. If your child is being picked on, threatened, harassed or physically assaulted in any way by another child, it is important to respond properly to the situation. Teaching your child how to protect themselves and boost his or her self-esteem can help keep them from becoming a victim.

Why Children Are Bullied

Kids often are bullied when they appear vulnerable and different from others. If your child is shy or reclusive, has a physical trait that distinguishes them from peers (e.g., smaller than other kids their age), has a disability or is part of an ethnic, cultural or religious minority, they may be a target for a bully. It is important to understand that any child can become the target of a bully at any time, given the right set of circumstances. Kids who typically become bullies often were bullied themselves in some way. Many bullies have been mentally or physically abused, neglected and exposed to negative environments. Growing up in a family where the parents consistently fight, threaten or manipulate each other can have a strong influence on a child. Kids who are routinely criticized can develop insecurity problems. Making others feel out of control by bullying them can help a bullying child feel more in control.

What You Can Do

To help protect your child against bullying, consider these suggestions:

- **Build your child's self-esteem at an early age.** Kids who are praised for their efforts, encouraged to develop talents and taught to keep trying tend to have greater confidence. Try to make your child feel as good about themselves as possible by avoiding criticism and negative comments. The more self-respect your child has, the better they will be at ignoring a bully's taunts and defending themselves when attacked.
- **Encourage your child to express dissent.** One good anti-bully exercise is to teach your child how to speak up respectfully if they disagree with you. Stress that it is okay to express anger and dissatisfaction in healthy, productive ways. Practice negotiating and debating techniques together as alternatives to fighting or being victimized. Teach your child to use direct "I" expressions when someone is making them uncomfortable: "I don't like when you treat me that way."
- **Teach your child to stand up for themselves.** Emphasize the importance of maintaining eye contact, standing up straight and proud, not showing fear and not backing down to a bully when cornered. A child may be less likely to bully if they sense that the other child is not afraid.
- **Teach your child how to ignore taunts.** Tell your child that insults and threats are just words; they cannot really hurt your child. Encourage your child to talk to themselves privately with positive reassurances, such as, "I know what he's saying isn't true. I'm not going to give in to his words. I'm stronger than that." Often, the best advice is to tell your child simply to walk away and say nothing.
- **Emphasize avoidance if necessary.** You do not want your child to run away from their problems or live their life in fear, but you can encourage them to stay away from the bully, especially if the possibility of physical harm exists.
- **Discourage fighting back.** Getting physical with the bully is giving in to exactly what the bully wants: a chance to exert physical dominance over your child. Your child may end up injured or seriously hurt, and the bully's success will only encourage him or her to continue to victimize others. Tell your child also not to taunt or provoke the bully in any way. However, as a last resort, you may want to teach your child how to use self-defense techniques to protect himself or herself as a last resort. Consider signing up your child for an age-appropriate martial arts class or a sport. A bully may decide to leave your child alone if the bully knows he or she is athletic or trained to defend themselves.
- **Keep an eye out for warning signs.** Your child may be frightened to tell you that he or she is being threatened or picked on. Watch for slipping grades, physical marks on his body, missing lunch money, an extended depression or any out-of-the-ordinary behaviors. If you suspect that your child is being bullied, encourage them to tell you. If you think your child is covering up or holding back the truth, try talking to their friends or their parents. Have they seen or heard about your child being picked on?

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- **Respond appropriately.** Do not ignore the problem or overreact. Weigh your options, and talk to your child about what he or she would like to do before you go ahead and do something on their behalf.
- **Get help.** If you feel that your child is in danger or that a bully's tactics have gone too far, it is time to get involved and get help. If the bullying happens at school, talk to your child's teachers and principal about the problem, and try to arrange for a school-supervised meeting between you, your child, the bully and the bully's parents. If your child has been injured or seriously harassed, file a police report, and explore your legal options.
- **Discourage bullying.** Your child may begin to model some of the bullying behavior to which they have been exposed by picking on other kids. Indicate that you will not tolerate bullying. Encourage your child to be a defender of bullying victims instead.

You can do many things to teach your child to avoid being bullied and to help put an end to a bullying problem. There are no easy answers, and you may have to keep trying before you find the right approach that works for you and your child.