

Promoting Children's Mental Health

We know that children need nutritious food, shelter, exercise, and immunizations—but the basics for good mental health aren't always as clear. The first fundamental rule is to know that children's mental health matters. Children's mental health is an important part of their overall health and well-being. It should be given thought and attention and, when needed, professional help.

General Tips for Promoting Mental Health

The best way to promote children's mental health is to build up their strengths, help to protect them from risks, and give them tools to succeed in life.

Help children relate to others and build their confidence. Give children a chance to talk about experiences and feelings; offer encouragement and praise; acknowledge positive and negative behavior; and provide consistent and fair expectations with clear consequences for misbehavior.

Be a role model. Talk about your own feelings, apologize when you are wrong, don't express anger with violence, and use active problem-solving skills.

Encourage exercise and sports. Researchers have linked a variety of psychological benefits to exercise, including decreased depression and anxiety, and improved mood states, self-confidence, sense of life-quality, and general psychological well-being. i Participation in exercise and sports has also been shown to reduce delinquent behavior and boost academic performance. ii

Suggest involvement in after-school activities. A questionnaire on body image and self-esteem found that girls who were active in a greater number of after-school activities had higher body image, self-esteem, and feelings of competence than girls who participated in fewer. iii

Encourage strong family relationships. Researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston found that adolescents who were from closely knit families and maintained an intimate connection with their parents based on trust and open communication were less likely to use alcohol.

High expectations can go a long way. Studies indicate that high parental or family expectations for a child's performance may serve as a protective factor against child substance abuse. iv

Tips for Parents and Care Givers

- Recognize that your children's mental health is just as important as their physical health.
- Spend time with your children daily listening to them and talking to them about what is happening in their lives.
- Provide unconditional love and support to your children.
- Educate yourself about children's mental health and illness.
- Talk about emotions and feelings with your child.

- Teach and model tolerance and understanding about mental illness.
- If you're concerned about your child's mental health, consult with their teachers, guidance counselor, or other adults that may have information about your child's behavior.
- If you think there might be a problem, seek professional help.
- If treatment is needed, a comprehensive plan should be developed including the child.

Tips for Teachers and School Officials

- Think about mental health as an important component of a child being “ready to learn”; if a child is experiencing mental health problems, he or she will likely have trouble focusing in school.
- Incorporate mental health into the classroom and ensure that all students are treated with respect.
- Know the signs of mental illness and available resources.
- If you have concerns, contact a child's parent or caretaker and seek consultation from school mental health professionals.
- Use the mental health professional(s) at your school as resources for preventive interventions with students, including social skills training; education for teachers and students on mental health; crisis counseling for teachers and students following a traumatic event; and classroom management skills training for teachers.

Tips for Policy-Makers

- Invest in community-based mental health services for children and their families.
- Safeguard access to treatment services, including medications, for children with mental health needs and their families.
- Develop incentives to expand the pool of mental health professionals specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of children and adolescents.
- Address broader issues related to children's unmet mental health needs, including fragmented service systems and the lack of culturally appropriate care.

Children's mental health matters!

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Action Center	877-339-SSHS	www.sshsac.org
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry		www.aacap.org
American Psychiatric Association	888-357-7924	www.psych.org
American Psychological Association	800-964-2000	www.apa.org
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health	703-684-7710	www.ffcmh.org
Head Start Mental Health Resources	866-763-6481	www.headstartinfo.org
Knowledge Exchange Network	800-789-2647	www.mentalhealth.org
National Association of School Psychologists	301-657-0270	www.nasponline.org

i Folkins, C.H., & Sime, W.E. (1981). Physical fitness training and mental health. *American Psychologist*, 4, 373-389. Sonstroem, R.J. (1984). Exercise and self-esteem. *Exercise and Sports Sciences Reviews*, 12, 123-155.

ii Segrave, J.O. (1983). Sport and juvenile delinquency. *Exercise and Sports Reviews*, 11, 181-209. Burnette, E. (1996, July). Sports lift esteem in young athletes. *APA Monitor*, p. 34

iii Jaffe, L., & Wu, P. (1996). After-school activities and self-esteem in adolescent girls. *Melpomene Journal*, 15, 18-25.

iv Mills, R. (1990). Substance abuse, dropout and delinquency prevention: The Modello-Homestead Gardens Early Intervention Project. Paper presented at the Ninth Annual Conference of Psychology of the Mind.