

10 WAYS TO PROMOTE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING IN KIDS

This year make mental health a parenting priority. Kids with good mental health feel better, learn better and are better equipped to handle life's curve balls.

It seems strange to talk about promoting good mental health in children. Shouldn't all children naturally have good mental health habits? After all, childhood is supposed to be a pretty relaxed time of life, free from the pressures and stresses that come hand in hand with adulthood.

Sadly, it doesn't seem that way. According to the Australian Psychological Society one in seven Australian children experience some type of mental health issue, with ADHD, anxiety and depression being the most common.

Having good mental health doesn't mean kids don't experience difficulties or worries. Feeling worried, sad or fearful is normal. Kids who are mentally healthy are equipped to handle many of life's curve balls that come their way. They also don't let their emotions overwhelm them. As a result they learn better and have more friends as well.

As a parent it's useful to reflect on the mental health habits that you promote in your kids.

Here are ten ways to promote good mental health and wellbeing in kids:

1. Model good mental health habits

If you, like many parents, live constantly with stress then consider ways to actively minimise it, such as getting regular exercise, plenty of sleep and doing relaxation exercises. Not only will this improve your mental health, and make you easier to live with, it will send a strong positive message that mental health is important. It's worth remembering that kids learn what they live, so make sure they see good mental health habits first hand.

2. Make sure they get enough sleep

Sleep is one of the building blocks of mental health and wellbeing. Many children and just about all teenagers are sleep-deprived at the moment. Many parents are sleep-deprived as well! Children need between 10 and 12 hours' sleep to enable proper growth and development, while teenagers need a minimum of nine hours. One of the single most powerful strategies to improve kids' abilities to cope with stressful or changing situations is to ensure they get enough sleep.

3. Encourage your kids to exercise

When my mum would tell me all those years ago to turn the television off and go outside and play, she didn't know she was promoting good mental health. She just knew that physical activity was a good thing for an active growing boy. Kids today get less exercise than those of past generations, which is an impediment to mental health. Exercise stimulates the chemicals that improve mood and release the stress that builds up over a day. An hour's movement per day seems the minimum for kids. How much exercise does your child receive?

4. Encourage creative outlets

Kids should practise creativity if for no other reason than it helps them experience the state of 'flow'. This is the state of getting so immersed in an activity that you forget about time and place. Writers and other creatives understand the concept of flow. It's energizing and helps take stressed and worried kids out of themselves.

5. Provide a space of their own

Children of all ages benefit from having some space of their own where they can think. Quiet time and down time give boys the chance to let their thoughts wander around inside their heads. It also helps them get to know, and even like, themselves. Boys will often do their best thinking on their own, so they tend to retreat to their caves (bedroom) when things go wrong at school or in their relationships. They need to go within to find their own answer.

6. Talk about their troubles

A problem shared is a problem halved. Talking about what's worrying you is a great way to remove the burden of worry and reduce anxiousness. Some kids bottle up what's inside, while others will catastrophise a situation, which can make matters seem worse. If your child has a problem let him know that his concerns are important to you. Kids often can't tell you what may be wrong, so be observant and gently ask questions to help gain a clearer picture of how kids may be feeling.

7. Help them relax

Make sure your child has a hobby or activity that relaxes them. The ability to relax and get away from the stresses of everyday life is essential. Some children who have real difficulty switching off may benefit from practising meditation or mindfulness, but most kids just need time to chill out so they can relax naturally.

8. Have two routines – weekday and weekend

Most households are pretty highly scheduled these days. There are routines for getting up, coming home, eating meals and going to bed. These structures are necessary when we're busy. Families need a second, more relaxed weekend routine that helps kids relax and unwind. It's important to have this release valve if families are flat out busy during the week.

9. Foster volunteering and helpfulness

Social isolation is a huge predictor of poor mental health. Encourage your child to be connected to and help others in any way possible. Helping others reinforces social connectedness and the importance of being part of a community, as well as providing opportunities for positive recognition.

10. Bring fun and playfulness into their lives

Kids should be the kings and queens of play; however, some children live such full-on, organised lives that much of the natural fun and spontaneity has been stripped from their everyday life. Mucking around, which is code for having fun, is something many children of this generation don't have time for. If you see your child constantly stressed or overwhelmed by events, change the mood by going to a movie, joining them in a game or seeking other ways to have some fun.

These ideas are basic common sense. However, as kids' lives get busier these essentials get squeezed out. Here's my recommendation to ensure that mental health habits aren't overlooked or neglected.

First, see these habits as the building blocks of mental health. Don't ignore or trivialise them. Talk to your children and tie these activities to their mental health. Do this in your own way and your own time.

Second, assess which of these habits need your attention and make some adjustments over time to push the pendulum back in favour of your child's mental health.

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