

Parenting - How to nurture your child's mental health.

8 ways you can improve your child's mental health

You may already know how important it is for your child to eat healthy food and be active every day to be physically healthy. But did you know that their mental health needs are just as important?

Mental health is more than thinking about a disorder like ADHD or depression. Dr. Nicholas Westers, a psychologist at Children's HealthSM, encourages looking at it differently and positively. He tells parents, "Good mental health is really about creating, encouraging and using everyday healthy habits – like understanding and talking about your feelings, correcting negative thinking, showing empathy and building resiliency."

Dr. Westers has some advice to help you support your children on their journey to better mental health.

What is mental health?

Mental health is our emotional, mental and social well-being. Our mental health can affect how we think, feel and behave. It can impact our daily activities such as relationships, and how well we do in school or at work. It can even affect our physical health.

How can you affect children's mental health?

You are an important role model and support for your child's mental health habits. Mental health disorders can run in families. So, if you suffer from anxiety, your child may be more likely to have an anxiety disorder, too. However, things and events in their life can also affect their mental health.

How can you improve children's mental health?

You can nurture your child's mental health by building a close relationship with them. Children also develop good mental health when you provide structure and boundaries, foster their independence, encourage friendships, teach healthy habits and model positive behavior.

Here are Dr. Wester's 8 ways to help improve your children's mental health:

1. Notice your child's cues

Pay close attention to your child's cues – spoken or through their actions. This helps you see when your child needs support or when they need someone to talk with. When you notice your child's cues you can help them develop a secure base where their mental health can grow.

Your child knows if you are interested in them, and if you approve or disapprove of them or their actions. Providing this secure base lets your child safely experience their feelings, even before they can name what they are feeling. Children learn best when they feel safe, so helping name their feelings works better when they are safe to have them.

2. Balance closeness and following rules

Building a good relationship with your child is one of the strongest ways to protect them against mental health disorders. Look for chances every day to build your relationship with them. This can help create a healthy relationship – one that makes it easier for your child to come to you when they face a problem.

For example, when your child throws a fit in a restaurant, your first reaction might be to settle them quickly, so they behave. Instead of telling your child to be quiet, think about whether there is another reason they are acting this way. Is she hungry? Did he skip his nap? Did they have a bad day at school?

All children, even teens, are more likely to obey your requests when they feel loved by and close to you.

3. Allow your child to fail

It is natural for you to want to prevent your child from experiencing heartache or failure. However, those are key to building their mental health. Failing now and then helps them learn how to come back from it, to move on and grow. It also helps them understand when others may be going through something similar.

If your child is safe, consider standing on the sidelines, just watching and being ready to support and encourage them when they need it most.

4. Let your child be bored

No playdates this week or next? No problem. Boredom, Dr. Westers says, is when children learn to be creative. It helps them learn how to solve problems themselves, manage time, use their imagination, develop self-control and be independent. Keeping your child busy with activities may keep them from complaining of being bored, but it also keeps them from learning these skills.

5. Provide limits and routines

It will be easier for your child to deal with failures and struggles they know that there are some limits and routines in place. That includes bedtime, limits on phones, gaming and other electronic devices, playtime and how we treat others and ourselves. It is okay to be flexible sometimes, but placing limits and rules tells your child that you love them and are invested in their well-being.

6. Being social

Being social is a key part of our mental health. We are wired for connection. Building friendships teaches your child how to be a better friend. It also helps them learn critical social skills, such as reading and responding to nonverbal cues.

Dr. Westers suggests that for every hour of online connections, kids may need 30 minutes of face-to-face connections. That means balancing playing video games with playing with friends in the neighborhood.

7. Model good behavior

One of the most important ways you can nurture your child's mental health is to model healthy behavior. That includes being open about your feelings – without sharing too much. It also means showing how you bounce back from a mistake. Talk with your children about mistakes you made, what you learned from it, and how you came back from it.

8. Make healthy choices

Our physical health plays a critical role in our mental health. Our mind and body are connected. Healthy eating, exercise and enough sleep protect against mental health disorders and improve mood.

Continue to support your child and model healthy choices that improve your child's physical, emotional, and mental health, including:

- Eating a healthy diet
- Being physically active
- Getting plenty of sleep
- Teaching digital hygiene or responsible use of technology

Learn more

Children's Health provides comprehensive services to support children's and teens' mental health. Learn more about our Pediatric Psychiatry and Psychology Programs.

You can also access emotional care and support from the comfort of your home with Virtual Visit Behavioral Health. With a behavioral health care appointment, you can speak to a board-certified psychiatrist or licensed therapist using video technology. Learn more about Virtual Visit Behavioral Health.