

Positive Parenting

Mental health is as essential to children's overall well-being as their physical health. While the stressors families face every day — from financial problems to personal struggles — can make it challenging to adopt a positive parenting style, there is much parents can do to foster mental health. Use the parenting techniques below to help promote your child's mental health:

Help develop social skills in your child: The single best childhood predictor of healthy adult functioning is "social competence" — how well a child gets along with others. ¹ Social competency and healthy self-esteem go hand-in hand. Take time to set good examples, and teach children the social skills and behaviors that encourage positive social interactions between them and others.

Take time to talk to your child: When feelings are bottled up, they can explode in the form of temper tantrums, bullying or mood swings. Encourage children to talk openly and let them know that talking through feelings is a healthy way of expressing anger, fear, sadness and pain. Provide children with the words to express their emotions, and be a role model by talking about your own feelings.

Leave the stresses of work at work: When parents bring their job-related stress home, they are less tolerant and more prone to argue with their children. This can damage a child's self-esteem. ² It is important first to address your own stresses and mental health needs, so you can collect your thoughts, be composed and set positive examples for your children.

Avoid "hyper-parenting": Don't enroll children, in too many extracurricular activities or become over-involved in their academic, athletic and social lives. Children need the time and space to be creative, think and discover things on their own. Hyper-parenting may damage self-esteem and even increase the likelihood of depression and substance abuse — by creating unrealistic expectations and putting too much pressure on children.³

Celebrate accomplishments: Rewarding children for good behavior is more constructive than letting them know when they have behaved inappropriately. For example, if your child has cleaned up his or her room but left a pile of toys in one corner, say how impressed you are that the room is clean, rather than scolding your child for neglecting the pile of toys.

Use discipline, not punishment: "Discipline" is a method of teaching children acceptable behavior and helping them to make wise decisions on their own to act in positive ways.⁴ "Punishment," on the other hand, involves using physical means or verbal criticisms to address a negative behavior. While punishment can lead to low self-esteem, discipline will help children learn positive social skills. When your child misbehaves, try the following discipline methods:

Use constructive criticism: Rather than scolding the child, focus on the misbehavior and how it can be improved. For instance, instead of saying "You made a mess, you left your toys all over the place," try saying, "This playroom is a mess. I need you to please clean it up."

Redirect: Instead of focusing on a negative behavior, help the child replace it with a more acceptable one. For example, if your child is playing ball in the house, take him or her outside and play ball together.

Give time outs: Remove your child from a situation to allow time to regain self-control. Have the child face a wall away from any distractions for a set number of minutes. When the time is up, allow your child to return to the situation. ⁵

Promote positive mental health: Pay attention to and promote good mental health in your child, just as you promote his or her physical health. Here are signs of strong mental health in children:

- Has friends and gets along with other children
- Can concentrate and focus attention
- Has relatively stable eating and sleeping patterns
- Shows reasonable interest and progress in school
- Is satisfied at least some of the time with most aspects of life – family, friends, school, and physical appearance
- Does not become anxious or angry over minor inconveniences or setbacks
- Fears are reasonable and not excessive
- Shows respect for other people
- Maintains a reasonable amount of energy throughout the day
- Has hobbies and enjoys different activities

For More Information:

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

The Strengthening Families fact sheets are made possible through an unrestricted, educational grant from The E.H.A. Foundation.

1 *Appropriate limits for young children: A guide for discipline Part 2.* National Parent Information Network. McClellan, D., and Katz, L.G. (1998).

2 *Spanking study gets big play in the media.* *Monitor on Psychology*, 32. C. C. (2000 March).

3 *The over scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap.* The Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter. Stormshak, E.A., Bierman, K.L., McMahon, R.J., & Lengua, L.J. (2000, February).

4 *Young children's development: A checklist.* Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. National Parent Association (1998).

5 *Children and adolescents' mental health.* (In conjunction with Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and US Department of Health and Human Services.) Knowledge Exchange Network. DeBord, K. (2001).