

Helping Your Child Develop Mental and Emotional Fitness



Being a parent means helping your child grow into a healthy, capable person. We hear a lot about physical fitness. We know children should eat healthy meals and be physically active. Have you thought about your child's mental and emotional fitness? Going to school, reading, and making positive friends are good ways to start. But there is so much more you and your child can do!

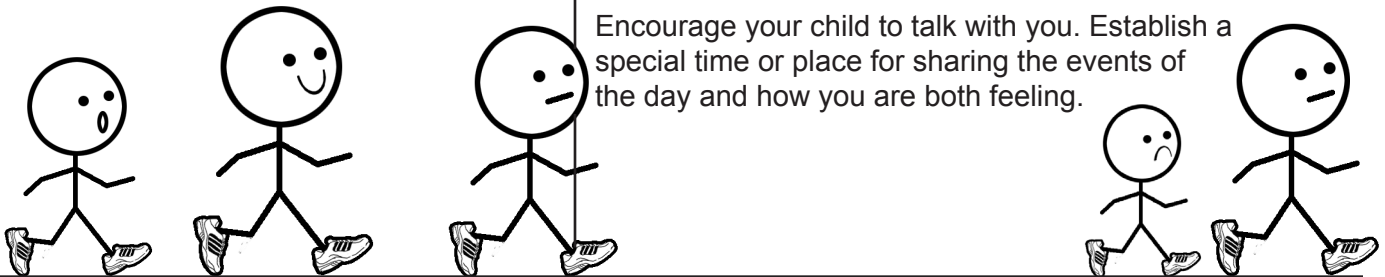
The Key to Managing Strong Feelings—Especially If You Feel Stuck

In class, we have talked about ways to settle down when a person is very happy or upset. Sometimes feelings are so strong that children and adults feel stuck. They lack ideas for what to do to make things better. The key to managing this situation is:

Talk to a trusted adult about your feelings.

We talked about the “Three D’s for Telling.” Always tell an adult if something is dangerous, destructive, or disturbing. This includes times when we are angry or disappointed with ourselves or very sad about something that has happened.

Encourage your child to talk with you. Establish a special time or place for sharing the events of the day and how you are both feeling.



Exercise Those Mental and Emotional Muscles

You can help your child to develop mental and emotional fitness by teaching him or her to manage stress and have a positive attitude. Mental and emotional fitness habits, just like physical fitness habits, are easier to start when a person is young. Try a few of these “exercises”:

- Help your child develop a “feelings” vocabulary and share feelings with each other.
- Help your child with a “stress rehearsal” if a stressful event is in his or her future. Help your child imagine feeling calm and handling the situation well.
- Help your child set realistic goals. Avoid over- and under-achievement.
- Help your child celebrate his or her accomplishments. Help your child forgive mistakes.
- Laugh often and laugh a lot. Laughter is good for everyone!





Depression in Children

The signs of depression in children are different than in adults, so it may be overlooked.

Depressed children may have these characteristics:

- Report stomach aches, headaches, and other aches and pains
- Say they feel “empty”
- Think no one likes them and that they have no friends
- Avoid school and other social events
- Have outbursts of anger, shouting, irritability, or crying
- Act aggressive and violent toward themselves or animals
- Have problems with sleeping, eating, bedwetting, and toileting
- Experience a drop in grades or school performance
- Cling to parent or worry their parent might die



Why is it so important to know about depression?

Depression is the number one cause of suicide. In fact, over half of all kids who suffer with depression will attempt suicide at least once; more than seven percent will die as a result. The good news is that depression is treatable, and suicide is preventable.

Helpful Resources

To subscribe to a free newsletter that supports parents, visit:

- New York University Child Study Center. *The Parent Letter*. Subscribe at http://www.aboutourkids.org/education/forparents.html?parameter=education_2

For more information on mental health, visit:

- Families for Depression Awareness. “Talking to Children.” <http://www.familyaware.org/teens/talking.php>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. “Children’s Mental Health—When to Seek Help.” http://www.aap.org/pubed/ZZZVZ2V979C.htm?&sub_cat=21
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. “Facts for Families: The Depressed Child.” <http://aacap.org/page.wv?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=The%20Depressed%20Child>



Stages, Phases, and Changes

As your child grows, he or she goes through many interesting stages. At times, it can be hard to tell the difference between a normal “phase” and a sign that your child needs help. If you or your child’s teacher notices a change in your child, take him or her to a pediatrician for a checkup. Your health care provider can tell you if there is a physical problem or if your child might need to be checked for another type of problem, such as depression.

In the past, experts believed that children could not suffer from depression. What could children have to worry about? Unfortunately, as many as one in ten children between the ages of six and 12 years experiences persistent feelings of sadness. This is the major sign of depression. Children are most at risk if they have:

- Experienced stress or loss
- Attention, learning, or conduct disorders
- A family history of depression

