

Let's Talk: Children's mental health

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Hi, my name is Lynn. Let's talk about kids and mental health. When you think about taking care of your kids, what comes to mind? Providing food, shelter, medical care, and so forth, right? But what about their emotional and mental health well-being? Do you know that recent studies show that one in seven kids in the United States has a mental health disorder and that only 1/2 of these kids get any kind of help at all?

What causes mental health issues in children?

So, what causes mental health problems in kids? Well, pretty much the same thing that causes mental health problems in anyone. It can be hereditary factors. It can be environmental. They may grow up in a home where there is chaos or dysfunction, or they may suffer some kind of a trauma. All of these things can contribute to mental health issues.

So what do kids need to be mentally healthy? Children can best cope and thrive in life if they have unconditional love from their family, if they feel like whatever they do, somebody may be mad at them temporarily, but they're still loved, if they feel secure and stable, if they have good self-esteem and self-confidence. Kids need time to play and socialize with other kids. Even during this time of social distancing, kids can socialize online with parental supervision.

How can you know if your child is having any kind of mental health stress or issues? Well, here are some signs that you could look for. Maybe suddenly their grades are falling. That can be a sign. They might be unwilling to go to school suddenly or join in activities. They may have nightmares a lot or sleep problems, maybe not being able to sleep or wanting to sleep all the time. Both can be a sign. Kids can be worried and anxious. They might act out in a way that you're not used to or disobey you in some kind of an uncharacteristic way or start having tantrums when they didn't used to. Also, being restless or having hyperactivity can be another sign. And on the other hand, so can depression, not wanting to get out of bed, not wanting to do anything, or a lot of anger. And another thing to look for is are they having problems coping in different parts of life more than one, like at home and at school and when they play with other kids?

Now, bear in mind that the symptoms of having mental health issues can change and might appear differently in different age groups of kids. And at the same time, not each of these signs is a sign of a mental health issue.

Steps to building your children's emotional health

What are some things that you can do to help build your children's emotional health? Well, for one thing, children need encouragement and praise. They need to be encouraged to try new things. And when they do succeed at new things or even if they don't succeed but they learn from trying new things, you can encourage them, and you can praise them for trying. That's really important. Praise shouldn't always come from getting straight A's. Praise should come from trying.

Number two is let your kids experience failure because you know what? Failure is part of real life. And if you want your children to grow up to be resilient, which means that they can bounce back from disappointments, then your kids need to experience failure in order to be able to build coping skills and resilience. So don't try to save your kids from disappointments and letdowns. Let them experience what real life is, and then you can talk to them afterwards about being disappointed, and you can help boost their self-esteem by pointing out how they got through it and what they can do next.

Number three, help teach your children how to cope with problems. Similar to number two, kids are going to encounter situations that are disappointing or where they feel blocked in some way. You have to remember as a parent, you're a role model. Even when you don't think so, your kids are watching what you do in the face of disappointment or in the face of failure, so you need, as a parent, you need to remember that, and you need to model good behavior.

Also, be available for your kids because kids do want to talk to their parents, maybe not at the exact time that you want to talk to them. It kind of needs to be on their schedule. So try to be available to listen to them, even just to give them a hug to make them feel better.

Another thing you can do is encourage your kids to have friends outside the family, to have peer-age friends. Children need to connect with other children, and they can do that even now with social distancing. Parents can help them use online tools, video, email, text, and of course telephones to stay connected. When they interact with peers, they learn how to socialize, share, and be part of a group. I know that people really want to have quality family time these days, and that is really important, but it's also important for your child to learn how to interact with other people their own age.

Finally, you can help to teach your child how to cope when they're sad or when they're very stressed out or when something negative happens. You can give them suggestions like share with you. You can be there for them to talk to, even if they just need to vent. You can encourage them to write their feelings down. Sometimes when kids keep a journal or a diary or just write a short story or a draw a picture about what happened or what their feelings are, that can be a great way to vent and

get their feelings out. They could color a picture. They could paint. They could also do something to take their mind off of a situation to distract them. So they might watch a funny video or a funny movie or something like that.

Also, if you have any pets, pets are great stress-relievers. Even just playing with the pet for a little while can help your child to recover and feel better. Another way to teach them is to show them about being active. And one great way to help children recover is to go outside and shoot a few baskets with mom or dad or throw a football back and forth, or encourage them to find a friend or do it by themselves. They can go for a bike ride. They can go for a walk. Any kind of physical activity helps you feel better.

What you should do if your child needs help

Finally, what should you do if you think your child might need help? This is a great question because I want to encourage you not to overlook anything that you think might suggest that they need help. It's important for you to take action. You can call the school and talk to the teacher. You can meet with a guidance counselor. You can meet with your child's pediatrician. And you can get a referral to a mental health specialist. There are people who specialize just in children's problems. Whatever you do, don't hesitate. If you think there's a problem, take action. The sooner that you can get help and intervention for your child, the greater the likelihood of a good outcome.

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