

Your child's mental health

Mental health affects the way people think, feel and act. Taking care of our mental health is just as important as having a healthy body. As a parent, you play an important role in your child's mental health:

- You can **promote good mental health** by the things you say and do, and through the environment you create at home.
- You can also learn about the **early signs of mental health problems** and know where to go for help.

How can I nurture my child's mental health?

Help children build strong, caring relationships:

- It's important for children and youth to have strong relationships with family and friends. Spend some time together each night around the dinner table.
- A significant person who is consistently present in a child's life plays a crucial role in helping them develop resilience. This person—often a parent or other family member—is someone your child spends a lot of time with and knows they can turn to when they need help.
- Show your children how to solve problems.

Help children and youth develop self-esteem, so that they feel good about themselves:

- Show lots of love and acceptance.
- Praise them when they do well. Recognize their efforts as well as what they achieve.
- Ask questions about their activities and interests.
- Help them set realistic goals.

Listen, and respect their feelings:

- It's OK for children and youth to feel sad or angry. Encourage them to talk about how they feel.
- Keep communication and conversation flowing by asking questions and listening to your child. Mealtime can be a good time for talking.
- Help your child find someone to talk to if they don't feel comfortable talking to you.

Create a safe, positive home environment:

- Be aware of your child's media use, both the content and the amount of time spent on screens. This includes TV, movies, Internet, and gaming devices. Be aware of who they might be interacting with on social media and online games.

- Be careful about discussing serious family issues—such as finances, marital problems, or illness—around your children. Children can worry about these things.
- Provide time for physical activity, play, and family activities.
- Be a role model by taking care of your own mental health: Talk about your feelings. Make time for things you enjoy.

In difficult situations, help children and youth solve problems:

- Teach your child how to relax when they feel upset. This could be deep breathing, doing something calming (such as a quiet activity they enjoy), taking some time alone, or going for a walk.
- Talk about possible solutions or ideas to improve a situation and how to make it happen. Try not to take over.

How common are mental health problems among children and youth?

One out of every 5 children and youth in Canada (20%) has a diagnosable mental health condition. Examples include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders and learning disabilities. Many more children have milder but significant emotional and behavioural problems.

Mental health issues can affect youth at any age. But certain situations can place some young people at a higher risk, including:

- A family history of mental illness.
- New immigrants and refugees who experience difficult economic circumstances.
- Indigenous children and youth who have poorer overall health, live in isolated communities and have scarce educational and work-related opportunities.
- LGBTQ children and youth who experience bullying and/or rejection from their families.
- Big life changes such as moving to a new city or new school, caregiver separation or divorce, serious illness or death in a close relative or friend.
- Facing or witnessing trauma, including abuse.
- Substance use.

Unfortunately, too many children and youth don't get help soon enough. Mental health disorders can prevent children and youth from succeeding in school, from making friends, or becoming independent from their parents. Children and youth with mental health disorders may have trouble reaching their developmental milestones.

The good news is that **mental health disorders are treatable**. There are many different approaches to helping children and youth struggling with emotional or mental health problems. Getting help early is important. It can prevent problems from becoming more serious, and can lessen the effect they have on your child's development.

How do I know if my child or youth has a mental health problem?

All children and youth are different. If you're concerned your child may have a problem, look at whether there are changes in the way they think, feel or act. Mental health problems can also lead to physical changes. Ask yourself how your child is doing at home, at school and with friends.

Changes in thinking

- Saying negative things about themselves or blaming themselves for things beyond their control.
- Trouble concentrating.
- Frequent negative thoughts.
- Changes in school performance.

Changes in feelings

- Reactions or feelings that seem bigger than the situation.
- Seeming very unhappy, worried, guilty, fearful, irritable, sad, or angry.
- Feeling helpless, hopeless, lonely or rejected.

Changes in behaviour

- Wanting to be alone often.
- Crying easily.
- Showing less interest in or withdrawing from sports, games or other activities that they normally enjoy.
- Over-reacting, or sudden outbursts of anger or tears over small incidents.
- Seeming quieter than usual, less energetic.
- Trouble relaxing or sleeping.
- Spending a lot of time daydreaming.
- Falling back to less mature behaviours.
- Trouble getting along with friends.

Physical changes

- Headaches, tummy aches, neck pain, or general aches and pains.
- Lack of energy, or feeling tired all the time.
- Sleeping or eating problems.
- Too much energy or nervous habits such as nail biting, hair twisting or thumb sucking.

Remember: Just because you notice one or more of these changes does not mean your child or youth has a mental health problem.

Where do I go for help?

There are many ways to help your child achieve good mental health. Sharing your concerns with the doctor is one of them. Talk to your child's doctor:

- if the behaviours described above last for a while, or if they interfere with your child's ability to function;
- if you have concerns about your child's emotional and mental health;
- about your child's behavioural development and emotional health at each well-child visit.

If your child or teen talks about suicide or harming themselves, call your doctor or local mental health crisis line right away.

Additional resources

- Mental Health Resource Centre (SickKids)
(<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En/HealthAZ/HealthandWellness/MentalHealth/Pages/default.aspx>)
- Anxiety BC
(<http://www.anxietybc.com/parent/index.php>)
- Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario: Mental Health
(<http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/cheoamentalhealth>)
- Children's Mental Health Ontario
(<https://www.cmho.org/education-resources/parent-resources>)
- Teach Resiliency (A program of PHE Canada)
(<https://phecanada.ca/programs/teach-resiliency/home>)
- www.ementalhealth.ca: To find resources in your community
(<http://www.ementalhealth.ca/>)
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
(http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/for_children_youth/Pages/default.aspx)
- Evergreen: A Child and Youth Mental Health Framework for Canada
(http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/Diversity_Evergreen_Framework_Summary_ENG_O_1.pdf)
- Talking with kids & teens about dying and death (Canadian Virtual Hospice)
(<http://kidsgrief.ca/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee
- Public Education Advisory Committee