

Healthy Young Minds: Rx for Children's Emotional and Mental Health

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Emotional health is one of the bedrocks of success in life. Being able to understand and manage our feelings and to connect with others in satisfying ways, are crucial to finding personal happiness, stability, and peace. Parents want to help their children do these things so that they too will be able to engage life in the fullest way possible. This means parents must learn how to support the growth and development of their children's social skills.

What can parents and school professionals do to strengthen children's emotional health, in the hope of reducing these kinds of problems? Identifying the characteristics of an emotionally healthy child or teen is a good beginning.

According to Kim Dell'Angela, a child psychologist and assistant professor in the department of pediatrics at Loyola University Medical Center in Illinois, there are such characteristics. An emotionally healthy child is active and curious about the world. These children are able to make and keep friends; engage in successful learning; regulate their emotions, i.e., soothe themselves when angry or upset and accept soothing from others, as well as delay gratification of their needs. These children interact well with the larger community, whether that community is the family, the school, or the larger world. They feel positively about their bodies, evaluating themselves in terms of what they can do rather than how they look.

Marjorie Hardy, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, added that these children also have high self-esteem; they're aware of their strengths and feel confident of their abilities within a realistic context.

Supporting Children's Strengths -

How do we as adults, as parents, teachers, and caregivers, support these traits in our children? How do we keep anxiety, depression, and other ills from undermining our children's emotional health? Of course, some mental and emotional health problems are biological and require treatment with medication. But many others have causes in children's experiences or environment.

Parents and teachers must be sensitive to the children in their care. For example, children and youth who experience loss—the death of a parent or other close family member, a divorce, or a move—may be at risk for developing emotional problems. Even changes in their physical health can have a negative impact on young people's emotional well-being. Those who develop a chronic illness such as diabetes, juvenile arthritis, or cancer, especially as they approach adolescence, could be prone to depression or other emotional problems. And those who have been exposed to violence or been victims of violence may have emotional difficulties.

"If a child doesn't feel safe in the world, that takes a tremendous toll on his or her peer relationships, learning, and so forth," said Dell'Angela. However, both Hardy and Dell'Angela agree that the presence of supportive, caring adults—even one such adult—can go a long way in helping children weather such adversity.

Learning difficulties such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or other learning disabilities also can contribute to a child's experiencing emotional and social problems. "Children with learning disabilities often do not know how to 'read' a social situation, so they might have difficulty making friends. Also, these children often have lower self-esteem because they have more trouble learning things as compared to their peers," noted Hardy.

Differences Can Hurt -

Another major factor that can affect children's emotional health is whether they are different from their

peers. "Any child who is different, when that difference is perceived as undesirable, can experience difficulty with peers and even with adults," said Hardy. For example, kids who are overweight, disabled, or gay may experience isolation and shame, which can lead to more severe emotional problems. "Adolescent homosexual youth have the highest rates of depression and suicide among teens," said Dell'Angela.

What Can Parents do?

- **"Know your kid,"** said Dell'Angela. Know what's normal behavior for your son or daughter. "If you've always had good communication with your daughter, but recently she's become sullen and noncommunicative, there may be reason for concern," she added.
- **Be aware of dramatic changes in a child's behavior.** These could include withdrawal from friends, new friends of questionable character, plummeting grades, sleep disruptions, eating problems, evasiveness, lying, and chronic physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches. (see Warning Signs) Any of these might indicate a serious problem, but concerned parents should seek a diagnosis from a health professional. "Often, pediatricians are the first to notice a problem, and they can refer you and your child to a mental health professional," said Dell'Angela.
- **Set the stage for communication with your children early on.** Parents who communicate well with their children when they are younger will have that basis to fall back on when those children reach adolescence.
- **Boost children's self-esteem by providing tasks that are challenging but doable.** "Children need to experience effort and its accompanying frustration," said Hardy. These experiences help build their belief in themselves; they know they have what it takes to overcome difficulty or adversity.
- **Be a role-model of good emotional behavior.** "That old adage, 'It's not what you say, but what you do,' has a lot of impact on children. If you want your son or daughter to manage his or her anger, then you need to manage yours. We're our children's heroes; they idealize and imitate what we do. When we say one thing and act another, we lose credibility with our kids," advised Dell'Angela.
- **Examine your parenting style.** "Often we adopt the parenting style of our parents. We need to stand back and reflect, 'Did that really work for me, and is it working for my children?'" said Hardy. It's her opinion that effective parents are warm and nurturing but also have expectations for their children, set limits, and allow them to learn the consequences of their behavior (without endangering themselves or others).
- **Create regular time to do meaningful things with your children,** especially activities like volunteering where they can see the positive effect of their actions on the community at large, said Dell'Angela: "Kids often have an idea of the way things should be, and such an activity would put their ideals into action."
- **Keep children safe.** Advocate for a safe neighborhood and school environment. "Teach children how to protect themselves, both verbally and by avoiding dangerous situations," said Dell'Angela.
- **Maintain a sense of humor.** "We all make mistakes. Sometimes all we can do about something is laugh about it," noted Dell'Angela.

What Can Schools do?

Schools also share in the responsibility for giving children the tools to become knowledgeable, responsible, and caring people.

"We've got to teach the whole child," said Roger Weissberg, a psychology and education professor and executive director of the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "We all know that social and emotional factors affect learning and preparedness to learn. If a kid is feeling unhappy, it's hard for him or her to focus on schoolwork. If a kid is feeling stressed, or is pressured by peers not to perform well, this can reduce academic learning."

There are many ways schools can address children's social and emotional needs. They can offer a coordinated, systematic social and emotional education curriculum. A supportive, safe environment in

which staff nurture students' personal development is very important. And schools can do much to establish a network of supportive programs and individuals in the community. All of these factors can be elements of a comprehensive school health program.

Social and emotional education teaches a battery of skills that include self-awareness; how to regulate one's feelings; how to monitor performance or action; empathy; and social effectiveness (see Social and Emotional Smarts). Parents and PTA leaders should acquaint themselves with these skills and inquire what their schools are doing to promote them, said Weissberg. "They also should ask to serve on committees where these kinds of programs are being discussed," he added. (For more information on such programs, visit the CASEL website at <http://www.casel.org>).

As part of such a program, schools should not tolerate violence—physical or verbal—and school professionals should show a high level of respect for the individual child, said Dell'Angela. School administration and faculty should expect the best of kids and showcase their accomplishments, build a healthy respect for the body by supporting sports programs, and help students feel part of the community at large, she added.

All of us want our children to live happy, productive lives, to embrace the world and all its opportunities with hope and optimism. It's parents' responsibility to ensure that our children have the mental and emotional resources to do so.

Warning Signs -

These signs may indicate emotional problems in a child or teen. If your child experiences any of the warning signs below, talk to your doctor, a school counselor, or other mental health professional who is trained to assess young people.

Is a child or teen troubled by the following:

- Feels sad and hopeless without good reason, and the feelings don't go away is angry most of the time, cries a lot, or overreacts to things
- Feels worthless or guilty a lot
- Is anxious or worried more than other young people
- Experiences grief for a prolonged time after a loss or death
- Feels extremely fearful—has unexplained fears or more fears than most children
- Constantly concerned about physical problems or appearance
- Frightened that his or her mind is controlled or is out of control

Does your child experience big changes?

- Suddenly does much worse in school
- Loses interest in things usually enjoyed
- Has unexplained changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Avoids friends or family and wants to be alone all the time
- Daydreams too much and can't get things done
- Feels life is too hard to handle or talks about suicide
- Hears voices that cannot be explained

Is your child limited by the following:

- Poor concentration or indecisiveness
- Inability to sit still or focus attention
- Worry about being harmed, hurting others, or about doing something "bad" the need to wash, clean things, or perform certain routines dozens of times a day
- Thoughts that race almost too fast to follow
- Persistent nightmares

Does your child behave in ways that cause problems?

- Uses alcohol or other drugs
- Eats large amounts of food and then forces vomiting, abuses laxatives, or takes enemas to avoid weight gain
- Diets or exercises obsessively although bone-thin
- Often hurts other people, destroys property, or breaks the law
- Does things that can be life-threatening

Social and Emotional Smarts: Key skills

Here are the skills that educators (and parents) should promote in the children and teens entrusted to their care:

Self-Awareness

- Recognizing and understanding emotions
- Understanding the reasons and circumstances for feeling as one does

Self-Regulation of Emotion

- Verbalizing and coping with anxiety, anger, and depression
- Controlling impulses, aggression, and self-destructive, antisocial behavior.
- Recognizing strengths and feeling positively about self, school, family, and support networks

Self-Monitoring and Performance

- Focusing on tasks at hand
- Setting short-and long-term goals
- Responding to advice and feedback
- Feeling motivation
- Feeling hope and optimism

Empathy and Perspective-taking

- Learning how to increase empathy
- Becoming a good listener
- Increasing sensitivity to others' feelings
- Understanding others' perspectives, points of view, feelings

Social Skills in Handling Relationships

- Managing emotions in relationships, harmonizing diverse feelings and viewpoints
- Expressing emotions effectively
- Exercising assertiveness, leadership, persuasion
- Working as part of a team/group
- Showing sensitivity to social cues
- Exercising social decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Responding constructively to interpersonal obstacles.