



Kids' mental health matters

A parent and caregiver's guide to
helping your child be their mental best

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“Why do I need this guide ... and how do I use it?”



We live in stressful times.

While we all feel it, families — especially kids — see some of the greatest impact. And while parents and caregivers have a lifetime of experience managing their own stress, kids and teens often don't have the skills to cope — or the language to ask for help.

As you read this guide, mark it up. You can circle behaviors you recognize, take notes on tips you find useful, or highlight tools to find care. Then, use the guide to start conversations with your partner, your extended family, your child's doctors and teachers — anyone who has your family's best interests at heart.

If your child is doing well right now, we hope this guide gives you ideas to keep them healthy. If they are struggling, we hope this guide serves as a valuable resource and an important reminder:

You are not alone.

An estimated **20 million children** in the U.S. have a mental health diagnosis.

Combined data for depression, anxiety, behavior, and ADHD: cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html



Kids' bodies are resilient.

From toddlers to teens, they can ...

Skin their knee
Stick a crayon up their nose
Fall off their bike
Get stung by a bee

... and usually get back to laughing and playing in minutes.

A lot of that has to do with you.

They trust you to know what to do when they're hurting. Whether it's ...

Pull them close for a hug
Kiss the owie
Grab the antibacterial ointment and bandages
Head to urgent care

... you know how to dry their tears and get them feeling like themselves again.

But what about kids' brains?

Just as kids hurt when their body gets banged up on the playground, they also hurt when their mental wellbeing takes a hit. This kind of pain can be harder to spot — and harder for parents and caregivers to soothe.

We'll show you how to help.

In this guide, you'll learn how to help your child maintain a healthy, resilient brain. We'll talk about monitoring and managing your child's mental wellness in times of stress. And, we'll discuss what you can do if a child you love needs more support.

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Who struggles with mental wellness?

Any kid can have mental wellness challenges.

Some are more likely to experience them because of heredity. (Issues like depression, anxiety, and ADHD run in families.)

Others, because of traumatic events.

And others are simply born prone to them. They are part of the body your child was given, just like if they had diabetes or asthma.

We all have different susceptibilities to mental wellness concerns. But the trigger for what brings those issues to the surface for kids and adults of all ages is almost always the same:

STRESS.

What stresses kids out?

- Parents feeling stressed
- A parent's divorce or remarriage
- Feeling left out
- Fighting with friends
- Bullying
- Moving or changing schools
- Birth of a sibling
- Tests or grades
- Being overscheduled
- Juggling responsibilities
- Body appearance
- Social media pressures
- Worrying about the health/wellbeing of a loved one
- High-visibility news events like mass shootings or the COVID-19 pandemic

This is their brain on stress



A little stress can be a good thing, even for a kid; it motivates them to try new things and to do well. In times of short-term stress, their body's fight-or-flight response kicks in and helps them focus on the task at hand, like when they're writing a story, climbing a tree, or running a race.

But chronic stress isn't good, or healthy.

When stress becomes chronic, your child can't turn off the fight-or-flight response. Unable to recognize that a threat isn't present, their body is flooded with stress hormones.

Over time, this can damage their brain and body and contribute to issues like depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns.

ACEs & traumatic stress

ACEs, or adverse childhood experiences, are particularly traumatic forms of stress that can impact childhood and family health for years—even across generations. These can include:

- Extreme poverty or neglect
- Witnessing or experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Living with someone with untreated mental illness or substance abuse problems

If your child has experienced ACEs, it's smart to monitor their wellbeing, as they may be more prone to physical or mental health challenges as they age. If you experienced ACEs in your own childhood, you may want to talk with your doctor or therapist about strategies to reduce the impact on your long-term health.



Know your kiddo: Signs of stress & struggles

Even on their best days, kids can be sad, angry, anxious, and irritable — and that's okay. Their brains are growing and changing constantly, and those big feelings help them learn to navigate the world around them.

However, unlike adults who are more experienced at talking through their emotions, kids don't have the words to express what they feel — so they communicate through behavior, instead.

While acting out is often an age-appropriate response to stress, some behaviors are more concerning than others. Read the checklists to learn some of the behaviors that may mean your child is struggling.



7/10
YOUNG PEOPLE
say mental health is
weighing them down.
Pew Research/GWI

3/10
MEMBERS OF GEN Z
say they feel anxious
or nervous almost
every day.

Young children may ...

- Have frequent tantrums or seem intensely irritable
- Have difficulty making or keeping friends
- Struggle in school or see failing grades
- Talk often about worries and fears
- Feel overly frightened of being separated from you
- Complain frequently of headaches or stomachaches
- Be in constant motion
- Have frequent nightmares
- Repeat actions or check things many times out of fear that something bad may happen
- Scratch their skin, pull out their hair, bang their head, or bite themselves
- Act aggressively towards family, peers, or pets

Older children & teens may also ...

- Lose interest in things they used to enjoy
- Have low energy
- Sleep or eat too much or too little
- Spend more time alone and avoid activities with friends or family
- Lash out at people they care about
- Strive to be "perfect"
- Diet or exercise excessively
- Have periods of very high energy and activity and require much less sleep than usual
- Smoke, drink, or use drugs
- Engage in self-harm behaviors, then wear long sleeves, pants, or makeup to cover the marks
- Exhibit risky or destructive behavior

REMEMBER:
They're not
giving you a
hard time ...
they're *having*
a hard time.

Since 2020, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Nevada, Oregon, and Virginia have enacted statutes that allow K-12 students to miss school days for stress and mental health concerns.

Pew Research

ids and teens communicate stress and big feelings through behaviors ... and those behaviors can be incredibly challenging. As you work to help your child, it's important to keep your own emotions in check.

THE Q-TIP METHOD

If you or your partner are struggling to keep cool when your child is acting out, try reminding yourself to Q-TIP:

Q-TIP: *Quit. Taking. It. Personally.*

It may feel like your child is being disruptive, disrespectful, ungrateful, or selfish. It may feel like they are doing these things *to* you.

They are not.

They have a need that's not being met, or a hurt that's not being soothed, and they don't have the words to tell you — or the tools to fix it.

Care you can do at home

Take a look at the speech bubbles.
Adults are familiar with these phrases.
They remind us that we can't be much
help to anyone else if we're emotionally
drained ourselves.

It's an important concept for kids to embrace, too:
They can't be a good friend, student, or teammate if they're running on empty.

One way both adults and kids can help themselves feel refreshed and replenished is by practicing self-care: activities we can all do each day to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health.

When children incorporate self-care into their daily routines, they learn to be mindful of their own needs, and they build a foundational skillset that will help them stay healthy now and into adulthood.

“You can’t pour from an empty cup.”

***“Please secure
your own mask
before helping
others.”***

Types of self-care for kids & families



When your child is feeling stressed, or if they are prone to mental wellness challenges and you want to keep a relapse at bay, here are some things you can work on together to improve their mood and overall health.

- In the past ten years, the number of children who meditate regularly for self-care has increased by over 800%.

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health; National Health Interview Survey



SLEEP:

To help manage stress, make sure your child is getting the recommended number of hours of sleep per night for their age. Their brains and bodies need sleep to grow, and their health will suffer if they are operating on a sleep deficit.

NUTRITION & EXERCISE:

Provide nourishing foods including proteins, fruits and vegetables; encourage them to drink plenty of water; and perhaps most importantly, help them get their body moving. Active kids are happy kids, and even a quick family walk around the block can improve their mindset.

STILLNESS:

Help them set aside time each day to be alone with their thoughts and away from all electronic devices. Model for them how they can use that time, whether its meditating, relaxing while taking deep breaths, writing in a journal, or spending quiet time in nature.

SOCIAL TIME:

One of the best predictors of a healthy life is strong social connections, so help them find ways to be with people they enjoy. Encourage them to join a team or club, bring them with you to volunteer, or schedule regular meetups or phone calls with friends and extended family.

PURPOSE:

Finding purpose is a little different for everyone, but for kids, it usually means figuring out what brings them joy. Is there a productive hobby, skill, or activity they can lose themselves in for hours? Find ways to support and encourage that joy.

49.5% of U.S. children will have a diagnosable mental illness before they turn 18, but only **7.4%** will get care in any given year.

ChildMind Institute: Children's Mental Health Report, 2015

Where to go when your child needs more help

Recognizing that your child needs more help for their mental health than you can provide can be overwhelming. But mental health challenges hurt, and one of the most loving things you can do for your child is finding them the care they need to feel their very best.

Here's who you can call for **SUPPORT.**



- **Start with their pediatrician**

Pediatricians or family doctors are skilled at screening for common mental health concerns. If needed, they can make referrals, write prescriptions, coordinate your child's care team, and monitor their progress as they receive treatment.

- **For young children, consider play therapy**

Play therapists use toys, games, art projects, and other forms of play to help kids relax, open up, and express what's on their mind. They can reframe your child's thinking and teach you and your child coping skills to practice at home.

- **For older kids and teens, try talk therapy**

In talk therapy, your child will have conversations with a trusted provider who can help them overcome negative thoughts, reframe personal challenges, improve relationships, and generally feel better. Psychologists, counselors, social workers (LISW/LCSW), and advanced psychiatric nurses can all provide talk therapy.

- **If the pediatrician or therapist suggests medication, call a psychiatrist**

Psychiatrists prescribe and manage medications that — combined with talk therapy and other healthy habits — can help treat symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. While your child's pediatrician can prescribe some common medications, psychiatrists specialize in pinpointing the combination and dosage that fit your child best.



Virtual care with Doctor On Demand®

If your child prefers to video chat with a licensed provider from the privacy of home, talk therapy and medication management with Doctor On Demand is an easy, affordable choice. Visit DoctorOnDemand.com to register, then download the free app.

Treatment pitfalls

Making an appointment with a trusted health care provider is a great first step on your child's journey to mental wellness. But — it *is* a journey, and there will be bumps along the way. Here's how to tackle some of the most common challenges.

It's common for your child or another family member to feel uncomfortable about seeking out mental health care — but there is nothing shameful about it. Remind them: You'd call an optometrist if your eyesight was going fuzzy. You'd call a cardiologist if your heart was fluttering. So why not call a doctor to help your brain stop feeling bad? From glasses, to pacemakers, to therapy and prescriptions, we all use health care to help our bodies work their best.

"This is embarrassing."

"I can't get an appointment."

Unfortunately, this is a big problem all across the U.S. As long as there is a provider shortage, the best thing you can do for your child is invest time and energy into being their advocate.

SEARCH THE LISTS. There are multiple search engines (see page 19) that can help you find mental health providers near you, including ones in your network who are accepting new patients.

CALL, THEN CALL AGAIN. The squeaky wheel really does get the grease. Call every provider available. Take notes on who you talk to. Ask to be put on waiting lists. Check in regularly to ask about cancellations.

USE YOUR RESOURCES. Sometimes, it's not who you call but who you know. Ask your contacts for suggestions and referrals. Reach out to your doctor, school counselor, clergy person, and your work's EAP program.



"My kid doesn't like their therapist."

"School is not going well."

"Friends are suggesting alternative treatments."

"My child is having side effects from their medication."

When you're going through a health journey, well-intentioned friends, family, and social media followers will often offer up alternative or complimentary care suggestions. Some of these suggestions, like yoga and other relaxation techniques, may be harmless or even helpful. But some suggestions — like eliminating certain food ingredients or giving your child supplements — are unproven and could even be dangerous to your child, especially if they are taking other medications. Bottom line? Always check with your child's doctor before adding another treatment to their care plan.

Did you know? Kids with diagnosed mental health conditions qualify for an individual education plan (IEP) or a 504 plan.

This means, you can partner with your school to determine what accommodations and adaptations can be made to the curriculum, schedule, or classroom environment to best help your child succeed. Contact your child's guidance counselor or principal to get started.

Most side effects will eventually fade. But if they are intolerable or upsetting, tell your child's doctor right away. It's important that you don't stop the medication suddenly without a doctor's permission, as this can lead to serious withdrawal symptoms.

Talking to kids about suicide: Dos & don'ts

Suicide can be a scary topic for kids and caregivers alike. But talking about it is key to prevention.



If your child confides in you ...

SAY THIS:

“I am here for you.”

“How can I help?”

“What is the best way I can support you?”

“I love you.”

“Your feelings are valid.”

“That sounds hard.”

“I’m sorry you’re going through this.”

“I may not understand how you’re feeling, but you’re not alone.”

NOT THIS:

“Think positive!”

“Snap out of it.”

“I know exactly how you feel.”

“It could be worse.”

“It’s just in your head.”

“Why can’t you get it together?”

“It’s your fault.”



Do have honest, age-appropriate conversations.

If your young child asks why someone would choose suicide, frame it in terms they understand: “Their brain was sick, and the sickness was stronger than the treatment.” For tweens and teens, ask what they have heard or what they know about suicide, and follow their lead into deeper conversation.

Don’t worry about putting ideas in their head.

Having conversations with your kids will not make them depressed or suicidal. Rather, by demystifying the subject, you’re making it easier for your child to ask for help when they need it.

Do ask direct questions.

If they are in a good headspace, ask, “What will you do when you or someone you know has thoughts about suicide?” If they are struggling, ask, “Are you thinking about hurting yourself, or about suicide? Have you thought about it at all in the last few weeks?”

Don’t judge.

If your child shares they have experienced these thoughts, keep your emotions in check. Kids will shut down if you react strongly. Don’t try to convince them they are wrong for feeling this way. Instead, ask gentle questions, listen carefully, and talk about a plan to keep them safe and get them help.

Do be vigilant.

Watch your child for warning signs of suicide. If you think they are in crisis or acute danger, don’t leave them alone. Take them to the nearest emergency room or call 911.

Warning signs: Get help now

Combined with the behaviors on page 7, a child may be in acute danger of attempting suicide if they ...

- ▶ Suddenly give away possessions
- ▶ Make comments about feeling trapped, wishing they were dead, or being a burden to others
- ▶ Have a detailed suicide plan covering how and when they plan to act
- ▶ Are preoccupied with suicide or dying in their writing, drawing, or online activity
- ▶ Show rage or talk about seeking revenge
- ▶ Suddenly seem happy or at peace after a long bout of depression; this can indicate relief after coming to a decision to end their life

Care for the caregiver

Loving and advocating for a child with mental health concerns can be a rollercoaster of emotions. You feel intense joy and gratitude on the good days. But on the bad days, it's easy to become overwhelmed, especially if you're pouring from an empty cup.

Here's how parents and caregivers can take care of themselves.

■ Think small.

Brief walks, power naps, and short conversations with people you enjoy can make all the difference.

■ Get help from trusted friends and family.

It's vital to have a safety net of people you can call when you need a break.

■ Find a local parent support group.

Both the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Mental Health America (MHA) have groups who meet across the country, as do many hospitals and houses of worship.

■ Remember: Your child is not their diagnosis.

Kids who struggle with their mental health will often lash out at those they care about most.

■ Remind yourself it's their condition talking, not them.

However, maintain your boundaries. Mental health challenges are an explanation — not an excuse — for mean or cruel behavior.

■ Take care of your love life.

Many caregiver parents report marital strain. Call on your trusted friends and family so you can enjoy regular date nights.



Up to 70% of family caregivers report symptoms of depression.

Zarit, S. (2006). *Assessment of Family Caregivers: A Research Perspective*.

Hy-Vee employee resources

Wherever you and your children are in your mental wellness journey, you can access tools, resources, and benefits to support you and your family. Don't hesitate to reach out — you've got lots of people ready to help.

SEARCH FOR CARE

Wellmark Care Finder

Search for in-network providers, including those who offer evening and weekend hours, who speak your language, and who are accepting new patients // Wellmark.com/finder

The Psychology Today® Therapist Finder

Search for therapists by insurance accepted, gender, therapy type, issues they specialize in and more // PsychologyToday.com/us/therapists

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

Search for facilities that treat substance abuse, addiction, and mental health concerns // FindTreatment.samhsa.gov

VIRTUAL VISITS

Doctor On Demand

Schedule affordable talk therapy and medication management visits from home // DoctorOnDemand.com

MANAGE YOUR BENEFITS

myWellmark® member portal

Review your coverage, track claims, monitor spending and more // myWellmark.com

EMERGENCY SUPPORT

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Free and confidential support for people and families in distress, including prevention and crisis resources // 1-800-273-8255



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