

4 Tips for Building Mental Wellness in Young Children

Mental wellness is just as important as physical health. These four tips can help your children develop key social and emotional skills early on and set them on a path to becoming healthy and balanced adults.

1 Build strong relationships.



Positive and nurturing relationships with caregivers—especially parents—are essential for the healthy development of children. The stronger the relationships, the stronger the foundation for a child’s mental wellness.

- Children’s brains grow the fastest in their first five years of life. Their everyday experiences with the world and those around them create the foundation for their health, learning, and behavior later in life.
- Being aware of and responding to a child’s needs in a caring and consistent way helps them feel loved, safe, and valued. This helps build trust and connection, the basis for strong relationships.
- Trust in caregivers builds trust in themselves, making children feel more confident to navigate the world and situations around them as they grow up.

Spending quality time with children helps foster connection. Aim to spend at least 10 minutes a day—being fully present and without distractions—doing activities together like playing or dancing, reading a book, taking a walk, etc.

2 Show empathy.



Just like adults, how children act is driven by how they feel. Put yourself in their shoes to understand the reasons behind their behaviors. When children feel seen and heard by parents and adults, they can better manage their emotions.

- Emotions are a mix of our feelings and thoughts. Children may express their emotions through behaviors that can be easily seen—such as tears and screaming—or through behaviors that are harder to see—like worrying and feeling nervous.
- Young children are still learning how to manage their emotions—to practice self-regulation and self-control—because their brains are still developing. It is important to have realistic expectations of what they can handle. Adults can help by naming and validating children’s feelings.
- Try to understand why a child is behaving in a certain way. When children “act out” or seek attention, it may be their way of telling you they need quality time together. Discuss behavioral concerns with their pediatrician or teachers if they last longer than usual.

Creating a nurturing and stable environment can help children feel secure and promote self-regulation, which is essential for preventing unwanted behavior. Have routines and clear communication about changes so children know what to expect during transitions.

3 Teach healthy coping skills.



Empower children with positive ways to express their emotions. Every child has unique needs, and it takes time and effort to figure out what works best. Model healthy coping strategies, use community resources, and seek out services and early intervention, if necessary.

- Mental wellness is not about being happy all the time. It is okay to feel sad, angry, or scared sometimes. These are normal feelings that everyone experiences. The important thing is to find healthy ways to manage these emotions.
- Children first learn to manage their emotions through connection with others, especially their parents. This is called co-regulation. When parents manage their own emotions in healthy ways, they teach their children how to do the same, eventually on their own.
- **Caregivers can model healthy coping strategies such as:**
 - **staying calm** even when things are tough (composure)
 - practicing **positive self-talk** and feedback (encouragement)
 - setting **clear boundaries** (assertiveness)
 - giving **choices** when possible (autonomy)
 - fostering **accountability** for our actions (consequences)
 - **learning** from our mistakes (growth mindset)
 - doing activities that **release emotions** (stress relief)

Building social, spiritual, and family connections can help us cope with stress and life's challenges. Lean into cultural strengths and community resources to create a sense of belonging and social support, contributing to strong mental wellness.

4 Take care of yourself.



Raising and taking care of children can be stressful. Find simple ways to nurture your own well-being and seek support if needed. When you meet your own needs, you will have more energy to support your children's needs and be the parent you want to be.

- Stress and anxiety can show up in different ways. Make it a practice to check-in with yourself to notice when you are feeling overwhelmed and take steps that bring you back to your best self.
- Seek support from loved ones, professionals like teachers or doctors, or a trusted local community-based organization if you need help meeting your own mental health needs.
- **Be kind to yourself and try to manage stress by:**
 - Getting **enough sleep**
 - Eating foods that **nourish your body**
 - Adding **movement and activity** throughout your day
 - Doing things that help you **feel relaxed**
 - Pausing and **taking deep breaths** regularly
 - Going outside and **connecting with nature**
 - **Being grateful** and focusing on the positive

Seeking help is a sign of strength because it shows you know yourself and your limits. Reach out to someone you trust for support or call or text the national Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 if you are in an immediate crisis.