



Your Child's Emotional Health

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

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What is emotional health?

As babies grow and develop, they have feelings. Parents and other close caregivers help children learn about their feelings and how to manage them. Parents and other caregivers cuddle a crying infant. They rock and calm a frightened toddler. They help preschoolers learn to wait, share, show anger safely and handle fears. A family's cultural heritage may influence parents' attitudes and approaches to teaching young children about ways to express feelings.

Children bring their own particular personality (or temperament) to all relationships from the moment they are born. One child may be quick to warm up to new people, places and things. Another may need more time and help to feel comfortable. Some children are easy to please. Others are more sensitive or difficult to make happy.

When you and other caregivers recognize and respect your child's individual personality, you can provide the kind of support and encouragement your child needs. With this help, your child will explore the world and feel competent and successful. When a child can interact with others, communicate needs and express emotions in safe ways, that child has good emotional health.



Can stress hurt my child?



Babies and toddlers respond to stress and life events in many different ways. Some young children may not seem to be affected by special family problems or life events much at all. Others may show you that they are overwhelmed by feelings.

Some life problems that may affect young children are:

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|--|-----------------------------|
| Premature birth | Move to a new home |
| Difficult birth | Death of a loved one or pet |
| Medical procedures | Physical abuse |
| Frequent loud arguments at home | Neglect |
| Separation or divorce of parents | Being homeless |
| Parent/caregiver's drug or alcohol abuse | Sexual abuse |
| Parent/caregiver's mental or physical illness | Housing problems |
| Exposure to violence in real life or on TV or movies | Hospital stays |
| Disasters for the family or community (fire, etc.) | |

Children can have many reactions to these kinds of events. Helping young children cope with hard feelings like sadness, anger or fear is a challenge for parents and other important caregivers.

What behaviors may suggest that my child is having difficulty with his/her emotional development?

Infants:

- Shows little interest in looking at faces or making eye contact
- Shows little interest in imitating expressions or movements
- Does not point to objects or show interest in watching people, animals or toys with parent
- Always twists away from the person holding him/her
- Resists adult's attempts to soothe
- Does not look for comfort from parent or caregiver
- Is unable to calm himself/herself
- Does not communicate needs like hunger, cold, distress
- Does not coo or babble in response to a familiar adult
- Does not respond to his/her name

Older babies and toddlers:

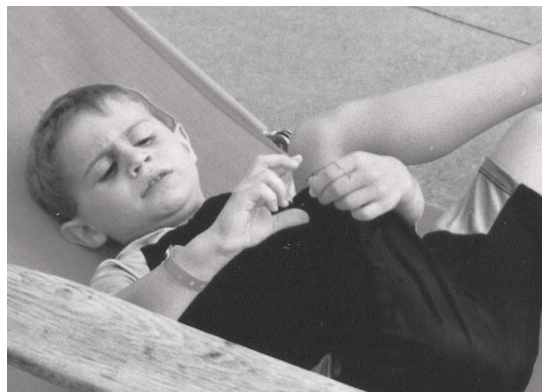
All of the items listed for young infants and

- Walks on toes, twirls or rocks
- Cries or is sad more often than other babies and toddlers
- Becomes very upset when separated (apart) from parent
- Becomes very clingy, wants to be held all the time
- Has intense and frequent tantrums
- Is very irritable
- Hits, bites, pushes other children more than most toddlers
- Has trouble sleeping

Older toddlers and preschoolers:

All of the items listed above, plus

- Is often defiant (refuses to listen to adults)
- Is always shy or upset in new situations
- Has little confidence in self, says "I can't do it" and cannot be encouraged to try
- Complains about feeling sick (headache, stomachache)
- Forgets or loses old skills (toilet training, language, etc.)
- Plays in odd or compulsive way
- Hurts self on purpose
- Talks about wanting to hurt self
- Gets injured a lot
- States that he/she is "bad"
- Has trouble concentrating at play
- Has trouble learning new skills
- Cannot sit still for meals or activities
- Squirms and climbs a lot more than other children
- Runs and bumps into people and things
- Hurts children, adults, or animals on purpose



When should I look for help for my child?

It is a good idea to look for help when:

- You have questions or concerns about your child's well-being
- Your child's behavior problems get worse
- You notice a sudden change in his/her behavior

How do I get help for my child?

Talking with your child's pediatrician is a good place to start. The doctor can make sure that there are no medical reasons for your child's behavior. The doctor may refer you to people who are trained to help figure out what is going on with your child. This resource could be a program or a person who is an early childhood specialist, a therapist or other mental health clinician.

Teachers, providers and program directors know a lot about children and the resources that are available to help families. If your child attends an early childhood program such as preschool or day care, the staff there can help.

If your doctor or child care provider does not share your worries or concerns, you can still look for help. If you have questions about your child's learning and behavior you can get help from programs or people such as:

- An Early Intervention Program (available from birth until the child's 3rd birthday)
- Special Education (through the local public schools for children ages 3 years and up)
- A Social Worker (LCSW, LICSW)
- A Child Psychologist (Ph.D.)
- A Child Psychiatrist (M.D.)

Therapists and other mental health professionals are trained to understand how children's feelings and behavior work together. These people will meet with you to talk about your worries about your child. They might want to talk with other people in your family who know your child. They also might be able to help you think about how to talk with family members who have questions about your decision to look for help. They may also request your permission to observe your child at child care and speak with the providers who care for your child.

After getting to know you and your child, a plan will be made with your help. Recommendations might include things like:

- Have regular routines with your child
- Make changes in the home environment
- Make changes in the child care environment
- Parenting support groups
- Play therapy
- Family therapy
- Special testing to gather information about what will help your child

What can I do to help my child?

Have daily routines that help your child feel safe. Routines show your little one that the world is predictable. Your child will learn to trust that you are there to meet his or her needs. (Examples: you child eats dinner at the same time each night, you tuck your child into bed after washing up each night.)

Your child care providers can make plans with you to help with transitions (For example, helping your child say “good-bye” to you when you are dropping off, supporting saying good-byes to teachers and friends at the end of the day).

Child proof your home. Young children are curious and learn by touching. Make your home safe so that your child can play and explore. Your child’s pediatrician will have information on how to do this.



Play with your child every day. Laugh and smile together. Look at books every day together.

Limit your child’s exposure to TV programs, videos, computer games, and movies. Adult programs that might not seem too violent to adults such as the news can be confusing or scary for young children. Try to limit the amount of time your preschooler watches children’s programs. If you can, watch with your child and talk about what you see and hear.

Help your child label his/her feelings: happy, sad, mad, or silly. When your child is frustrated or angry try not to get mad. Let your child know that you understand.

Give your child simple choices (for example, “Do you want to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt?”). When a child has some control over life, it leads to positive self esteem.

Allow your child to have a special “comfort object.” If she/he has a special blanket, stuffed animal, or favorite toy to hold, it might help with feeling safe.

Make clear, simple rules and use them consistently. When you mean what you say, your child will not be confused.

Limit how often you say “No.” Explain things in a simple way (for example, “I know that you want to go outside, but it is time for a nap.”)

Know how much your child can tolerate. A child who is tired, hungry or too excited will have trouble trying to control his/her behavior. Recognize your child’s signals that indicate he/she needs rest, food, or help to calm down before behavior is out of control.

Take care of yourself! Raising children is hard work and can be overwhelming at times. A parent or caregiver who is well rested will think more clearly and guide his/her child with patience. Your loving, nurturing and consistent relationship with your child is essential. It forms the basis for healthy emotional development and is the foundation for all learning.

“No matter what the situation, if we can help children talk about their concerns and their feelings, and really listen to what they tell us, we are letting them know we care deeply about them.”

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