



# All About Mental Health

## Information for Elementary Parents

Mental health refers to one's social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Just as you look after your child's physical health, it's important to look after their mental health as well.

### Support your child's mental health

#### **Make sure your child gets enough sleep.**

The amount of sleep a child gets impacts their mood and attitude. Make sure your child gets 9–11 hours of sleep a night.

**Encourage physical activity.** Physical activity improves both physical and mental health. Look for fun ways to integrate physical activity into your child's daily routine.

**Have calming routines.** A warm bath, bedtime stories, or listening to calming music are some good ways to help your child wind down and relax.

**Teach gratitude.** Help your child recognize things in their everyday life to be thankful for.

**Help others.** Helping others has been shown to improve mental health. Donate books and toys or shovel snow for a neighbor. Give your child ample opportunity to develop a giving spirit.

**Eat healthy.** Food fuels the body's health, including the brain. Research shows that nutrients found in foods like vegetables, fruits, fish, and nuts can improve brain function and mental health.

## Communication is key

*Regularly talking with your child is the best way to check in on their mental health.*

**Timing is important.** Be available to listen when your child wants to talk. Look for times when your child is most likely to be open to conversation, such as right after school or before going to bed.

**Recognize the importance of nonverbal communication.** Children can't always articulate what they need you to know. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to body language, moods, eating and sleeping patterns, physical appearance, and school performance. These can be good indicators of how your child is feeling.

**Offer support.** When your child is feeling down or upset, a hug or a few words of encouragement may be all they need. However, if you have concerns or are seeing the following, calmly and gently talk to your child about how they are feeling, and about how you can help.

- ▶ lack of energy
- ▶ prolonged sadness
- ▶ loss of interest in activities or hobbies
- ▶ outbursts, anger, and/or irritability
- ▶ difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- ▶ frequent complaints of illness
- ▶ changes in academic performance
- ▶ extreme clinginess
- ▶ changes in eating habits
- ▶ not wanting to go to school

If you need help, talk to your pediatrician for advice or referrals.

*For simple ways to support your child's mental health, watch this quick video.*





# Coping with Stress

## Information for Elementary Parents

Stress is the body's reaction to change, demands, and difficult situations. While we tend to think of stress as something teens and adults deal with, it's not uncommon for elementary children to experience stress. Helping your child develop healthy ways to cope with stress will benefit them throughout their adolescent years, and beyond.

### Signs of stress in children

When it comes to your child's mental health, keeping the lines of communication open is crucial. However, children aren't always able to verbalize how they feel, which is why it's important to pay attention to nonverbal signs like the ones below.

Here are some common signs of stress to watch for in your child. (These can vary in severity—the key is to look for changes that are sudden and drastic.)

- ▶ emotional outbursts and irritability that go beyond what is normal for your child
- ▶ an increase in headaches and/or stomachaches, and/or a change in appetite
- ▶ trouble falling or staying asleep, or a sudden onset of nightmares
- ▶ problems at school, such as difficulty focusing, a drop in grades, discipline issues, and trouble with friends
- ▶ a desire to spend more time alone
- ▶ an increase in defiant behavior

## Help your child cope with stress

*Here are some ways you can help your child manage stress.*

**Communicate with your child.** Your child may have a hard time talking about their feelings, or what is causing them stress. Make yourself available to talk, but keep the pressure low. A good time to chat is during another activity, such as getting ready for bed, riding in the car, playing a game, or having a snack.

**Keep life predictable.** Routines are important because they are something children can count on to be the same. When your child is stressed, it's important to stick to your daily routines as much as you can to give them a sense of structure and consistency.

**Have fun together.** Laughter and play are natural ways for children to relieve stress, and they provide a great distraction. Watch a funny show or read a funny book, play games as a family, dance, and spend time outside. You may find that these activities help you relieve stress, too.

**Model healthy coping strategies.** When you show your child healthy ways to cope with your own stress, it helps them understand that it's a normal part of life, and that stress is something that can be managed.

**Practice deep breathing.** For immediate stress relief, show your child how to breathe in deeply, count to four, and then slowly exhale. Have them repeat this as many times as necessary until they feel calmer.

*Stress and anxiety often go hand in hand. For some helpful information on anxiety, watch this quick video.*





# Managing Anxiety

## Information for Elementary Parents

Anxiety doesn't just affect teens and adults. Children can experience anxiety too, and it can have similar negative effects on their mental health and wellness. Here's how to identify anxiety in your child, and how you can help.

### Types of anxiety in children

It is normal for children to have fears and worries. While these fears and worries are generally mild and manageable, they can be severe enough to interfere with daily life.

These are some of the types of anxiety that children commonly experience.

**Separation anxiety** – fear of being separated from a loved one, usually a parent

**Social anxiety** – being very uncomfortable in social situations, and afraid of being embarrassed, ridiculed, or judged by others

**General anxiety** – worrying excessively about everyday things, and being preoccupied with what *could* happen

**Panic attacks** – an intense fear that comes on suddenly and causes physical symptoms, such as a rapid heart rate, trouble breathing, dizziness, shaking, and sweating

**Phobias** – an extreme fear of a person, place, thing, or situation

## Help your child manage anxiety

While it's impossible for your child to avoid anxiety completely, you can give them tools to help them manage it.

**Talk through it.** When your child is anxious about something, talk about ways they might handle it and develop a plan together. For example, if your child is scared of getting a shot at the doctor's office, talk about what they can do to make it easier (such as closing their eyes and holding your hand). Planning ahead can reduce anxiety.

**Show confidence in your child.** When your child is faced with something that scares them, let them know that they *will* be okay, and that they *will* get through it. This reassures your child that it's normal to be scared, and that you will be there to support them.

**Deal with triggers.** The best way for a child to learn to cope with the things that trigger their anxiety is to be exposed to them a little bit at a time. As children learn to function and cope *despite* these triggers, their anxiety level will decrease over time.

**Model healthy coping strategies.** When you show your child healthy ways to cope with your own triggers, it helps them understand that having anxiety is not only normal, but that it can be lived with and managed.

**Talk to a professional.** If your child's anxiety goes beyond what is normal for their age, and is making daily life difficult, talk to your child's pediatrician for advice and referrals.

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# Building Self-Esteem

## Information for Elementary Parents

Self-esteem is the perception of one's worth. Students who have good self-esteem feel liked and accepted. They have the confidence to try new things, and they are better able to cope with setbacks. Having good self-esteem helps students succeed both in and out of the classroom.

### Ways to help build self-esteem

**Encourage new experiences.** Whether it's trying a new sport or learning how to use a camera, allowing your child to try different things and conquer new challenges will help boost their self-esteem.

**Delegate responsibility.** Give your child age-appropriate household tasks, such as taking out the trash, helping put away laundry, taking care of a pet, or making their bed each day. Make sure that tasks are completed, and praise your child for their effort. Conquering even simple tasks can lead to big gains in self-confidence.

**Demonstrate perseverance.** You are your child's most important role model, and having your child see you overcome adversity and achieve personal goals is invaluable.

**Praise wisely.** Praise is the most meaningful when it has been earned. Boost your child's self-esteem by praising them for good effort, hard work, and good behavior.

**Help your child develop a skill.** Becoming good at something, whether it's a sport, drawing, singing, or cooking is a great way for your child to improve their self-esteem. Help your child identify interests and talents and provide opportunities for your child to pursue them.

**Don't dwell on mistakes.** How you respond to the mistakes your child makes sets the tone for how your child will respond to them. Instead of focusing on what your child has done wrong, remind them that mistakes are a part of life—and that they are opportunities for growth.

**Set goals.** Goals give children direction, focus, and purpose. Encourage your child to set both short- and long-term goals. When children accomplish their goals—no matter how big or small—they feel stronger and more capable.

**Provide opportunities to help others.** Helping others has been shown to improve mental health and boost self-esteem. Choose toys and books to donate or rake a neighbor's leaves together.

**Let your child fail.** As a parent, one of the greatest challenges is allowing your child to fail. However, experiencing failure teaches your child that it's not the end of the world—and that failure often provides information they can use to do better the next time.

**Love your child unconditionally.** As your child grows, there will be high and low grades on tests, games won and lost, and good and bad decisions made. Make sure your child knows that you love them—when they succeed, and especially when they don't.

*For tips on how to build your child's confidence, watch this short video.*







# Calming Techniques

## Information for Elementary Parents

Anger, stress, fear, and worry are complicated emotions for children, and calming techniques can help them re-center and relax.

Here are some tips on helping your child cope with these complex feelings, and some calming techniques you can try at home.

### Validate your child's emotions

The first step to helping your child manage their emotions is to acknowledge and validate them.

**Be accepting of negative emotions.** Some children believe that negative emotions are unacceptable, so they let these emotions build up inside until they erupt and are hard to control. Explain that it's normal to have a range of both happy *and* sad feelings, and encourage your child to notice and acknowledge them.

**Label emotions.** Encourage your child to label their emotions—both positive and negative. For example, *"I'm upset because I don't understand how to do this math problem."* When you notice that your child is struggling, ask them to describe, in their own words, what they are feeling.

**Don't minimize emotions.** Show your child that you understand how they're feeling and that you want to help, even if whatever your child is upset about seems like a small thing to you.

## Calming techniques

When emotions become hard for your child to control (and they will), try these calming techniques.

**Practice deep breathing.** Taking deep, measured breaths is the easiest way for your child to feel calmer. Show them how to breathe in, count to four, and then slowly exhale. Have your child place their hand on their stomach and feel how it expands and deflates with each breath.

**Identify soothing items.** Whether it's a favorite stuffed animal, a weighted blanket, or a smooth "worry stone," a comfort item can help calm and soothe your child when they are in distress.

**Tune in to surroundings.** To help ground your child during a outburst or meltdown, encourage them to use their senses to tune in to what's around them. Have them close their eyes and name what they can smell, touch, and hear.

**Provide a safe space.** Sometimes children just need to take a break in a place where they can safely cope with their emotions. Help your child identify a safe place in or around your home and stock it with a few favorite comfort items.

**Encourage patience.** There is no magic cure for strong emotions, and sometimes it takes awhile for you and your child to find coping strategies that work. Remind your child that even if a strategy doesn't help immediately, it's important to be patient and to keep trying.

*For ways you can support your child's mental health, watch this quick video.*





# Supporting Mental Health

## Information for Elementary Parents

Your child's mental health is just as important as their physical health. Here are ten ways you can help your child protect, improve, and maintain their mental health.

### 1. Love your child unconditionally.

In order for your child to feel secure and accepted, they need to know that your love doesn't depend on good behavior or accomplishments. Regularly tell your child that you love them. This is especially important when things are hard and your child is not at their best.

### 2. Nurture your child's confidence.

Encourage your child to try new activities and master new skills. Give them opportunities to show you how capable they are, and help them learn from the mistakes they make.

### 3. Limit time on electronics.

While some TV shows and video games can be educational and beneficial, children need physical activity and play in order for their brains to make crucial, healthy connections.

### 4. Teach calming techniques.

It's helpful for children to know how to calm themselves when they are upset, angry, or worried. For a few simple calming techniques, watch this short video.



## **5. Let them play.**

In addition to being fun, play can be a great stress reliever. Play is also important because it teaches your child self-control, creativity, and problem-solving skills—all of which will help them protect and maintain their mental health as they grow.

## **6. Don't minimize emotions.**

What may seem like a small problem to you can be a very big deal to your child. Encourage your child to label their emotions, let them know you understand how they're feeling, and then work together to come up with solutions.

## **7. Talk to your child.**

Make time each day to sit and talk to your child. Ask open-ended questions, and listen without interruption. Developing these connections will make your child more comfortable coming to you with problems, now and in the years to come.

## **8. Make home a safe place.**

Your home should be a place where your child feels loved, safe, and secure. Home should also be a place where your child knows that consequences for mistakes or misbehavior will be appropriate, consistent, and fair.

## **9. Create routines.**

Routines can provide security and stability for children. What might seem like a simple routine to you may be a source of comfort to your child.

## **10. Don't be afraid to ask for help.**

Even when you do everything right, your child's mental health can still be an issue. In these instances, reach out for help. Talk to your child's pediatrician for advice and referrals.