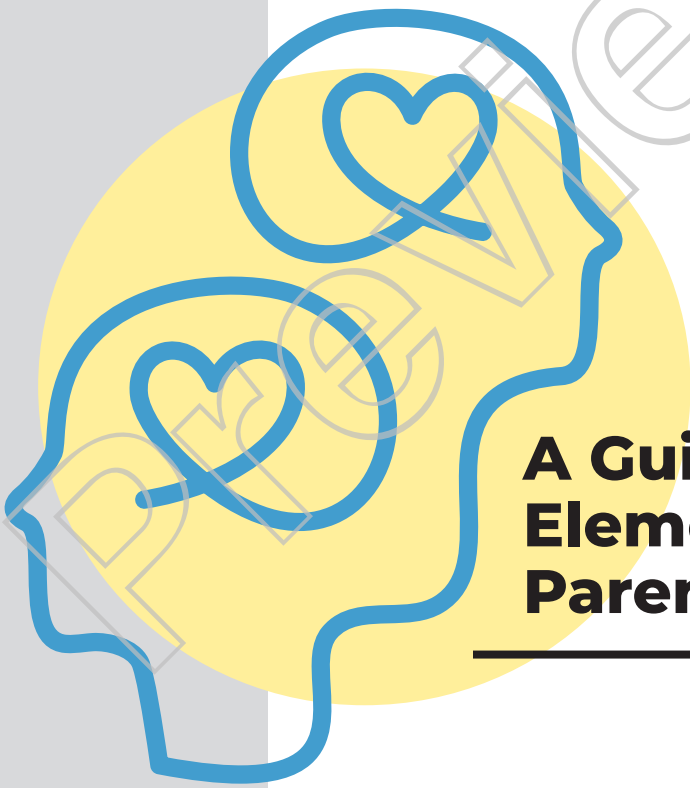


Your Child's **Mental** **Health**



**A Guide for
Elementary
Parents**

In a perfect world, children would feel calm, happy, and carefree all the time. In reality, of course, this isn't possible. Even young children face situations that make them sad, or that cause them to feel anxious or scared—and that's okay. Adversity is a part of life—and it's what often provides opportunities for growth.

Whether your child is generally happy and healthy or struggling with stress, anxiety, or another mental health issue, the information in this booklet will explain what mental health is, help you understand and identify common mental health struggles in children, and show you what you can do to help and support your child—and take care of yourself, too.



Your Child's Mental Health

A Guide for Elementary Parents

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What Is Mental Health?



Mental health refers to one's social, emotional, and psychological well-being. In children, this is often measured by how they learn, behave, and deal with emotions. Although mental health can be impacted by many things, there are ways you can help your child protect and maintain it.

Why is mental health important?

Mental health affects day-to-day living

When your child is calm, happy, and confident, they get more enjoyment out of life. On the other hand, if they often feel sad, angry, or anxious, daily life can be a struggle—for them and for you.

Mental health affects learning

A tremendous amount of learning takes place in the elementary grades, and to get the most out of their time at school, children need to be in a good place mentally.

Mental health affects relationships

Your child's relationships with you, family members, friends, and classmates are all impacted by how they feel. If they're unhappy, upset, or feeling down, forming and maintaining relationships is more difficult.

Learn to recognize nonverbal cues

Children can't always articulate what they need you to know. This is why it's important to pay attention to your child's body language, moods, eating and sleeping patterns, physical appearance, and school performance. These can be good indicators of how your child is doing.

Supporting Your Child's Mental Health

There are a number of simple things you can do each day to help maintain and improve your child's mental health.

Make mental health a priority in your home by doing the following.

Communicate openly

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

Exercise

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

Eat healthy

Have nutritious food and snacks available. Research shows that nutrients in foods like fish, fruits, and vegetables can improve brain function—and that a poor diet can negatively impact mood and memory.

Have calming routines

A warm bath, reading a book, or listening to calming music are some good ways to help your child wind down and relax.

Practice gratitude

Help your child recognize and verbalize gratitude for the people, things, and experiences in their life that they are thankful for.

Help others

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

Get enough sleep

The amount of sleep a child gets impacts their mood and attitude. Make sure your child gets 9–11 hours of sleep each night. *For more on sleep, watch this video.*



Helping Your Child Cope with Stress



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

How you can help

Communicate with your child

Your child may have a hard time talking about their feelings or about what's causing them to feel stressed. Make yourself available to talk, but keep the pressure low. A good time to chat is during another activity (helping your child get ready for bed, riding in the car, or playing a game).

Keep life predictable

Routines are important because they're something children can count on. When your child is stressed, it's important to stick to your daily routines as much as you can.

Model healthy coping strategies

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

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 a game as a family, dance, or spend time outside. You may find that these activities help you relieve stress too.

Helping Your Child Manage Anxiety

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

When your child is anxious...

Make a plan together

When your child is anxious about something, talk about how they might deal with it and develop a plan together. For example, if your child is scared of getting shots 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 or makes them anxious, let them know that they will be okay. This reassures your child that it's normal to be scared, and that you believe in their ability to cope with difficult situations.

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.

Don't hide your own anxieties

When you show your child how you cope with the things that make you anxious, it helps them understand that having anxiety is normal—and that it can be managed.

Get support

If your child's anxiety goes beyond what is normal and is making daily life difficult, talk to their pediatrician and ask for advice and/or referrals.



Helping Your Child Handle Anger



Outbursts of anger and tantrums are common in children. This is because many young people do not have the coping skills, language ability, or impulse control to deal with these feelings in a healthy way. When your child is angry, remind yourself that they are communicating with you through their behavior—and that they need your understanding, patience, and support. Here is what you can do.

Don't match anger with anger

When your child is upset, the situation can escalate—fast. Remain calm, take several deep breaths, speak to your child in a quiet voice, and remember that they are still learning how to regulate their emotions.

Stand your ground

Dealing with an angry child is exhausting, and it's tempting to give in. But when you give in to your child's demands, you are teaching them that a tantrum is an effective way to get what they want.

Avoid triggers

Work with your child to keep track of what triggers their outbursts and tantrums. Do they always happen at the same time of day, or in response to the same demand or activity? This can help you anticipate these situations, make a plan to deal with them, or avoid them altogether.

Help develop problem-solving skills

Whether it's using their words to explain why they're upset, trying a calming technique, or taking a self-imposed "time out," work with your child to develop healthy coping skills.

Helping Your Child Build Relationships

Having positive relationships with others is important to your child's mental health and well-being. Here are some things you can do to help your child develop friendships and build relationships.

- ▶ If your child is shy or has a hard time making friends, encourage them to find classmates who like the same things they do.
- ▶ Find something for your child to join. It's easier for children to make friends when they are part of a group or involved in an activity.
- ▶ Encourage your child to go out of their way to be friendly to everyone, and to strike up conversations by giving a compliment or asking a question.
- ▶ If your child experiences rejection or is teased, listen, be supportive, and talk to your child about how to best deal with the situation.
- ▶ Children with a positive self-image are better able to deal with social situations and peer pressure. Spend time with your child to help them develop a strong sense of self.
- ▶ Most importantly, regularly talk to your child about how things are going at school and with friends.



Bullying

Bullying can be a problem in the elementary grades. If your child complains about someone bothering them at school, find out exactly what happened. Then talk to your child's teacher, counselor, or principal.

Sometimes children are afraid to tell their parents they're being bullied. If your child suddenly doesn't want to go to school, talk to them and ask if someone is causing problems for them at school.

Technology and Mental Health



It's not surprising that research shows a link between technology use and declining mental health in young people. While elementary-aged children may not yet use social media, they often play games online and use the internet. Parents need to do everything they can to make sure that their children use technology safely and responsibly.

What you can do

- ▶ Limit the amount of time your child spends online, monitor their online activities, and encourage your child to engage in a variety of "offline" activities.
- ▶ Use parental controls, but be realistic about their effectiveness. Supervision and monitoring are the best ways to protect your child.
- ▶ Keep your family computer in a common area of your home (kitchen or family room). Children should not have internet access in their bedroom or in areas that may be difficult to supervise.
- ▶ Discuss what information is appropriate to share online. Remind your child that people online may not be who they say they are, and to never share personal information with anyone.
- ▶ Monitor your child's online game playing. Some games contain explicit violence, mature language, and/or sexual content that can be harmful to a child's mental health.

For more information on video games, watch this video.



Building Your Child's Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the perception of one's worth. Children who have a healthy self-esteem feel loved and accepted. They have the confidence to try new things, and are better able to cope with setbacks. Here is how you can help build your child's 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. Conquering even simple tasks can lead to big gains in self-confidence. Make sure to praise your child for their effort.

Let your child fail

As a parent, one of the greatest challenges is allowing your child to fail. But experiencing failure teaches your child that it's not the end of the world—and that failure often provides information they can use to grow.

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 strong and capable.

Help your child develop a skill

Developing a skill is a great way for your child to improve their self-esteem. Look for ways to help your child pursue and develop their interests and talents.

For ways to help build your child's confidence, watch this video.



Teaching Calm and Relaxation



Calming and grounding techniques can help children recenter and relax—and deal with complicated emotions like anger, stress, fear, and anxiety. Here are some tips for incorporating these techniques at home.

Calming techniques

Practice deep breathing

Taking deep, measured breaths is the easiest way for your child to feel calm. 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're upset.

Provide a safe space

Sometimes children just need to take a break where they can safely cope with their emotions. Help your child identify a safe place in your home and stock it with some 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.

Grounding techniques

Mindful movement

Doing something physical is a great way for children to ground themselves and feel calmer. In addition to walking, they can try stretching, running, or a yoga pose. The key is to focus on the way their muscles and other body parts feel as they move.

The 5-4-3-2-1 technique

With this technique, children tune in to their senses and focus on what is happening around them. Have your child list 5 things they can see, 4 things they can touch, 3 things they can hear, 2 things they can smell, and 1 thing they can taste.

Belly breathing

Have your child inhale slowly until they feel their belly expand, and then slowly exhale. They can say or think the words *in* and *out* as they breathe, and place a hand on their belly to feel its movement.

Stomp-stomp-blow

Have your child stomp one foot, then the other foot, and then exhale forcefully. As they do this, tell them to imagine that they are blowing away their bad feelings. They can repeat this pattern as often as needed.

Validate your child's emotions

Be accepting of negative emotions. Some children believe that negative emotions are unacceptable, so they hold them in until they erupt. Explain that it's normal to have a range of feelings, and encourage your child to notice and acknowledge them.

Label emotions. Encourage your child to label their emotions. For example, *"My friend is moving away and that makes me really sad."* When your child is struggling, ask them to describe how they feel.

Don't minimize. 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.

Mental Health Resources



If your child is struggling...

No matter what your child is going through, there are resources available to help them—and you.

Work with your school

If your child is struggling, remember that the teacher(s) and support personnel at your child's school are available to help. If they are unable to assist with a particular problem, they can provide referrals and suggestions.

Talk to your pediatrician

Your pediatrician knows your child and is interested in your child's mental health, as well as their physical health. Talk to your pediatrician and ask for their advice.

Other resources

On Our Sleeves (www.onoursleeves.org) offers free, expert-based children's mental health information and resources to parents, teachers, and communities.

National Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 to chat online with someone who can help.

Activeminds.org can help you and your child connect with a mental health professional in your area.

For additional information on supporting your child's mental health, watch this short video.





Caring for Your Own Mental Health

In order to help your child manage and care for their mental health, you need to care for your mental health, too.

Practice self-care

Self-care does not have to be complicated, but it is crucial for maintaining your mental health. Find what helps you feel calm and centered, and integrate it into your daily life.

Give yourself a break

When you feel your stress or anxiety level rising—whether from day-to-day demands or during an interaction with your child—stop, take a breath, and go to a quiet space for a few minutes. Return only after you feel calm and in control. It's okay to take a mental health break.

Be aware of the effects of social media

People tend to post only highlights of their life on social media, and this can make you feel like other families are more perfect, more fun, or more "together" than yours. Just remember that you're only seeing filtered snippets of others' lives.

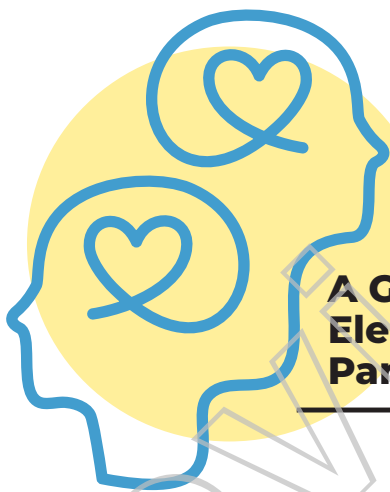
Engage in physical activity

Exercise releases brain- and mood-boosting chemicals that decrease stress and anxiety—and it's good for your body, too. Try to fit in at least 30 minutes of physical activity a few times per week.

Ask for help

Whether it's a partner, friend, family member, or mental health professional, reach out for help when you need it.

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This booklet is filled with important information to help you support your child's mental health and well-being.

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