

INSIGHTS

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5 mental health habits to promote in kids

Kids who are mentally healthy are equipped to handle many of life's curve balls that come their way. They also don't let their emotions overwhelm them. As a result, they learn better and have more friends as well.

It seems strange to talk about promoting good mental health in children.

Shouldn't all children naturally have good mental health habits? After all, childhood is supposed to be a pretty relaxed time of life, free from the pressures and stresses that can come with adulthood.

Sadly, it doesn't seem that way. According to the Australian Psychological Society one in seven Australian children experience some type of mental health issue, with ADHD, anxiety and depression being the most common kind.

Having good mental health doesn't mean that kids don't experience difficulties or worries. Feeling worried, sad or fearful is normal. Kids who are mentally healthy are equipped to handle many of life's curve balls that come their way. They also don't let their emotions overwhelm them. As a result, they learn better and have more friends as well.

As a parent it's useful to reflect on the mental health habits that you promote in your kids. Here are five basic mental health habits that you can consider right now:

1. Sleep: Sleep is the one of the building blocks of mental health and well-being. Many children and just about all teenagers are sleep-deprived at the moment. Many parents are sleep-deprived as well!!!!!! Children need between 10 and 12 hours sleep to enable proper growth and development, while teenagers need a minimum of nine hours. One of the single, most powerful strategies to improve kids' ability to cope with stressful or changing situations is to ensure they get enough sleep.

2. Exercise: When my mum told me all those years ago to turn the television off and go outside and play she didn't know that she was promoting good mental health. She just knew that physical activity was a good thing for an active, growing boy. Kids today get less exercise than those of past generations, which is an impediment to mental health. Exercise stimulates the chemicals that improve mood and release the stress that builds up over a day. An hour's movement per day seems the minimum for kids. *How much exercise does your child receive?*

3. Help others: Social isolation is a huge predictor of poor mental health. Encourage your child to be connected to others and to help others in any way possible. Helping others reinforces social



connectedness and the importance of being part of a community, as well as providing opportunities for positive recognition.

4. Talk: A problem shared is a problem halved! Talking about what's worrying you is a great way to remove the burden of worry and reduce anxiousness. Some kids bottle up what's inside, while others will catastrophise a situation, which can make matters seem worse. If your child or young person has a problem let him know that his concerns are important to you. Kids often can't tell you what may be wrong, so be observant and gently ask questions to help you get a clearer picture of how they may be feeling.

5. Relaxation: Make sure your child or young person has a hobby or activity that relaxes them. The ability to relax and get away from the stresses of everyday life is essential. Some children who have real difficulty switching-off may benefit from practising meditation or mindfulness, but most kids just need to have the time to chill out, and they'll relax quite naturally.

These five habits are basic common sense. However, as kids' lives get busier these essentials get squeezed out. Here's my recommendation to ensure that mental health habits don't get overlooked or neglected.

First, see these habits as the building blocks of mental health. Don't ignore them or trivialise them. Talk to your children and tie these activities to their mental health but do so in your own way and in your own timeframe.

Second, assess which of these five essential habits need your attention and make some adjustments over time to push the pendulum back, if necessary, in favour of your child's mental health.

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