



Raising Emotionally Healthy Kids



May is Mental Health Awareness Month



It is important to give as much thought to your child's emotional health as you give to their physical well-being.

“Emotional health is an area that a lot of pediatricians overlook and, as a result, so do many parents,” says Juliette Tuakli-Williams, M.D., M.P.H., a clinical instructor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine.

Emotional well-being is no less important than, say, making sure your child gets immunized on schedule. By supporting the youngster's emotional health, you'll nurture their spirits, which can influence everything from self-esteem to a child's ability to form relationships with you and other adults and children.



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Dr. Tuakli-Williams offers these suggestions for enhancing your child's emotional development from birth through the teen years.

Take baby's cues

During the first two months of a child's life, regard your baby with an open mind and pay attention to the infant's behavior and various cries and ways for expressing hunger, distress, boredom, displeasure, and pleasure.

"I think most children come into the world with a basic temperament that essentially takes them through the rest of their lives," says Dr. Tuakli-Williams. "The sooner you learn to appreciate your baby's personality and work with it, the happier everyone will be."

Give toddlers time

More than anything else, toddlers need to feel important to their parents. To make your toddler feel appreciated, try to spend at least 30 to 60 undivided minutes each day with your child.

"No matter what else is going on in your life, take time each day and engage totally and completely with your child in activity that's driven by your child," advises Dr. Tuakli-Williams. "Having a predictable daily connection goes a long way toward enhancing your child's sense of security and self-importance."

And if you haven't already begun to do so, read up on what's age-appropriate behavior for your child or attend a parenting class. By understanding where your child is developmentally, you'll be better able to manage behavior problems.

Be available to school-aged kids

Entering kindergarten is an important emotional landmark for children that parents should recognize, as are the various "graduations" from lower to junior high and on to high school.

"Parents make a grievous error by regarding them as no big deal," says Dr. Tuakli-Williams. School, in general, can unearth a host of emotional issues, from fitting in and making friends to meeting academic and social expectations within the school and at home. To help your child better deal with school anxiety, be available at the end of each day so the youngster can talk things out.



Share your experiences

The teenage years are a time when children separate from their parents emotionally. Though it may not seem the children want anything to do with you, "they still need you," says Dr. Tuakli-Williams.

Your role: to be on the periphery of your child's life while watching for signs of distress, such as falling grades, truancy, substance abuse, social, emotional, or physical withdrawal from the family or others, and/or risky sexual activity.

At this stage, children are confronting their budding sexuality and self-image. "To help your child better cope with this emotionally complex time, talk about your own experiences as a teenager or those of friends or family members," advises Dr. Tuakli-Williams.

Recounting these anecdotes can "give teens a frame of reference," says Dr. Tuakli-Williams. "They won't thank you or acknowledge it, but they'll use it as a source of comfort."

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