



Comfort Play & Teach



Mental Health and Brain Development

You may be surprised to learn that some that infants, toddlers and preschoolers have mental health issues. As with adults, a child's mental state profoundly impacts her cognitive, physical and emotional development and overall well-being.

Families all experience varying levels of stress, but children whose families experience stress on a consistent basis are more likely to develop mental health issues that will affect their physical health and ability to learn. We now know that children who have experienced prolonged high levels of stress or "toxic stress" are more likely as adults to have difficulty expressing their emotions, maintaining relationships, and even holding down a job. These tips will help families better understand how to reduce the amount of stress their children are experiencing and give them the tools to become happy, healthy and functioning adults.

Your Baby/Toddler (Birth to 36 months):

Your child's early experiences shape her brain, and the way in which it is built. It's these experiences in the first three years of life that hardwire into your child's brain. As an infant, your child looks to you for her every need, so it is important that the experiences that she has with you are positive, that she may come to see the world as a safe place.

- A secure attachment is the most important piece to building a relationship with your child, and ensuring that he has the best chance at developing good mental health. This means that every time your child signals you, you respond with love and nurturing kindness. This lets your child know that you are in tune with his needs, and that you will respond to his needs.
- A child at this age requires 24/7 attention. This can be overwhelming for any parent and can heighten any stressful situation. In order for you to be in tune and responsive to your child, you need to make sure that your own mental health is taken care of as well. This may mean carving out time for yourself each week in order to recharge. When you are well, you are in a position to be a more responsive parent.
- When possible, reduce or eliminate any unnecessary stress and chaos from your life. Small changes in your day such as preparing meals over the weekend, laying out clothes for you and your child the night before, and giving yourself extra time as you get ready for the day, will all help reduce your level of stress and therefore reduce your child's level of stress.
- Choose your battles and give room for flexibility. Every child has her own temperament, likes and dislikes. By giving your child options you can stave off many temper tantrums and let your child feel she has some control. This also helps her to build a sense of autonomy and problem solving skills.

Comfort:

Responding to your child with comfort when he is in distress is imperative for building a secure attachment and the foundation for good mental health.

Play:

Let your child lead in play and follow his cues. He will let you know what he needs.

Teach:

By being consistent in your responses you will teach your child that he can depend on you.



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Your Preschooler (36 months to 48 months):

Your child is now becoming his own person who has his own thoughts and ideas about the world he lives in. He is aware of the people in his life and knows whether or not he can trust them. School can be a great place to foster mental health and self-esteem as your child has the opportunity to interact with all kinds of different people, make friends and experience new and exciting things. Schools and child care centres can act as buffers or “protective factors” for children who may be experiencing stress in other areas of their life. These are positive places for children in order to find relief and allow their stress levels to reduce to a point where they can begin to have fun and learn without distraction.

- Children who have experienced love and have a secure attachment to their primary caregiver are more likely to do well once they have entered a child care centre or a school. Your child should be able to go into her classroom and be able to become engaged with her classmates. Working together, turn-taking and expressing her emotions are all ways that you can see that she has good mental health.
- At this age, aggressive behaviour, such as hitting should no longer be an issue. Children who have been exposed to loving relationships and have been given the opportunity to use words to express their feelings, no longer use hitting to solve their problems. They use words, or find an adult who can help them. These are signs that your child is maturing. If you are concerned about your child’s aggressive behaviour work with your child’s teacher to find strategies to help your child reduce such behaviour and find other ways to express herself.
- Talk to your child and actively listen when she talks to you. She may not want to tell you if she is having problems at school, like being teased or bullied. If you know what is happening you can help your child to problem solve and work through interpersonal problems with peers and boost her self-esteem.
- Engage in dramatic play with your child. Children love to play pretend and this is a good way to introduce scenarios where you can teach your child lessons about fairness, empathy, love and safety. Let your child lead the play and listen carefully to the scenarios your child chooses to act out and what the conversations between the characters are like. This will allow you some insight into how your child feels about playing with others, how he relates to the story he is telling and how he see himself within that context.

Comfort:

Talk to your child about her day, every day. This will show her that you care about her experiences.

Play:

Role play to see how your child views the world and how she would react in different scenarios. You will learn about the things that effect her most.

Teach:

Help your child problem solve. By showing her different ways to deal with problems and you will set her up with the knowledge that there are many different solutions to any problem.