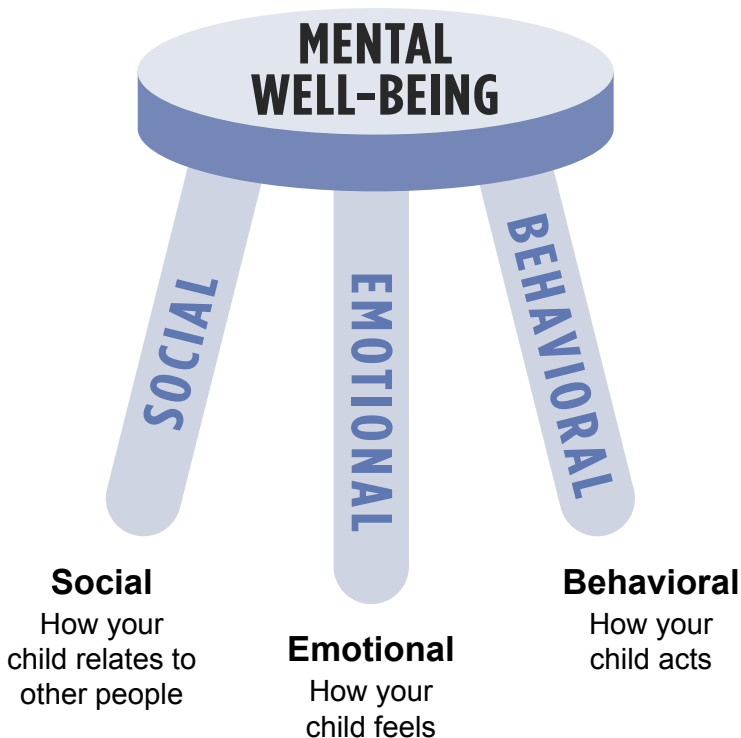


# Supporting Your Child's **Mental Well-Being**



# What is mental well-being?

Experts define mental well-being in children as having healthy social skills, reaching emotional and developmental milestones and knowing how to cope when faced with problems. Mental well-being helps your child get along with peers and adults, do well in school and become a productive member of society. You can think of your child's mental well-being as a three-legged stool:



A stool needs all three legs to function well. Think of it this way: When children feel happy or calm, it's easier for them to be nice to others and follow rules. But when children are sad or angry, it is harder for them to be kind and cooperative. And children who are equipped with social skills, like sharing and taking turns, are better able to make friends—which often leads to a more positive attitude toward school.

Schools teach students to get along with others, understand feelings and choose positive behaviors. But the most effective lessons take place at home. This booklet is full of ideas for building social and emotional skills that improve mental well-being, relationships and behavior. These skills can boost academic achievement—and help to prepare your child for the future.





# Promote SOCIAL well-being

## Help your child make friends

Friendships are important for children's mental well-being, and kids who have friends at school feel an important sense of connection. Friendships often begin with shared interests, so:

- **Encourage your child to notice** what others are reading, drawing, writing about, wearing or eating. Your child might say something like, "That's a good book. I like that series, too."
- **Role-play social interactions** with your child. Practice starting conversations, asking questions, and responding to others in a friendly way. This can build your child's confidence in approaching new people.
- **Get your child involved** in extracurricular activities. The school, the parks and recreation department, cultural and religious organizations and community centers may offer clubs and teams where your child meet peers with similar interests.





# Promote SOCIAL well-being

## Teach your child to “read” emotions

Recognizing other people’s feelings can help your child strengthen relationships by showing understanding and consideration. To help your child learn this skill:

- **Take turns acting out feelings**

and guessing them. Then, encourage your child to find ways to respond considerately. Your child can think, “What would I want someone to do for *me* in this situation?”



- **Pause during story time**

to discuss how book characters are feeling and to look for examples of characters showing understanding and kindness.

- **Talk about the emotions** you observe in others during the day. At the grocery store, you might say, “That person looks frustrated because they can’t find what they need.” Or, “The cashier seems happy to see us today; she’s smiling.”



# Promote SOCIAL well-being

## Strengthen conflict resolution skills

Conflict is a normal part of relationships, even among the best of friends. Healthy conflict resolution skills like these can keep relationships strong:

- **Using “I” messages.** These can clarify issues without placing blame. Your child can fill in the blanks: “I feel [blank] when [blank].” (“I feel sad when you sit with someone else at lunch.”) For persistent problems, your child should seek adult help.
- **Encourage your child to listen** carefully to what the other person is saying and repeat it back. “So, it sounds like you’re upset because I didn’t wait my turn on the swing.” This helps both children feel heard and understood, which can minimize conflict.
- **Taking responsibility and apologizing.** If your child caused the conflict, it’s important to acknowledge the other person’s feelings—and try to make things right. (“I’m sorry I knocked down your block tower. I know I made you feel sad. I’ll help you rebuild it.”)





## Build a healthy self-image

Your words and actions matter. To support your child's positive self-image:

- **Give praise** that focuses on your child's efforts and actions. Saying "You studied a lot and brought up your math grade—that must feel great!" teaches your child that hard work is something to feel proud of.
- **Nurture talents and interests** by encouraging participation in activities your child enjoys.
- **Ask for your child's ideas** and opinions regularly, on everything from family activities to major purchases.
- **Encourage problem-solving.** When your child faces a challenge, resist the urge to immediately fix it. Instead, ask open-ended questions like, "What are some different ways you could approach this?" Solving problems on their own makes children feel capable.

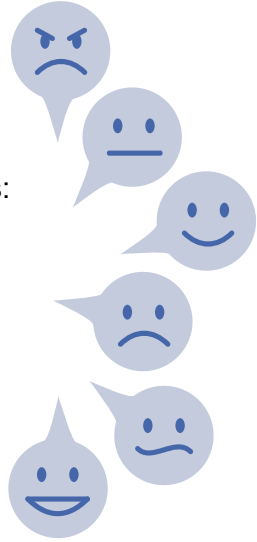




## Promote self-awareness

Being aware of feelings is a key step toward coping with challenging situations. To teach your child to recognize personal feelings:

- **Build emotional vocabulary.** A basic self-awareness skill is labeling feelings with words like *sad*, *frustrated* and *disappointed*. You can help by naming your child's emotions: "I bet you're *disappointed* that your game got rained out."
- **Encourage your child to reflect** on emotions. Ask questions like, "What happened right before you started feeling sad?" or "What do you think made you feel so excited?"
- **Label your own feelings.** You might tell your child, "I'm a little *nervous* about my job interview tomorrow."





## Help your child manage feelings

Everyone feels sad or angry sometimes. The secret isn't avoiding these feelings, but understanding how to handle them constructively. Here are some helpful tips to support your child:

- **Talk about appropriate strategies** to use, like slowly counting backward from 10, walking away or seeking adult help. Show how you handle emotions, too. "I feel impatient because we're stuck in traffic. Let's sing along with the radio." Then, take turns acting out emotions and practicing coping strategies.
- **Show you understand** when your child expresses feelings inappropriately. Then, offer an alternative. "I know you're mad screen time is over, but slamming the computer shut can break it. Choose a screen-free activity to do instead, like jumping rope or finger-painting."





## Foster resilience

Resilience is the ability to cope with change and recover from setbacks. And it is a skill children can learn. To improve your child's resilience:

- **Nurture family relationships.** Supportive adults make your child feel secure. Check in regularly by asking your child, “How are things going?” and listening closely to the answer. Find shared interests and do activities together. When possible, make caring relatives or family friends a regular part of your child's life.
- **Create predictable routines.** Children feel secure when they can count on certain things, especially during difficult times. Try to keep mealtimes, bedtime and family rules and consequences consistent. Establish traditions like Saturday pancake breakfasts or family sing-alongs.
- **Encourage positive thinking.** Teach your child to “flip” negative thoughts. When something is difficult, your child can change “I can't do it” to “I can't do it ... yet” or “This is the worst thing ever” to “With help from my family, I will get through this.”





# Foster EMOTIONAL wellness

## Teach healthy stress-management techniques

Share ways you deal with stress and encourage your child to experiment to find out what works best. Suggest that your child try:

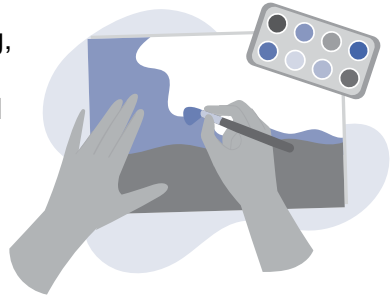
- **Deep breathing.** When anxiety strikes, have your child breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth several times.

- **Physical activity.** Ride bikes, shoot baskets and visit the playground as a family. Encourage your child to take up a sport or another active hobby. Have your child play outside with friends.



- **Nature.** Spend time outdoors appreciating the sights, sounds and scents of nature. Go for hikes, explore parks or camp out.

- **Creative pursuits.** Drawing, painting, singing or playing a musical instrument can all reduce stress.





# Encourage positive BEHAVIOR

## Use positive discipline

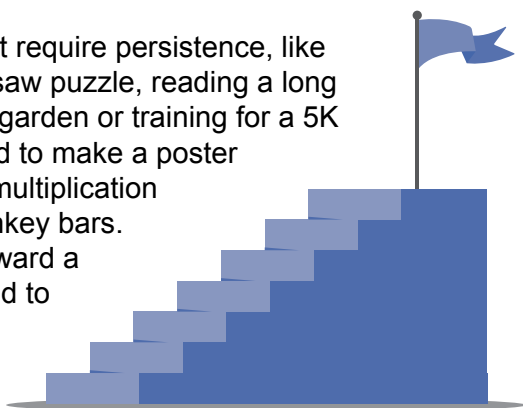
Noticing what your child does right encourages similar behavior. When you say, “It was kind of you to read to your siblings,” you motivate your child to be kind to siblings in the future. When your child misbehaves, criticize the behavior instead of your child. Say, “It was irresponsible to leave your bike outside” rather than “You’re so irresponsible.” Praise far more often than you criticize.

## Teach your child to think before acting

Encourage your child to stop and consider the consequences before acting on impulses. What might happen if your child grabs a toy from a younger sibling? What are better alternatives? (*Asking nicely for the toy, offering a different toy.*) It may help your child to picture a bright red STOP sign.

## Encourage persistence

Do activities together that require persistence, like putting together a big jigsaw puzzle, reading a long chapter book, planting a garden or training for a 5K run. Encourage your child to make a poster with goals, like learning multiplication facts or crossing the monkey bars. Celebrate small steps toward a goal to motivate your child to keep going!





# Encourage positive BEHAVIOR

## Teach problem-solving strategies

It's tempting to try to solve your child's problems. But that can keep your child from learning to solve problems independently. Instead, ask questions to guide your child toward solutions. ("What could you say that might help you and your friend make up?" or "How can you avoid forgetting your schoolwork tomorrow?")



## Promote responsible decision-making

Let your child make everyday decisions, like which pants to wear or which fruit to eat, and live with them. Practice with low-stakes choices will help your child make big decisions responsibly later, like saying *no* to negative peer pressure. Teach your child to listen to that "inner voice." If an action feels wrong, like sharing test answers with a classmate, it probably is.

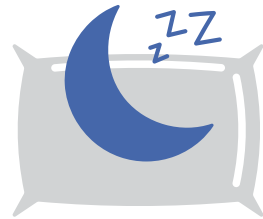
# Support OVERALL well-being

There are many strategies you can use to promote your child's mental well-being and make sure all three legs of the "stool" (social, emotional and behavioral) are sturdy. Use these guidelines:

## Focus on physical health

Physical health and mental well-being are closely linked. To help your child stay healthy:

- **Make time for physical activity** and plenty of sleep. Experts recommend at least one hour of exercise and at least 9 to 12 hours of sleep per day.
- **Take your child for regular medical checkups.** Pediatricians screen for physical *and* mental health issues.
- **Provide your child with a balanced diet.** If access to nutritious foods is a concern, talk to the school counselor or social worker about school and community resources.



## Promote healthy technology use

Too much screen time—and the wrong kinds of screen activities—can have a negative impact on mental well-being. To avoid this, you can:

- **Monitor screen use** so you know what devices and content your child is using.
- **Establish specific times** (like mealtimes) and areas (such as bedrooms) where digital devices are not allowed.
- **Make technology use meaningful** and constructive. Your child might video chat with relatives, watch educational TV shows with you or look up craft projects to try.
- **Aim for balance.** Screen time should not take away from healthy offline activities like active play, in-person socializing, reading, etc. Set an example by putting away your phone while talking with your child.



# Know when and how to seek help

Encourage your child to ask for help with problems like anxiety or sadness, but know that children often don't do this. So look for signs that your child needs help. These include withdrawing from family and friends, avoiding favorite activities and changes in eating and sleeping habits, among others. Contact a health professional if your child asks for help or if you notice these or other concerning signs. Also, be sure to partner with the school. Teachers, administrators and school counselors and social workers want to support your child's academic achievement *and* mental well-being. They can offer advice, make sure your child receives appropriate support at school and connect you with resources.



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