

Promoting good mental health for children (3–6 years)

What good mental health in children looks like

Mental health is the way children think or feel about themselves and the world around them. It's related to how children cope with life's challenges and stresses.

Children with good mental health:

- feel happy and positive about themselves
- enjoy life
- learn well
- have healthy relationships with family and friends
- can manage sad, worrying or angry feelings
- can bounce back from tough times.

Your child's mental health and you

Good mental health in childhood also provides the foundation for better mental health and well-being later in life. Lots of things influence children's mental health, including some that you can help with.

Tips for promoting good mental health

A loving and supportive relationship with you directly and positively affects your child's mental health. Here are some ideas:

- Tell your child that you love him, no matter what. You can also show him love by giving him lots of cuddles!
- Praise and encourage your child when he does something well or behaves in a way that you like.
- Make time every day to talk and listen to your child. If he wants to talk, try to stop what you're doing and give him your full attention.
- Enjoy time with your child. The best way to do this is by spending time doing things that your child likes – for example, reading together, kicking a ball, drawing, playing board games and so on.
- Involve your child in developing clear rules and consequences around safe and responsible behaviour. Adjust the rules and consequences together as he grows.

Physical health helps your child have more energy, feel confident, manage stress and sleep well. Here are some ways to help your child stay emotionally and physically healthy:

- Offer healthy food and encourage healthy eating habits in your family.
- Encourage your child to try lots of different physical activities and sports. This is good for fitness and can also help him feel good about himself as he develops new skills.
- Make sure your child gets the sleep he needs. Quality sleep will help him to manage stress and a busy life.

When children can calm themselves down in difficult or emotional situations, they're likely to feel good about themselves. Here are some ways you can help your child learn to manage feelings:

- Talk about emotions with your child, and encourage him to recognise and label his emotions. You can also let him know that most feelings are normal. For example, 'It looks like you're really frustrated that your toy won't work. I can understand that'.
- Role-model a positive outlook for your child – for example, 'I'm disappointed that my cake didn't bake properly, but that's OK – I'll try it again another time'.
- Support your child when something is bothering him. For example, if your child is having trouble with friends at pre-school or school, you could give him lots of hugs and reassure him that you're there for him. At the same time, you could work with the teacher on a plan to handle the situation.

Feeling capable is also good for your child's mental health and well-being. Here's how to help:

- Encourage your child to try new things, take age-appropriate risks, and learn from his mistakes. This could be things like trying a new sport, entering a drawing competition, speaking in front of his class, climbing new equipment at the playground and so on.
- Help your child to set realistic goals for his age and abilities and work towards achieving them – for example, riding a bike without training wheels or tying up his shoelaces by himself. Teach new skills step-by-step. For example, your child could start by learning to tie the first knot in his shoelaces then work up to getting the bow right.
- Help your child learn how to solve problems so that he develops the skills to do this for himself when he's older. For example, you can help your child work out what the problem is, brainstorm possible solutions, and choose a solution to put into action.
- Encourage your child to connect with other children and others in the community. This gives your child a stronger sense of his place in the world and helps him learn how to relate to different people.