



HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

**Our top recommendations for nurturing your
child's growth & development**

What is Mental Health and Why Does It Matter?

A child's earliest experiences shape the foundation of their developing brain—including sound mental health. During the first 2,000 days of your child's life, critical brain development is rapidly occurring.

Just as you provide your child with physical care and nourishment, such as healthy food, exercise, and medical care, mental health care is equally important. However, understanding precisely how to nourish and support your child's mental health can be a bit more complicated.

Promoting strong mental health in your child means a few things:

- Helping them feel secure and confident
- Building relationships with others
- Fostering their continuous growth —both at home and in educational environments

When your child has strong mental health, they're able to:

- Reach developmental and emotional milestones
- Learn healthy social skills
- Cope appropriately with problems
- Manage feelings of sadness, anger, or worry
- Function well in school, in their homes, and in their greater communities
- Try new or challenging things

How Negative Experiences Impact Mental Health

When a child's development process is either disrupted or impaired, it can have lifelong implications. Children hurt by abuse or other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) may need additional professional help to cope with their trauma—even if they are supported by caring parents or adults.

Common Mental Health Disorders

Common mental health disorders diagnosed in childhood include attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and other behavioral disorders. In the United States, approximately 6 million children (or nearly 10 percent) are diagnosed with ADHD; 5.8 million are diagnosed with anxiety, and 5.5 million are diagnosed with behavior problems.

Many mental, behavioral, and developmental disorders begin in early childhood, according to research. 1 in 6 U.S. children aged 2–8 years (17.4 percent) had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.

All of these statistics highlight the importance of developing sound mental health in children. When a child has a strong foundation, it supports all other aspects of their life.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

When examining the prevalence of mental health conditions in young children, challenges often occur as a result of a child's genetics and exposure to significant adversity. Although genetics do play a large role, they are not the only factor—a child's environment can also have a powerful impact on the strength or weakness of their mental health foundation.

Children who experience toxic stress or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are at a much greater risk of developing poor mental health. ACEs can include a wide range of traumatic events, including:

- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect
- Witnessing violence in the home or community
- Exposure to household or community violence
- Death in the family
- Substance abuse problems
- Caregiver mental illness
- Instability due to parental separation or household members in jail

One study found that children with three or more reported ACEs had a much higher prevalence of a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder (36.3 percent versus 11 percent). Among children living below 100% of the federal poverty level, more than 1 in 5 (or 22 percent) developed a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.

Toxic Stress

Experiencing a number of ACEs without proper, consistent support can cause toxic stress — and while navigating stress and adversity is a necessary component of a child's early development, some children face extreme, long-lasting, and deeply damaging stress responses and need additional support.

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, there are three types of responses to stress:

Positive Stress Response: Largely considered to be a healthy, normal part of life, positive stress responses are characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevation in hormone levels.

Tolerable Stress Response: A tolerable stress response activates the body's alert system to a greater degree and may be triggered by more intense challenges, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. When a child experiences a tolerable stress response, they often have positive, supportive relationships with adults who help them cope, adapt, and offer stability.

Toxic Stress Response: Toxic stress occurs when a child experiences strong, frequent, or prolonged stress—which can come in the form of an ACE. This includes physical and/or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence (including racial violence), and the accumulated challenges of economic hardship. When a child's stress response is activated for a long period of time, it can cause physical damage, disrupting the development of the brain and other organs. It also increases the risk of stress-released disease and cognitive impairment into their adulthood. Most children who experience toxic stress also experience a lack of supportive adults in their lives and they don't have access to healthy coping mechanisms and a stable support system.

When a child lives in a state of toxic stress, their system is always in "fight or flight" mode. This results in a cascade of chemicals and reactions that negatively affect their developing body and brain. Children exposed to ACEs who experience toxic stress are also more likely to develop learning difficulties and health problems, such as asthma or sleep disturbances.



Nurturing Your Child's Mental Health

The path toward strong mental health begins with social-emotional development, which can be achieved by providing your child with a safe space filled with care, love, and respect.

When your child receives the support and guidance they need in childhood, they are able to better cope with life, regulate their emotions, and build strong, long-lasting relationships with their peers, teachers, and family members.

Build strong and trusting relationships.

Having a strong relationship with family and friends in your child's life can play a role in your child's social-emotional development. When your child has a significant person who is present and available to support them, it helps your child develop resilience, feel comfortable sharing their worries, and freely ask for help.

Be consistent.

We all have bad days—but maintaining consistency in your own behavior as a parent or caregiver with your child will help build social-emotional resilience and contribute to stronger mental health.

Create a safe environment at home.

Although you can't always control what your child experiences at child care or school, you can create a safe and loving home environment. Be mindful of your child's access to media, including TV shows, movies, video games, and the internet, and give them other opportunities for entertainment, such as board games, puzzles, and books.

Model self-care and self-love.

If you are a parent or caregiver, practice being a role model for your child. Take care of your own mental health, talk openly about your feelings, and show your child that you make time for the activities you care about. Seeing an adult practice self-care is instrumental in a child's overall understanding of mental health and in learning how to create safe rituals to support their health.

Provide new vocabulary words.

As a parent or caregiver, start building your child's vocabulary around their feelings. Whenever you hear your child use "good" or "bad" in a sentence when they could use a more descriptive word that adequately describes the situation, try offering your child different adjectives that would fit.

Encourage your child to feel their feelings.

Ask your child how they feel and help them articulate their emotions. If your child is facing a challenge, ask them: "How are you feeling?" If they struggle with the language to describe their emotional state of mind, you might say something like, "It looks like you might be feeling frustrated or angry about something."

Try new activities to help your child practice.

There are plenty of activities you can incorporate into your daily routines to help your child understand their feelings and develop greater empathy for others.

Read books together. While reading with your child, point out different emotions that each character experiences. On pages where a character shows their expression, ask your child: "What do you think they are feeling?" or "Why do you think they feel that way?" Other lines of questioning might include: "Do you ever feel like that?" or "What do you do when you feel that way?"

Create an emotion book. Organize the book by emotions—one section might be dedicated to happy feelings, another section to overwhelming feelings, and so on. Encourage your child to draw things that bring up that feeling or you can look through magazines or photographs together and identify the particular emotions in each image.

Set body boundaries.

Communication around consent is a vital lesson that you can start teaching your child at a young age—preparing them for a future where they're comfortable and confident navigating consent.

To start incorporating communication and consent into your child's daily routines, ask permission from your child before you reach out for a hug. You can say something like, "Is it okay if I give you a hug?"

If your child is nonverbal, you can start by communicating your intent clearly and letting them know what you're going to do. For example, you might say, "I'm going to put your shoes on, so you're ready to go to the park."

Be direct and transparent about body parts.

At a young age, the language you use about their body parts has a long-term impact on a child's ability to communicate—and their relationship to their body overall. Avoid using cutesy or covert words to describe your child's genitals. By using the anatomical words, you give your child permission to talk honestly about their body, their genitals, and avoid feelings of shame or discomfort.

Let your child know that they're in control of their body.

Never force your child to accept hugs or unwanted physical content—even from relatives or immediate family members. If your child doesn't want physical touch during greetings or goodbyes, affirm that this is perfectly okay and share different options they have: a high-five, waving, blowing a kiss, or simply saying hello or goodbye.

Introduce children to when touch by others isn't acceptable.

One in four girls and one in 13 boys experience child sexual abuse at some point during their childhood, according to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. To help your child understand acceptable and unacceptable touch, begin having conversations around these topics.



Programs to Support Mental Health

Learning how to identify, articulate, and describe feelings and emotions is a skill that your child will carry with them throughout their life. To help supplement their learning both in and out of the classroom, we recommend the following resources:

Preschool Programs: At One Place, we serve over 700 children each year through our preschool programs. We focus on providing children with a warm, safe, and culturally-aware environment to engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork. Through this experience, each child's social-emotional health develops, providing them with the necessary foundation to transition to grade school and beyond. If your child will be 3 or 4 by August 31, apply today.

Our early childhood educators prioritize building trusting relationships through warmth, affection, and mutual respect in the classroom. Educators in our preschool programs use tools available through the Creative Curriculum, which includes the following learning objectives and techniques:

- Regulate own emotions and behaviors
- Establish and sustain positive relationships
- Participate cooperatively and constructively in group situations

Pre-K staff also use the North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development to address learning targets for children that include the following:

- Express positive feelings about themselves and confidence in what they can do
- Recognize and respond to the needs and feelings of others
- Demonstrate a positive sense of self-identity and self-awareness

Triple P: Triple P Online provides parents and caregivers with a powerful toolbox of ideas and strategies to help raise happy kids, manage misbehavior, set rules and routines, and feel even more confident in your skills as a parent. Plus, you can work through the materials at your own pace—anytime, anywhere. This program is free for North Carolina residents. You can learn more about Triple P [here](#).

Child Care: If you are searching for high-quality child care programs to support your child outside of the home, we're here to help. [Click here](#) to learn more about our Child Care Resource & Referral Program and how we can help you find the perfect option for your child.



Our Approach

At One Place, we are dedicated to providing resources for children and families to strengthen familial relationships, develop social-emotional skills, and ultimately reduce sources of stress by providing the support system they need.

All of our programs are designed to provide children in Onslow County with environments filled with positive relationships and nurturing experiences. In doing so, we can reduce child abuse, lower rates of incarceration, decrease homelessness and increase high school graduation rates.

Every program offered through One Place is designed to help prevent child abuse, ACEs, and toxic stress for children and families. From Early Head Start and NC Pre-K to Child Care Referrals and Early Educator support, our programming serves as a protective factor. If children are hurt by abuse, we provide hope and healing through comprehensive services in our Child Advocacy Center.

Without support, children who suffer from ACEs may have challenges forming healthy relationships, regulating their emotions, and living a physically healthy life. At One Place, we provide early education programs that help support a child's healthy development—and for children who have been hurt by abuse or through other ACEs, we offer resources and referrals to professional help to cope with their trauma.

Families struggle to find community support and necessary resources. Without a connected community and access to high-quality resources, children suffer. We connect all families in Onslow County with the support they need to live happy, healthy, and successful lives.

Learn More About One Place

One Place is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that has been serving families of Onslow County and surrounding communities for more than 20 years. We strive to improve the lives of children and families by connecting them with high-quality resources for child care, early education, and child abuse prevention and intervention.

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