A Parent's Guide to Raising Resilient Kids

Partnership to End Addiction

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A Letter from Our CEO, Creighton Drury

Working for more than 30 years to protect children, adolescents and young adults from the harms of substance use and addiction, Partnership to End Addiction recognizes that parents and other caregivers are our nation's most important asset in this endeavor. We know that it is too much to ask families to shoulder this burden on their own, especially with so many external influences drawing our kids toward substance use and other unsafe and unhealthy behaviors. That's why we work to provide direct support to parents and caregivers in their efforts to prevent substance use and find treatment and recovery support for their loved ones. Moreover, we improve how prevention and treatment are delivered and inform and influence policies that better serve all families.

To drive the significant changes needed to protect children and put them on a healthy path to adulthood, we need partners who share this goal. While our ultimate goal is to end addiction, the way to get there is to create a society where young people are not tempted by addictive substances. Working together, we can set the stage for safe and healthy environments where children can grow and develop, set positive goals and have a real shot at achieving them.

With our **Raising Resilient Kids initiative,** we join with esteemed national organizations within and outside of the substance use field to collaborate and forge new paths to raising healthy, safe and resilient kids. By addressing the health and environmental factors shaping our kids and their communities, we can raise a generation to avoid addictive substances. And not only that, we can steer them from other unhealthy or unsafe behaviors and outcomes that can compromise their present and future well-being.

While we work with professionals in government, education and health care to promote policies and practices that help families, we also want to directly give you the information and tools you need to raise resilient kids.

If you are a parent or caregiver of young children, this resource is for you. It includes research-based best practices and resources for strengthening young people's mental and physical health, family bonds, school performance and engagement, and supportive neighborhoods and communities. We highlight supportive parenting practices that you can use and practice in those challenging circumstances that all parents face. Ultimately, we hope this resource will help you in your efforts to raise healthy and resilient children with all of the wonderful opportunities to lead vibrant, fulfilling lives.

Introduction

During childhood and adolescence, the brain and body undergo the most dramatic changes of one's lifetime, affecting health and well-being both in the present and well into the future. In these supercharged periods of growth, adolescents are highly susceptible and reactive to influences from the world around them.

As a parent, you have a unique opportunity and significant power to guide your children through this brief but highly consequential time in their lives. We're here to help you as they develop into healthy and fulfilled young adults.

Parents work hard to ensure that their children have the support, resources and internal strength needed to face life's challenges. **We know you want to put your kids on the path to mental and physical health, build strong parent-child bonds and envelop them in a safe and supportive school and community environment. This can all help contribute to personal and social success and a meaningful future.**

These basic goals – raising a supported, healthy and safe child – can be complicated by circumstances that include mental or physical health problems, trauma or financial instability, social isolation or a lack of opportunities for safe and healthy engagement with one's community. All pose a threat to a child's and family's well-being. **For many families, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened these threats, leaving parents and their children more exposed to their consequences.**

Much of this resource focuses on risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are characteristics and circumstances that may appear early in childhood. If left unchecked, they can lead to mental health or behavioral problems, physical health problems, social and relational difficulties, or substance use and addiction. Moreover, these risk factors tend to overlap, build upon one another and cause harm.

That makes protective factors all the more important. **Protective factors serve primarily to foster a child's resilience, or the ability to cope effectively with life challenges and gain strength and wisdom from those challenges.** As a parent, you can't possibly eliminate all obstacles to healthy development for your children. Still, decades of research show that parents are the single most important influence on children's attitudes and behaviors and a critical source of their resilience.

Through specific positive parenting practices outlined in this resource, you can support and empower your children, promote resilience, and protect their health, safety and well-being. We'll share science-backed recommendations for raising resilient kids – kids who will be better positioned to face the challenges that life will inevitably throw their way. We also provide useful resources to turn to for additional information, tips and support.

We start with a list of **10 key protective parenting strategies** that research has shown can promote resilience in your children. Some may seem like simple, common-sense practices, but applying them effectively and over time requires a lot of dedication, time, patience and drive. We're here to help.

10 Key Protective Parenting Strategies

1. Start early

It's never too early to promote healthy attitudes, emotions and behaviors in your children. The development of resilience is a step-by-step process. By establishing healthy skills early, you create a foundation to learn, grow and adapt. Be on the lookout, too, for risk factors that can interfere with your children's healthy development and respond quickly and effectively if they emerge.

2. Know the facts

Learn about what in your children's lives can promote or get in the way of their healthy development. You can help protect them and reduce risk. Some of your actions might seem like common sense, but different ages and stages require different strategies. The key is to be flexible and adapt. We know there's no art of perfect parenting, so keep learning all you can from trusted sources. These include friends and relatives, your children's health care providers and teachers, and from child development experts, researchers and practitioners.

3. Be a good model for health and resilience

Parents have the greatest influence over their children's attitudes and behaviors, so it's very important to model safe, appropriate and healthy attitudes and behaviors for them. More than friends, teachers or celebrities, you are your children's primary role model, and they're watching what you do even more than they're listening to what you say. That doesn't mean you have to be perfect. Even your flaws and slip-ups can demonstrate effective coping and social skills, including how to apologize, forgive, be honest about your shortcomings and bounce back from a challenge. Being a good model also means taking care of yourself. You can normalize the act of seeking help when it's needed.

4. Communicate openly and honestly

Have open conversations with your children. This creates a dynamic where they will feel safe to come to you with questions or problems and confident that what you tell them will be true and honest. This is part of building a strong social support system for your children, a key ingredient for raising resilient kids. Without mutual trust, they may not develop a strong sense of security and stability or know where to turn when they need support.

5. Share your expectations

Set clear boundaries and limits, make your stance known and follow through on the agreed consequences. While you don't want to overwhelm them or set unreachable goals, it's important for them to know that you believe they are intelligent, responsible and capable. Clear expectations, rules and a shared understanding of consequences for breaking them provide your children with a sense of stability, consistency and security. This applies both in the home and outside the home. If it is clear that your expectations are based in love and concern rather than a "because I said so," they will know that you truly care about their health and safety. They will, in fact, strive to meet your expectations and respect your rules.

6. Monitor their behavior

Part of parenting is protecting your kids from harm as they develop into healthy and fulfilled adults. This includes knowing where your children are, what they're doing and who they're doing it with. Today, monitoring also requires keeping an eye on your children's (and your own) screen time and social media use. Too much time spent on screens and social media has been associated with poor mental and physical health, weakened family bonds, and reduced connection to school and community. Inevitably, your children will sometimes resist. Monitoring, done from a place of love and care, can help you recognize and address potential threats to their safety and well-being. Spending quality time together, asking lots of questions, and really listening to their answers will help you be attuned to changes in your children's emotions, behaviors or appearance, and to signs of risk. At the same time, be flexible and adjust how and how often you monitor as your children grow older and (ideally) demonstrate increasing maturity and responsibility.

7. Take a health, not a punitive, approach

Focus on supporting your children's health rather than punishing unhealthy or unsafe behaviors. A health, rather than a punitive perspective, will yield better outcomes and will let them know that your primary concern is their well-being. This means that if your child is struggling emotionally or behaviorally – which can show up in frustrating ways and try your patience – get them the right kind of help rather than resorting to punishment. It's highly unlikely that your child will behave poorly just for the fun of it; there's usually a rational reason for their fights or outbursts and, more often than not, a reasonable solution.

8. Encourage healthy risk-taking and emotion expression

It's normal and natural for children to take risks and to express a broad range of emotions. If you can help your children do so in safe and healthy ways, they will be less likely to engage in and develop dangerous habits. Help your children face challenges and go beyond their comfort zone. They'll learn how to adapt to new and complex situations, manage setbacks and develop new skills. Likewise, stress, anger and fear are not necessarily bad emotions. In fact, they're really useful signals that something isn't quite right and good drivers of change, as long as they do not persist or overwhelm your child.

9. Use positive reinforcement

Give positive feedback when your children show effort or engage in desired attitudes and behaviors. An important part of instilling resilience is recognizing and acknowledging that resilience. So, when they do something that exceeds expectations or makes you proud, let them know. You'll be more successful in keeping positive efforts going by acknowledging them, instead of reprimanding your kids when they don't meet your expectations.

10. Know your children's risk level and respond accordingly

Know whether your children are susceptible to mental or physical health problems or substance use, be vigilant for and responsive to signs of risk, and know when and how to seek help for them – and for yourself – if needed.

Protect Your Children's Mental Health

Millions of children in the United States struggle with mental health problems, the most common being anxiety, depression, conduct disorders, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Rates of childhood mental health disorders have been on the rise, either because more children today are experiencing these problems or because we have become better at identifying them. About one in six children between ages 2 and 8 are diagnosed with a mental disorder. If left untreated, they tend to worsen through adolescence and into adulthood.[1] Childhood mental health problems typically require intervention from a trained health care professional, and the earlier that intervention is provided, the better.

Childhood mental health problems are serious, but also relatively common. Luckily, many researchers and health care professionals are working tirelessly to identify ways to help prevent and treat them, and to bolster children's resilience to the risk factors that make them more vulnerable to their development.

Risk Factors for Childhood Mental Health Problems

There is a broad range of risk factors for childhood mental health problems, many of which are genetic or otherwise biologically induced and others that are primarily triggered by environmental circumstances. Yet, in many cases, even children with an inherent vulnerability for mental illness will not develop a significant problem unless circumstances within their developmental environment elicit its onset.[2] It is those circumstances that we'll focus on here, since their ultimate effects on a child's mental health and future well-being can be alleviated by the presence of protective factors.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) affect an estimated 35 million children[3] and are associated with higher rates of mental illness, both early in development and throughout the lifespan.[4] Adversity describes difficult situations and hardships but, as used here, it refers to abuse, neglect, trauma, and family dysfunction which, if experienced during childhood, are associated with the development of mental health problems and other long-term life difficulties.[5] ACEs tend to cluster together and produce a dose-response relationship to later mental illness,[6] such that the more adversity children experience or the more intense those experiences, the greater their susceptibility to developing a mental health problem. **Experiences commonly considered ACEs include: physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; physical or emotional neglect; mental illness or addiction in the family; having an incarcerated relative; having a mother who was treated violently; and parental divorce or separation.**[7] Although other factors, like low socioeconomic status, are also associated with the development of mental health problems, the relationship between ACEs and mental illness cut across socioeconomic classes.[8]

When the experience of adversity is prolonged and relentless, it can produce a **toxic stress** response, which can be very damaging.[9] If someone is under persistent stress, such as a child living with an abusive and violent parent, the body responds with an incessant bombardment of stress hormones. When this happens in children while their bodies and minds are still developing, such an intense stress reaction directly interferes with healthy development.[10]

Toxic Stress

To learn more about toxic stress responses in children, please see this article from Partnership to End Addiction and this article from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child.

One troubling thing about adversity is that it is often intergenerational, meaning the effects of adverse circumstances can be "passed down" from parents to children. Essentially, when a parent has experienced trauma as a child, that parent is at higher risk for mental illness, addiction, and other negative outcomes. These effects frequently are felt by the next generation of children, who might be raised in an unhealthy, unsafe, or insecure environment, contributing to a cycle of adversity and mental unwellness.[11]

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Child Mind Institute

Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. The leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health, Child Mind Institute provides gold-standard evidence-based care, delivers educational resources to millions of families each year, trains educators in underserved communities, and develops tomorrow's breakthrough treatments.

We believe that knowledge empowers families and communities to promote kids' mental health. That means supporting children when and where they need it most. Whether we are sharing evidence-based information in our Family Resource Center or training educators and mental health professionals, we bring life-changing care within reach.

For helpful resources, please see Child Mind Institute's Family Resource Center at:

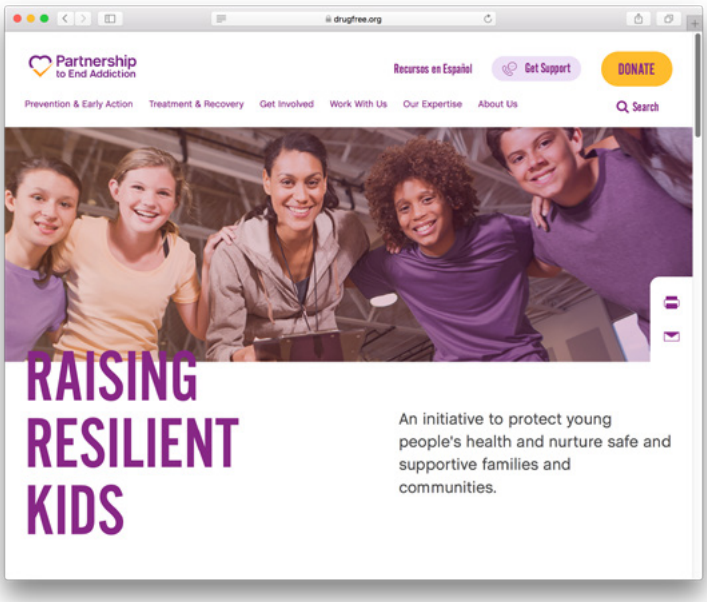
- childmind.org/resources

Protective Factors for Childhood Mental Health

Providing a consistent, stable, nurturing, and supportive home environment for your children will help to promote their mental health and provide a protective shield against adversity, even in the presence of adverse circumstances or experiences.

Resilience

One of the best gifts you can give your children is to nurture their resilience. Resilience is the crucial ability to withstand, overcome, and rebound from a difficult situation or experience.[12] Resilience is such a powerful skill to have and so important to instill in your children, as it can protect their mental health, help them regulate and control their emotions and behaviors, and help sustain their strength and confidence even under the worst of circumstances. It's that hidden quality that some people are so lucky to have, the one that makes us scratch our heads at those rare and beautiful stories of people who struggled through the worst life gave them and came out on the other side possibly better and stronger. It's a magic weapon against life's stressors and challenges. And, best of all, small, manageable interventions by parents can go a long way toward bolstering this wonderful quality in children of all ages.



Visit drugfree.org/resilientkids to learn about our Raising Resilient Kids initiative, download this guide, get access to a recording of our webinar, and access Resilient Relationships, our free Help & Hope text messaging program for parents.

Social and Emotional Skills

Social and emotional skills are invaluable throughout all phases of life. Whether a child in elementary school or a professional in the workplace, having strong social and emotional skills is essential for successfully navigating difficult situations and benefitting from social interactions and opportunities. Social and emotional competence means that you're capable of managing your emotions and that you can feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and responsibly accomplish individual and collective goals.[13]

Although social and emotional competence comes more easily to some than to others, they are skills that can be learned, practiced, and improved upon.[14] When children learn to treat others with kindness and to express their feelings honestly and respectfully, others will respond well to them, their confidence will improve, and they will have healthier and more adaptive social interactions. This, in turn, strengthens resilience.

The ability to recognize, control, and express one's emotions in a measured and appropriate manner is essential for the development of resilience.[15] Suppressing emotions can be harmful, as emotional reactions are normal indicators of what a person is feeling or experiencing, whether it's joy or frustration. These feelings, if allowed to take hold, help to inform children about whether the experience they just had should be repeated or avoided, and parents can observe those feelings and help their children put them in perspective.

If your children experience joy from something you deem undesirable, you can teach them that even though the experience felt good, it isn't healthy or safe in the long term (e.g., riding a bike without a helmet, driving too fast). Or, if your children feel frustrated or angry in the wake of an experience that you know to be healthy or safe, you can help them understand its benefits despite the initial or temporary bad feelings (e.g., eating a not-so-tasty vegetable, skipping a party to study for an important exam).

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The mission of **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. CASEL defined the term "social and emotional learning" more than two decades ago. Today, CASEL supports states, districts, and schools and convenes leading thinkers to ensure SEL is a priority in every school.

At CASEL, we envision all children and adults as self-aware, caring, responsible, engaged, and lifelong learners who work together to achieve their goals and create a more inclusive, just, and equitable world. Now, more than ever, it is critical to leverage social and emotional learning to demonstrate empathy, build relationships, and collectively strengthen our schools and our communities.

For more information, please see these resources from CASEL:

- 5-Minute Chats With Individual Students: These SEL sample questions can be adapted by parents and caregivers to build connections with young people and help respond to needs.
- SEL Reflection Prompts: This SEL tool offers prompts that can be adapted by parents and caregivers for discussions to prompt student reflection.
- Owning Your Power to Raise Kids who Challenge Racism featuring Dr. Deborah Rivas-Drake and Dr. Bloodine Barthelus: Tune in to the on-demand webinar for guidance on conversations that acknowledge the pain and struggle of being a parent during challenging times and the work that is required of us to mitigate racism.

Acknowledging and validating your own and your children's feelings will show them that it's okay to have and express a full range of emotions, help them recognize and feel empathy for the feelings that others have and express, make them feel accepted and loved even when the feelings they express aren't necessarily positive and happy, and let them know that it's healthy to seek help if their emotions become too overwhelming to handle.[16]

Coping Skills

Like social and emotional skills, coping skills — or the ability to deal adaptively with a problem — are essential for resilience. Whether your children have encountered specific ACEs or are facing broader societal challenges, good coping skills can enable them to thrive even in the face of such obstacles.[17] Some helpful coping methods include taking breaks from a stressful situation through play, exercise, or relaxation techniques; identifying and analyzing a problem with the help of a trusted adult; mapping out specific ways to address the problem; or getting help from a qualified professional.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

If a specific problem is the source of your child's emotions, brainstorm solutions together. Have your child actively participate and think of ways to work through their concerns.

Key Takeaways: Mental Health

Be an example

- The most important protective factor when it comes to childhood mental health is you, the parent. Children with a strong, reliable, and supportive adult in their life are most likely to develop resilience.[18]
- Reflect upon your own mental health as well as your family history, since mental illness can span generations.
- Taking care of your own mental health is one of the best things you can do to protect your children, as growing up in a household with a parent who struggles with mental illness or addiction is one of the strongest risk factors for the development of mental health problems in children.
- Psychological strength and resilience are learned qualities. Children learn more about how to face the world by watching you than by listening to what you tell them. Take care of your own mental health and well-being, maintain a healthy balance between work and play, and model good social, emotional, and coping skills.

Talk to them

- Good communication builds trust, which helps children feel secure, safe, and empowered. They need to know that you're a credible source of information and that you are prepared to listen to and support them even if you don't always approve of what they say or do.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

Let your child try something new without your help, like making their lunch for school. Be patient and let them learn from their choices, with gentle guidance from you.

- Try to validate your child's feelings and show that you respect their individuality, appreciate their strengths, and understand their weaknesses.
- Be on the lookout for unusual signs of anxiety, distress or mental health problems in your children, and seek help from those you trust, including a professional, if you have concerns. If their behavior becomes uncharacteristically unruly, they seem anxious or distressed, or they're having significant social problems, seek help from a professional — just as you would if they demonstrated signs of physical challenge or illness — rather than resorting to punishment.
- Take an active interest in your children's mental well-being so that if you notice changes in their behavior, like increased anxiety or distress, trouble paying attention, or symptoms of depression, you can talk with them and get help if needed. Frequent family meals or other routines can allow for low-pressure check-ins on your children's mental well-being.

Set limits

- Letting children know what you expect of them provides security and confidence. Understanding what your rules are and that they come from love and care will help kids feel stable navigating relationships in and out of the home.
- As a parent, you have a right to know your children's plans, what they do, who they do it with, and how they use technology and social media. As long as your monitoring is based in love and care and not in an unhealthy need to pry or control them, this monitoring is protective rather than harmful to their mental health.

- If you learn that your child violated a rule, try to understand why and address the underlying cause (while also following through on the predetermined consequence), rather than resorting to threats or punishment. Make sure your children understand that your goal is to help them develop healthy emotional and behavioral habits.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

Stay consistent with your rules and consequences. It's okay if you give in occasionally, but the more times you follow through with the limits you have set, the more likely your child will refrain from breaking the rules. Boundaries can also help children feel grounded and not so lost as they navigate the outside world. Try not to shy away from them.

Let them try

- Encourage independence by allowing them to do some tasks on their own with your encouragement and support, teaching them that it's okay if they don't always succeed as long as they try hard. Show them how to bounce back if they initially fail to achieve their goals.
- Just as it's normal for your children to not be perfect or reach every goal they set, it's also okay for them to express negative feelings or emotions. You can help them manage failure, frustration, and rejection in an adaptive way, as these are unfortunate but necessary parts of developing the resilience they will need to grow into mentally healthy adults.
- When children do manage to overcome challenges, recognizing their positive effort will increase the likelihood that they will repeat that behavior when faced with future challenges. Focus on the effort they put in (how well they played) rather than the outcome (whether they won or lost) of their actions.

Protect Your Children's Physical Health

Helping your children develop habits that protect their physical health, while addressing threats to their physical health as early as possible, increases their likelihood of developing the confidence, resilience, and wherewithal they'll need to take on life's challenges and enjoy its many opportunities and rewards.

Risk Factors for Childhood Physical Health Problems

While some physical health conditions are unavoidable and there's little parents can do to alleviate the pain and suffering that come with them, many children face undue burdens due to largely preventable health complications tied to poor diet, lack of exercise, inadequate sleep, substance use, or insufficient access to health care providers.

Poor Nutrition and Exercise

About 20% of children and adolescents (14.4 million) are obese, meaning they are severely overweight and at heightened risk for a range of health complications.[19] Obesity can lead to cardiovascular or heart disease, respiratory or breathing problems, diabetes, and a weakened immune system – and many of these health problems can occur in childhood.[20] On the other hand, millions of children do not have enough food to eat, living in homes with food insecurity.[21]

For some people, engaging in healthy dietary and exercise practices can feel overwhelming or like an unattainable goal, but living with the health consequences of poor nutrition poses a significant and long-lasting burden on children and their families. Some people may be more susceptible to becoming overweight or obese than others due to genetics or their family history.[22] Obesity and food insecurity are also associated with socioeconomic and racial disparities,[23] such that families with lower incomes and those who face social discrimination may not have adequate access to healthier, more expensive foods[24] or the available time and safe spaces needed to exercise. Childhood obesity and poor nutrition can disrupt healthy development, affecting growth and energy and even leading to an increase in fat cells, raising the risk of diabetes[25] and making future weight loss more difficult.[26]

* The American Academy of Pediatrics has helpful resources for families seeking to raise active children with a healthy, age appropriate diet.

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The **Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study®**, launched by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2015 is designed to enhance our understanding of what healthy brain development looks like, and how life experiences influence it to promote risk and resilience. The study recruited nearly 12,000 9- to 10-year-olds from diverse backgrounds with the goal of capturing and integrating a wide range of data — including structural and functional brain imaging, genetic, neuropsychological, behavioral, social, environmental, and other health assessments — over a 10-year period.

Parents, educators, health care professionals, and researchers share a common goal — helping our children become healthy and well-adjusted adults. Science-based information can help us achieve that goal. The ABCD Study® is looking at many childhood experiences that affect brain, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Understanding how and when childhood experiences influence these developmental trajectories will inform practices and policies that can ultimately improve the health and success of all youth.

For more information about this study and to find helpful resources, please see:

- abcdstudy.org/families
- abcdstudy.org/educators
- abcdstudy.org/publications
- abcdstudy.org/news

Inadequate exercise also is a risk to children's health. Children generally enjoy being active, but when their physical or social environment does not allow for or encourage healthy activity, it can be difficult for them to get the exercise they need. Whether access to safe parks or playgrounds is limited, or a child relies almost exclusively on screens for entertainment, they may be reluctant to move around and exercise their growing bodies.

It's also worth mentioning that overweight, obesity, and a lack of exercise often result in shame and low self-esteem, which can compromise children's mental health and put them at risk for depression and social isolation.[27]

Inadequate Sleep

Getting a healthy amount of sleep is crucial for developing children and teens, as sleeping not only provides much-needed rest to support academic and social functioning, but is also incredibly important for healthy physical development. Consistent and sufficient sleep supports children's brain development as well as physical growth and mental health. Unfortunately, studies have shown that up to one third of children and adolescents have difficulty falling asleep or do not get the appropriate amount of sleep for their age.[28]

Although every individual is different, there are recommended guidelines for how much sleep your children should get depending on their age: 12–16 hours for infants; 11–14 hours for toddlers; 10–13 hours for preschoolers; 9–12 hours for children ages 6–12; and 8-10 hours for adolescents.[29] Unfortunately, about 60% of middle schoolers and 70% of high schoolers don't get the recommended hours of sleep.[30]

Inadequate sleep affects children in many ways, including hindering their ability to participate and learn in school, harming their attention and memory, and preventing them from engaging in healthy social interactions with their peers. Inadequate sleep can also result in negative health outcomes in children, such as a weakened immune system; impaired hormone production, digestion, and energy retention;[31] and an increased risk of obesity, diabetes, injuries, heart disease, depression and anxiety,[32] as well as nicotine, alcohol and other drug use among adolescents and young adults.[33]

Substance Use and Addiction

A large body of research shows that use of any addictive substance — including nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs — at a young age substantially increases the risk of developing a substance use disorder, more commonly referred to as addiction.[34] A substance use disorder involves being dependent on a drug to the point where one uses it compulsively, even if this use impairs health, relationships, or daily functioning.[35] More than 90% of adults with a substance use disorder began using an addictive substance before the age of 18.[36]

A fetus exposed to addictive substances through a pregnant woman's use, a child exposed to tobacco or marijuana smoke in the home, or a teenager who uses addictive substances while the brain is undergoing rapid development are all at risk for the long-term effects those substances have on the brain's structure and functioning. Aside from addiction, substance use can also lead to serious illnesses like respiratory, cardiovascular, and liver disease and a broad range of cancers; it can also increase the risk for or exacerbate a number of mental health conditions.[37]

Lack of Access to Health Care

Protecting your children's health without the resources that allow for access to quality health care can be incredibly challenging. Financial insecurity, unsafe neighborhoods, a demanding or unpredictable work schedule, or living in areas known as 'medical deserts' where there are few nearby options for medical attention, can all limit access to health care.[38] This can be devastating for young children, since consistent pediatric check-ups and care during the early stages of life are essential for determining if children are healthy, meeting developmental milestones, and receiving the interventions they need to grow and thrive, including immunizations and needed behavioral and physiological therapies.[39] Interactions with pediatricians are also important for parents who can benefit tremendously from their advice and support about raising healthy, resilient children.

Protective Factors for Childhood Physical Health

Under the best of circumstances, there are many things you can do as a parent to put your children on the path to physical health. However, even if the above risk factors are present in your children's life, you can still help them grow and develop in a healthy way by getting them screened for health problems, ensuring that they receive needed interventions, and making their physical environments as safe and secure as possible.

Routine Screenings and Early Interventions

In a health care context, screenings are meant to evaluate your children and determine if they are meeting developmental milestones and whether they could benefit from early interventions or therapies. Such milestones include physical ones like crawling and walking and cognitive milestones related to learning, problem-solving, and communication. Children also can be screened for other health-related issues, like general growth and physical development, obesity, and mental health or behavioral problems.

Pediatricians can play an important role in educating parents through routine screenings, for example, to know the signs of early risk for later substance use and to get the help that they'll need early in a child's life to reduce those risks.[40] Most pediatric screening and early interventions are covered by public and private health insurance, removing a cost barrier to these critical health services.[41]

Some children do need early intervention services, such as physical or occupational therapy, speech therapy, or specialized educational services that can help them learn and interact with others. Public schools are required to provide free or low-cost specialized services catered to these needs.[42] To learn more about the developmental milestones that may indicate whether your children are growing at a healthy pace, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides a checklist of milestones for children up to age 5.[43]

Injury Prevention

Every parent wants to protect their children from injury and keep them out of harm's way. Still, preventable injuries are the number one cause of child death in the United States.[44] Since so many children lose their lives to accidental injuries, it's important to know what you can do to ensure their safety. A good way to prevent injury is to be familiar with the types of injuries that children are most at risk for and the environments and circumstances that carry the most danger.

Potential injuries that can be prevented include burns, drowning, poisoning, motor vehicle crashes, and severe falls. Children are at heightened risk of different injuries at different ages. For instance, drowning is the leading cause of injury-related death for children between the ages of 1 and 4, since many young children lack the physical strength and knowledge needed to swim,[45] making it especially important to focus on drowning prevention if you have young children. Children under 5 are also at heightened risk for exposure to and poisoning from addictive substances, and there are a range of actions parents can take to ensure that such substances, and other toxic products, are stored out of sight and out of reach of children.[46] For adolescents who are beginning to learn how to drive, a significant injury risk is a motor vehicle crash, so ensuring that your children are capable and responsible drivers is crucial.[47]

Key Takeaways: Physical Health

Prioritize health

- By getting your children on the right track early on — ensuring that they eat healthy foods, get enough exercise, and are seen by a qualified health care provider on a regular basis starting at a young age — it will become natural for you and your children to prioritize their health in the years to come.
- Take the time to explain to your children the benefits of taking care of their body, and help them understand the factors in their life that can affect their own health, including a family history of disease or any preexisting conditions that might increase their risk of health problems, including substance use and addiction.
- Honest and reliable communication is critical when it comes to teaching your children about common risks to their physical health, such as obesity, substance use, or unsafe driving. By having honest, age-appropriate conversations with your children, they can better understand why it's so important to treat their bodies with care and kindness.
- Your children's healthy choices should be acknowledged and painted in a positive light so that they are motivated to repeat them. When they show effort to take care of their bodies — whether by choosing healthier foods, staying active and safe, or resisting pressure to use substances — let them know you're proud of them.

Get the facts

- It's easy to encounter inaccurate or conflicting advice about childrearing, which is why you should try to rely on credible sources of information for help. A primary resource should be your children's pediatrician. Not only should your children trust their doctor, but you should also feel comfortable approaching their pediatrician with any questions and concerns you might have.
- Valuable resources from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Safe Kids Worldwide cover a variety of useful topics regarding protecting your children's health.
- Review your family's medical history and know about the illnesses your children may be predisposed to so that you can prevent them or intervene at early signs of risk. Likewise, consider your children's natural tendencies so that you can recognize whether they're more tempted than others by sweets or inactivity, or whether they're a bit more accident prone than their peers.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

Taking time to do things that you enjoy or that help you relax or relieve stress is not selfish. It's a great way to model for your child the importance of treating yourself well and doing things that make you happy.

Be an example

- If you model healthy practices for your children — whether with a healthy diet and exercise, refraining from substance misuse, wearing a seatbelt, not texting while driving, and attending health screenings — your children will have a better, healthier example to follow.
- Show your kids that cooking and preparing healthy meals can be fun and delicious. If you mostly eat non-nutritious meals, they may question your credibility when you encourage them to eat healthy foods. Likewise, if you

restrict your eating too much or convey that food is the enemy of being fit and attractive, you might contribute to disordered food-related attitudes and behaviors in your children.

- Show them that exercise can be an essential and fun part of one's life. And take care of yourself if you're not feeling well by resting or seeking medical help, which will show your children that physical health and wellness are important priorities.

Balance risk and protection

- You are in the best position to understand the health patterns that your children engage in or neglect and can work with them to bolster healthy practices and reduce those that are unhealthy or unsafe. Supervising your children is critical for preventing them from sustaining serious injuries or developing habits that can have short- or long-term health consequences. There are resources to help and, luckily, most health risks among children can be prevented or addressed effectively.
- Allow kids to take some risks and enjoy physical challenges. They need to explore and relish their physical strength and capabilities, even if that means experiencing some minor injuries or discomfort. It's important to keep in mind that it's normal for children (and adults) to fall now and then, make some unwise food choices, or skip out on a few hours of sleep, but as long as you can help redirect them toward a healthier path, they will retain their physical resilience.
- Try to be compassionate and understanding when your children make less healthy choices, and support them in healthier practices. Just as you would get help for, not punish, children who come down with a serious illness, try to take the same approach for the more everyday risks that many children take with their physical health and safety.

Strengthen Family Functioning and Parent-Child Bonds

The bond that you have with your children, and the strength and closeness of that bond, is a deeply important ingredient for raising healthy, resilient kids.[48] Although your children will face hardships outside of your control, you can empower them to more effectively tackle life's challenges by providing them with unconditional love and consistent support.

Risk Factors That Interfere with Healthy Family Functioning and Parent-Child Bonds

It's becoming increasingly clear that many of the obstacles to forming strong, secure, stable, and protective families lie outside the control of the individuals in the family. Trauma, poverty, discrimination, unstable employment or housing, and inadequate support from communities and government can put such significant strains on families that the elements required for healthy family functioning seem virtually unattainable. Even economically secure families may have mental, physical, or substance use disorders that compromise their ability to establish a stable and supportive family environment.

Family conflict

All family members fight sometimes, so we're not suggesting that any and all forms of conflict will cause severe harm to your children. Rather, intense, frequent family conflicts that go unresolved or that occur over petty or random issues can be very stressful for children. Whether your children witness these conflicts or are themselves involved in them, persistent family conflict can cause permanent elevated stress and insecurity in children, which can have lasting effects on their mental, physical, and social health and well-being. Even when parents are in conflict but don't outwardly show their anger or frustration, children usually know that something's wrong. So, even nonverbal anger, where conflict does not get resolved and instead bubbles under the surface, can cause harmful levels of stress.[49]

Untreated mental illness or addiction

A family member's untreated or inadequately treated mental illness or substance use problem can compromise the strength of a family and harm parents' bonds with their children. This isn't to say that any health problem that a parent has will inevitably put children at risk, but when a parent doesn't get help for these problems, it can damage family bonds and functioning.

Untreated mental illness in parents is associated with an increased risk for child maltreatment. Such maltreatment can include a parent with an anxiety disorder who might be overly-controlling or critical of their children or a more severe case in which parents with an untreated substance use disorder or psychosis engages in physical abuse or neglect.[50] Untreated mental or substance use disorders can affect a family's financial stability and interpersonal relationships as well, leading to reduced access to resources and social isolation.[51] Often, these problems are due to the corrosive stigma surrounding mental illness and addiction in our society, which blames and shames the person with the disorder and limits access to care.[52]

If you or a loved one is in an abusive situation, please call these helplines for assistance.

If there is an emergency, dial 911.

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD or 1-800-422-4453

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE or 1-800-799-7233

To learn more about child abuse and neglect, you can refer to this page from the American Psychological Association.

Trauma, abuse, and neglect

A trauma is a harmful, tragic, or stressful event that may involve a range of adverse experiences, including abuse, assault, the sickness or death of a loved one, or living through a natural disaster or warfare.[53] Trauma can have long-lasting effects that can interfere with personal relationships and family functioning, heightening stress, straining family dynamics, interrupting routines, and disrupting a child's developmental environment.[54]

Child abuse and neglect, legally defined as, "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm,"[55] can cause immediate pain, developmental delays, long-term psychological and physical problems, and can be fatal for children.[56]

In 2019, about 656,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect in the U.S.[57] Children who experience bullying, violence, abuse, or other trauma may have ongoing feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or self-blame. If the trauma is related to betrayal or abuse at the hands of a close relative, other family relationships can be affected, as the sense of trust and security within the family might be damaged.[58]

A number of factors increase the risk of child abuse or neglect, many of which are intergenerational. In many cases, abusive parents were themselves exposed to violence as a child and raise their children in the same way they were raised. Sometimes, untreated mental health or substance use disorders can impair a parent's judgement or capabilities, raising the risk of child neglect.[59] None of these can excuse abusing or neglecting a child. Rather, they illustrate how certain life circumstances can contribute to the risk of violence or neglect and how important it is to prevent these circumstances in the first place and to intervene early with those at risk of perpetrating and experiencing abuse or neglect.

Food, job, or housing insecurity

It's very hard to build a strong family, characterized by love, support, and safety, when you struggle to access basic, foundational needs. More than 1.5 million children enrolled in public school faced homelessness during 2017 and 2018[60] and an estimated 13 million children in the United States (one in six) are food insecure, meaning they might not know where or when they're going to get their next meal.[61] The millions of children and families experiencing food, employment, and/or housing insecurity face significant challenges to their ability to live and thrive together.[62]

Even in less dire circumstances, such as when parents are stressed by having to work multiple jobs or having to care for aging parents while simultaneously caring for their children, basic survival needs kick in and other issues, like nurturing strong and healthy social and family bonds, can fall by the wayside. When basic needs are not met, children face obstacles to healthy development, potentially leading to developmental delays, chronic health problems, mental health and academic problems, and substance use.[63]

Featured Content Partner

common sense®

Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century. Common Sense provides entertainment and technology recommendations for families and schools.

For helpful tips, please see these resources from Common Sense:

- Online Privacy and Safety
- Media Balance and Well-being
- Social Media and Devices
- Resources in Spanish

Protective Factors That Promote Healthy Family Functioning and Parent-Child Bonds

Overcoming serious threats to healthy family functioning is undoubtedly difficult, but certain parenting skills can mitigate those threats and benefit children, regardless of their risk level.

Open communication

Respectful and honest communication is crucial for fostering strong parent-child bonds. Talking with children about their concerns and challenges can help them put their troubles in perspective and find solutions.[64] Under more serious circumstances, discussing difficult experiences with children can be incredibly challenging, but it is also critical for helping them cope and determining how to get them the help they need to rebound physically and emotionally. This doesn't mean that parents should force their children to tell them details or information they're not comfortable revealing; rather, a parent should be approachable and willing to listen to and validate their children's feelings.[65] By providing opportunities for open communication — whether during routine family meals or any other relaxed, low pressure circumstance, such as while cooking, cleaning, or shopping — parents can help their children navigate life's hardships, build resilience, and provide hope.

Monitoring

Monitoring, or keeping an eye on your children, is a basic requirement for protecting them. Parents have the right to know the whereabouts and actions of their children, but this healthy level of monitoring doesn't have to be suffocating. Parents' attentiveness is key to being aware of changes in children's behavior that might indicate a problem. When children seem to act out of character, it might be due to difficulties that they are experiencing, whether at school, among friends, online, with substance use, or even at home. Some signs that children may be having trouble include outbursts of anger and aggression, atypical sleeping or eating patterns, ignoring school and other responsibilities, and getting sick more often, like with frequent stomachaches or headaches.[66] Through healthy monitoring and addressing potential problems in a way that reflects love and care rather than anger and punishment, a parent can protect their children's well-being, strengthen family bonds, and build child resilience.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

One great way to get kids involved around the house while spending time together is to give your child household activities to do. You can bond with your child while making dinner, setting the table or doing other things around the house.

External support to strengthen family stability

When a family is struggling economically or emotionally, or even when things just feel off balance, there is no shame in seeking help or assistance, especially when doing so helps to strengthen your family and support your children. For those who are more fortunate, valuable support can often be found in relatives, friends, neighbors, and health care providers. In the absence of support from one's social circle, help can often be obtained from community organizations or through government assistance.

Food banks safely distribute free food that help feed families dealing with food insecurity.[67] To find your local food bank, you can refer to Feeding America's website. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has several ways of providing for families in need,[68] including their National Hunger Hotline at 1-866-3-HUNGRY (1-866-348-6479).[69] For immediate help with housing, contact a local homeless service provider through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. For general income support, you can go to benefits.gov or to usa.gov.[70]

Key Takeaways: Family and Parent Child Bonds

Foster a strong bond

- Your children rely on you to meet their basic needs, such as food and shelter, as well as emotional needs, like love and support. The strength of your connection with your children is one of the most important factors in determining their health and future success.[71]
- Infants and very young children don't tend to remember their earliest experiences, but the affection and unconditional love that you provide from day one is the foundation for a strong parent-child bond.[72] By being responsive to their needs and nurturing their health and confidence, you can develop a strong and secure attachment.
- Providing guidance and consistent rules demonstrates that you believe that your children are capable, responsible, trustworthy individuals and that you are looking out for their best interests. By following your rules, your children have the opportunity to show that they respect your judgement.
- Having a strong relationship with your children does not mean that you allow them to do whatever they want. You have the right — and the responsibility as a parent — to ask your children directly what they plan on doing and where and with whom, to expect honest straightforward answers, and to set boundaries on their actions if you're uncomfortable with them. By monitoring your children in a way that shows that you expect the best, not the worst, of them, you can both protect your children and demonstrate your care for their health and safety.

Be an example

- By maintaining strong relationships with your own parents, siblings, and partner, you will teach them to value and respect you and their siblings, even as they increasingly look to peers for companionship and support.
- When family conflict inevitably occurs, do your best to demonstrate good coping skills, and seek out and accept support from others instead of facing all hardships alone.
- Try putting your phone and other devices out of sight and out of reach during family meals or times that you spend directly with your children. This teaches them that actual people, especially family, are more important and deserve more attention than interactions online.
- Your children can learn a lot from hearing about your day, your experiences, your relationships, and how you handle the good and bad things in your life. There's no need to put on an act, but be aware that your children are listening to what you say and also watching how you behave.

Love them for who they are

- Allow kids to try new things and express who they are. Acceptance of their individuality shows you have confidence in them, teaches them to be independent and trust their own feelings, and allows them to explore their interests. In this way, you can help them gain confidence in themselves, establish their unique identity, and show that you love them just the way they are.
- Take the time to acknowledge and support things they do right and, more importantly, the effort they put in. This lets them know that you're not just on the lookout for things to correct about their attitudes and behaviors, but that you are paying attention to their positive development and take great pride in them. Making parents proud is a very powerful motivation for kids to try hard and stay safe and healthy.
- Don't force your children to open up to you or pry into every detail of their lives. Instead, try to be

available and open to communication with them, both about their feelings and experiences as well as your own.

- If you feign interest in what they're saying or fail to show respect for their thoughts and feelings, they'll know it and will be less likely to initiate conversations with you in the future.
- As is true of adults, sometimes children just want to vent about a stressful experience, without necessarily receiving advice. In those situations, simply being a caring, attentive listener can be all they need. Part of raising resilient and healthy children means giving them a voice and ensuring that they feel that their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are respected and valued.

Know when you need help

- Your parental instincts and pure gut feelings are essential when it comes to caring for your children, but for more complex issues, research and seek guidance about the most effective ways to respond to difficult topics, like trauma and abuse, mental health problems, social difficulties, and substance use.
- If your children or family have gone through a difficult or traumatic experience, get help as soon as possible, before early signs of problems become worse. Even moderate shifts in family dynamics, aided by help from a trusted friend, relative, or professional, can produce significant short-and long-terms benefits for your children and your family.
- When your children seem angry, stressed, or withdrawn, or they're acting out or having trouble in school, talk with them and try to understand why they're feeling or acting the way they are instead of punishing them for their feelings. And it's important to show them that seeking outside help — whether from a friend, relative, pediatrician, or other trusted source of support — is a smart and healthy way to cope.

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

When you are engaged and present in what your child is saying to you, you can get a glimpse into their feelings and motivations. Ask them follow-up questions about what they tell you — this lets them know that you are truly listening and interested in what they have to say. Remember that showing you're listening doesn't mean giving advice or judgment on everything your child tells you. It can look like simply saying, "That makes sense."

Promote School and Community Connection and Engagement

A positive connection to school and community can be very protective for children, helping them develop resilience. Children who feel connected to their school and community are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically and socially.[73] Such connections equip children with invaluable life skills, foster a sense of belonging, and prepare them to move through life with self-confidence.

Risk Factors for Poor School and Community Connection and Engagement

Children who experience mental, physical, or family problems will understandably have a difficult time feeling invested in and connected to their school and community.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Some children just have more difficulty in social situations than others, which can make it harder for them to make friends, leading to social isolation and loneliness. Children can become socially isolated for several reasons, including being anxious, having poor social skills, or not fitting in with their larger peer group.[74] Loneliness and social difficulties can make children avoid participating in school or community activities like sports and clubs, perpetuating a cycle of loneliness and isolation. Being excluded from or excluding oneself from social interactions means missing out on many important learning opportunities that come from interacting with others, which can interfere with healthy mental and social development.

Feeling Unsafe

When opportunities that might enhance school connectedness or community engagement are unavailable or seem unsafe, children will be less likely to engage with or benefit from them. A significant impediment to children's sense of safety in school and communities is the threat or experience of being bullied. Children who are victims of bullying tend to do worse in school and might avoid going to class or participating in extracurricular activities to escape their aggressors. Bullying can contribute to anxiety and depression and other mental and physical health problems. Although any child can be a victim of bullying, some are at higher risk than others, such as those who are LGBTQ+ or have a disability.[75] Feeling unsafe around one's peers is a barrier to healthy engagement in school and community, as is living in a physically unsafe neighborhood, whether due to high crime rates, high rates of substance use, or environmental pollutants.[76]

Racial Stress and Discrimination

There is growing recognition of the many ways in which experiencing racism and discrimination can have both short- and long-term toxic effects on health, education, financial stability, relationships, self-confidence, and resilience.[77] Obviously, a full discussion of the devastating effects of racism and discrimination on children is beyond this guide, but we will focus on some of their effects on children's connection to school and community.

Racism and discrimination, and the stress and damage to self-confidence that they evoke, have been shown repeatedly to compromise children's ability to perform well in school and achieve their full potential.[78] They also directly hinder young people's progress, as explicit and implicit bias from educators and community members contribute to lower expectations and fewer opportunities for students of color.[79] Racism and discrimination also contribute to income instability and less funding and resources for schools in communities of color,[80] all of which make it harder for children to engage in and feel connected to their school, extracurricular activities, and community.[81]

Featured Content Partner

For more than 50 years, the **National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)** has been at the forefront of engaging leaders, policymakers, professionals, and parents around critical and timely issues that directly impact Black children and their families. NBCDI is a trusted partner in developing and delivering strengths-based, culturally relevant, evidence-based, and trauma-informed resources that respond to the unique strengths and needs of Black children around issues including early childhood education, health and wellness, literacy, and family engagement.

NBCDI has developed the Good for Me! program, a key component of our national initiative to promote culturally relevant healthy nutrition and fitness practices among Black families with young children. Since 2011, we have reached more than 80,000 individuals, including children, parents, caregivers, and teachers, nationwide. The goal of our initiative is to improve outcomes for young children of color by providing strengths-based resources that reflect our children's families, cultures, and communities. Our policy strategies also support efforts that promote child health and family wellness.

For more information, please see these resources from NBCDI:

- Policy Publications
- Connect to a local National Affiliate Network

Protective Factors for Strong School and Community Connection and Engagement

There are many things that can get in the way of feeling connected to school and community, and these obstacles to connection can impair children's ability to reach their full potential academically, socially, and as a contributing member of their community. A relationship with a trustworthy and supportive adult, a positive and stable group of friends, being able to see how doing well in school can actually improve one's future, and the improvement of a child's physical environment and school climate can do wonders in overcoming these obstacles and offering even the most disadvantaged children an opportunity to connect and engage.[82]

Adult Mentorship

Parents typically are the most influential adults in a child's life. Some very fortunate children have other adults who also serve as role models and mentors, while some less fortunate children are unable to look to parents to fill this need at all. Luckily, close relatives, family friends, teachers, coaches, clergy members, or other caring adults can serve as role models for children, as can adults from more formal programs that connect children with a trained, supportive mentor. Adult mentors can help a child navigate family, friend, or school challenges, and offer guidance around general life skills and healthy coping. They can build a child's confidence and help boost their resilience in the face of problems or setbacks.

Adult mentorship programs have been associated with better grades and higher graduation rates at school, as well as improved relationships with parents, teachers, and friends.[83] A trained mentor can help kids in need by showing them kindness, offering social support, lending an attentive ear, and forging bonds to their community.[84]

Featured Content Partner

Search INSTITUTE

Search Institute is a nonprofit organization with a sixty-plus-year history of collaboration with youth-serving organizations to conduct and apply research that promotes positive youth development and advances equity. Search Institute's tools build connections that help all young people learn and grow.

Research shows developmental relationships are the roots of positive youth development and young people's success. Search Institute's research has shown that when young people experience strong developmental relationships with teachers, parents, and staff in out-of-school-time programs, they are significantly more motivated to work hard in school and possess stronger social and emotional skills, and are more resilient in the face of stress and trauma.

—Search Institute President and CEO
Dr. Benjamin Houltberg

To find helpful resources, please see the Developmental Relationships Resource Hub from Search Institute:

The Resource Hub provides teachers, staff, and leaders from youth-serving organizations free access to a set of high-quality resources for building young people's developmental relationships. The Resource Hub is useful for those working with young people in classrooms, youth programs, at home, and in communities. The collection of activities, self-assessments, videos, measurements, webinars, and other resources is fully searchable and categorized in an easy-to-use portal. It consists of more than 50 resources created by the Search Institute based on research-to-practice partnerships with youth-serving organizations, as well as key resources from peer organizations.

Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Participation in safe activities and programs within or outside of school allows children to explore and hone their interests and bolster their social and emotional skills. Recreational activities like sports or art classes, academic clubs, or community service and volunteer work are often simple, enjoyable, and inexpensive ways for children to develop healthy school, social, and community connections.

Participation in extracurricular activities is positively associated with enhanced development and better grades, as most promote social skills and a good work ethic.[85] Academic-oriented clubs, like robotics or creative writing, can also help children improve the skills that are tested in school, but in a more relaxed environment.[86] Participation in sports allows children to strengthen both their physical and mental health and overall resilience.[87] Extracurricular activities that allow children to express and challenge themselves in safe and healthy ways have even been found on a nationwide scale to be protective against youth risk behaviors, including substance use.[88]

Partnership to End Addiction's Help & Hope by Text program:

Your child will get a real confidence booster if given the opportunity to help others. See if your child has an interest in volunteer opportunities in your community, such as at your local library, or helping a classmate on a project.

Key Takeaways: School and Community Engagement

Get involved

- Get young kids excited about learning by encouraging reading, doing creative math games, or even playing pretend school.
- Start early in community engagement by, for example, having them volunteer with you at a local food bank, animal shelter, or town festival; by joining a community center; or by forming relationships with neighborhood families.
- Early community engagement enhances social skills, teaches responsibility, and introduces children to a broad range of adults who might serve as role models for them.[89]
- Relatives, neighbors, teachers, counselors, health care workers, as well as your local library, newspaper, or online resources, can help suggest opportunities for engagement that are best suited for your family's needs.

Be an example

- If you demonstrate commitment and care for your community, as well as your personal and professional networks, your children will learn the benefits of forging social connections, working hard, and making meaningful contributions.
- Use family meals or other time spent together to talk positively about school, community, family, and friends. This kind of family conversation can teach your children to focus on the positive aspects of their social and academic activities, rather than the negatives.
- Showing hard work, conscientious effort, and good coping skills when it comes to your work, relationships, and responsibilities, and expressing the rewarding feelings that come from contributing to your community can help motivate your children to work hard at school and devote effort to their own relationships.
- Prioritize healthy balance between play, work, and community engagement to teach children to value their time and the many things their life has to offer.

Build motivation

- Set reasonable standards and expectations for your kids and provide them the support they need to reach those standards. Communicate to your children that you think they're smart and capable of doing well in school and being strong contributing members of their community.
- During extracurricular activities, try to watch your children's performance and behavior. This not only shows your children that you care about their interests, but also allows you to determine if they're benefiting from the activities, conducting themselves well, and seem comfortable with the adults involved.
- Help connect your children to challenging but rewarding classes or extracurricular activities, and encourage them to try new things. If your children aren't sure they'll be good enough to participate in a sports team, talented enough to audition for a play, or smart enough to take an advanced class, let them know it's okay to try, and that everyone starts out as a beginner. Even if things don't work out, your children will learn from the experience, build confidence and skill, and benefit from your encouragement.
- When your children work hard in their courses or in their extracurricular endeavors, let them know that you are proud of them for the effort they put in. This motivates them to continue working hard so that they can exhibit their strengths, improve their skills, and feel rewarded and fulfilled.

Support their success

- Pay attention to how your children are performing in school, both academically and socially, so you can know if they need more support or guidance. The earlier you can catch concerning trends in your children's grades or conduct, the easier it will be to help them get back on track.
- Encouraging open communication with your children may make it easier for them to approach you if they're having difficulty in school or if they find their extracurricular commitments to be stressful or unrewarding.
- If you find that your children are struggling in school or are withdrawn from their peers or community, discuss with them why they might be having trouble. Help them identify strategies or additional resources needed to address problems and bolster their motivation and engagement.
- Know what's right for your family. If you know that your children may have difficulty paying attention in school, you can talk with their teacher or pediatrician about how best to help them learn. You can assess the safety of your neighborhood and find ways that your children can participate in community activities without putting their health and safety at risk. If they are lacking in adult role models, you can seek out mentorship programs. And if, despite your best efforts, establishing meaningful connections to their peers, school, or community is difficult for your children, seek professional help for ways to achieve those goals without putting undue pressure or stress on them.

Featured Content Partner

inseparable

Inseparable is a growing coalition of people from across the country who share a common goal to fundamentally improve mental healthcare policy to heal ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities. The coalition seeks to be a united force to press our leaders to recognize, with both policy and tangible solutions, that the health of our minds cannot be separated from the health of our bodies and to build the power needed to win major reforms that help save lives and improve care for millions of Americans.

Inseparable leads the Hopeful Futures Campaign, a coalition of 15 national organizations coming together to ensure that each school in America has a comprehensive system in place to support school mental health. The Campaign is advocating for policy change in 4 core areas:

1. **Early Identification** — Identify problems early and connect students to needed services and supports through regular screening and referral to accessible care.
2. **School-based Mental Health Services** — Schools should offer accessible multi-tiered mental health supports and services, including age-appropriate mental health education for all students.
3. **Trained Educators, Staff, and Mental Health Professionals** — Schools must have specialized support teams that include trained professionals to provide support from assessment to treatment. In addition, we must equip educators with social and emotional skills and mental health literacy needed to create a healthier classroom and workforce.
4. **School-Community Partnerships** — Developing collaborative working relationships between schools and the larger community will create pathways to ensure the delivery of comprehensive mental health services and services within the school system that are enhanced, not duplicated.

For more information and to join, please visit: www.hopefulfutures.us

Partnership to End Addiction's Resources for Family Support

Partnership to End Addiction has a range of resources and services for parents interested in raising resilient, healthy children, including help for parents seeking to prevent substance use and addiction in their children, starting from an early age and continuing into adulthood:

Research-backed information

drugfree.org/prevention-and-taking-action-early

Resources and tools that include approaches to help families address substance use prevention and take early action.

Free support

drugfree.org/get-support

Our helpline, peer support programs, text messaging program and online tools can help you and your child. Find support and customized resources.

Tools for connection and learning:

Resilient Relationships is a **free** text messaging program that aims to empower parents and caregivers to raise healthy, substance-free kids through the foundation of a positive, nurturing relationship. It is part of our larger Help & Hope by Text program, which delivers personalized text messages and resources straight to your phone. Text **PARENT to 55753** and answer a couple of questions to get started!

Other resources supporting child health and development

National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org/Home): An organization that provides advocacy, education, support, and public awareness about mental illness.

American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org): An organization of pediatricians committed to the optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) page on preventing child injury. (www.cdc.gov/safechild/index.html).

Nemours Kid's Health (www.kidshealth.org/): A source for physician-reviewed information and advice on *children's health* and parenting issues.

Partnership to End Addiction's page on substance use prevention tips for children of all ages. (www.drugfree.org/prevention-and-taking-action-early/).

Safe Kids Worldwide (www.safekids.org/): A nonprofit organization working to help families and communities keep kids safe from injuries.

The Family Dinner Project (https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/): A nonprofit initiative that champions family dinner as an opportunity for family members to connect with each other through food, fun, and conversation.

Nurse Family Partnership (www.nursefamilypartnership.org): A community health program that empowers first-time mothers to transform their lives and create better futures for themselves and their babies.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (https://www.bbbs.org/): A nonprofit organization that creates and supports one-to-one mentoring relationships for children from age 5 to young adulthood.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America (https://www.bgca.org/): A nonprofit organization that empowers kids to excel in school, become good citizens, and lead healthy, productive lives.

National Head Start Association (https://www.nhsa.org/parenting-tools/) provides helpful resources to parents of young children to help them succeed in school and life.

Endnotes

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