

HELPING CHILDREN GROW UP HEALTHY

It is easy for parents to identify a child's physical needs—nutritious and balanced meals; adequate shelter and clothing; sufficient rest and physical activity; and a healthy living environment. However, a child's mental and emotional needs may not be as obvious. Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially, learn new skills, build self-esteem and develop a positive mental outlook.

These are the basics for a child's good mental health:

- **Give children unconditional love.** Children need to know that your love does not depend on their accomplishments.
- **Nurture children's confidence and self-esteem.** Praise and encourage them. Set realistic goals for them. Be honest about your mistakes. Avoid sarcasm.
- **Encourage children to play.** Play time is as important to a child's development as food. Play helps children be creative, develop problem-solving skills and self-control, and learn how to get along with others.
- **Enroll children in an after school activity, especially if they are otherwise home alone after school.** This is a great way for kids to stay productive, learn something new, gain self-esteem and have something to look forward to during the week. Or check in on children after school if they are home alone. Children need to know that even if you're not there physically, you're thinking about them, and interested in how they spent their day and how they'll spend the rest of it.
- **Provide a safe and secure environment.** Fear can be very real for a child. Try to find out what is frightening him or her. Be loving, patient and reassuring, not critical.
- **Give appropriate guidance and discipline when necessary.** Be firm, but kind and realistic with your expectations. The goal is not to control the child, but to help him or her learn self-control.
- **Communicate.** Make time each day to listen to your children and talk with them about what is happening in their lives. Share emotions and feelings with your children.
- **Get help.** If you're concerned about your child's mental or emotional health, consult with teachers, a guidance counselor or another adult who may have information about his or her behavior. If you think there is a problem, seek professional help right away.

For more information, contact your local Mental Health America affiliate, call Mental Health America at 1-800-969-6642 or visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net. If you're in crisis now, seek help immediately. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or dial 911 for immediate assistance.

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