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PROMOTING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN 1

COMMUNITY PAEDIATRIC REVIEW

A NATIONAL PUBLICATION FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH NURSES AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS

PROMOTING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN

Feelings, moods, emotions and behaviours are all inextricably linked. They influence how we function and respond to the demands of day-to-day life. They also help us shape our sense of wellbeing, or our 'mental health'.

The foundations for mental health are formed within the early infant-parent and caregiver relationships (Centre for Community Child Health, 2009). When the foundations are secure and no major trauma is experienced by the child or the family, the child's development usually continues on a healthy trajectory. Over time, with the parents' help to master the developmental challenges of each new age and stage, the child develops a robust capacity to manage life's pains and disappointments and to embrace life's joys.

A healthy child enjoys:

- exploring the world around them
- learning new things

- being part of a family
- making friends
- taking part in school and community life.

However, there are many ways in which a child's trajectory toward healthy social and emotional development can be disrupted. When this occurs, all the domains of a child's development – physical, intellectual/ cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual – can be affected. **Early detection** and recognition of any developmental disruption is vital for the child and the family.

THE FOUNDATIONS FOR GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

Positive emotional and social development, alongside physical and cognitive development, is a vital precursor to future mental wellbeing. This means that mastering skills in regulating emotions and behaviour is just as important as mastering physical and cognitive skills.

Age	Optimal developmental achievement	Parenting aim
Birth to two years	Sense of trust	To provide a secure environment, where sustenance and comfort is provided. To ensure basic needs are consistently met.
Two to four years	Sense of autonomy	To provide a secure base from which a child can explore. To avoid a highly restrictive or unpredictable environment.
Four to six years	Sense of initiative	To encourage and support a child's initiative and independence. To avoid being dismissive of a child's efforts to try new things.
Six to twelve years	Sense of industry	To encourage and support a child's perseverance and their accomplishments. To avoid ridicule of efforts.

An initiative of the Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Professionals with knowledge of developmental theory and practice can help parents understand their child's needs at different ages and stages. Developmental theories, such as that by renowned child psychologist Erik Erikson, can help professionals and parents understand what optimal development looks like and how it can be achieved. The table on page 1, based on Erikson's theory, provides an example of how developmental theory can be used to guide parenting goals up to the adolescent years (Erikson, 1963).

Erikson's theory stresses the importance of laying foundations in the early years, as early developmental 'struggles' may lead to the development of feelings of mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt and/or inferiority. Parents and caregivers may then require professional support to help understand when and how things may have gone wrong, and set them back on a healthy developmental trajectory.

FOSTERING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Mental wellbeing is enhanced by a number of factors both internal and external to the child. Of primary importance is how parents or caregivers and other family members interact with and respond to the child, as well as each other. Professionals can provide important reminders of this 'bigger picture' for parents and caregivers who are focused on meeting the basic day to day needs of their child.

The importance of family

In infancy, and as children grow, the relationships with the trusted adults in their life will continue to be the dominant guiding forces toward a healthy and fulfilling future. Children thrive in nurturing and dependable relationships. This means that parents (and other regular caregivers) in children's lives are 'active ingredients' that strongly influence children's development. The ways in which parents respond to their child will mould that child's sense of self and others.

Likewise, the way in which family members respond to each other forms the child's experience of how relationships work. From their experience in family life the child builds an internal map of how the world works. Bowlby called this an '**internal working model**' (Bowlby, 1979). A child's internal working model will direct and influence how they behave and inform how they expect others to behave. In a family where the adults treat one another kindly and respectfully, over time and with their parents' help, the child will learn to do the same.

A matter of temperament

No two children are alike; each brings with them unique and differing ways of engaging with and responding to the world around them. To some degree, this is influenced by their temperament. A child's



temperament is like a lens through which the child experiences his/her environment, and impacts on a child's emotional intensity, activity level, frustration tolerance, response to new people, and adaptation to change.

How a child's expression of these characteristics is understood and responded to by their parents will influence and shape that child's developing personality. Parents' temperament is also important, as it influences how they respond to their child.

Some child-parent combinations find harmony more easily than others. A child who is perceived to have a 'difficult' temperament will often challenge even the most confident and competent parents. However, parents who come to understand their child's particular temperament characteristics will be more easily able to adapt their parenting style to be more 'in tune' with the child.

When parents struggle with their child's temperament, it may help for them to understand that with support and encouragement, children can modify or strengthen individual characteristics. Parents who work to understand their child's temperament will enhance the child's capacity to confidently take their place in the world. This, in turn, can lead to less parent-child conflict and allow more mutual enjoyment.

Shared pleasure

Shared pleasure is vital for the child's developing self confidence. It is important for children to experience the praise and delight of important adults in their world; this also helps the child to become curious and willing to try new challenges.

Without shared pleasure and the encouragement it offers, children may become hesitant or resistant to learning. They may give up too easily when faced with frustration or lack confidence in themselves and their capability. Such feelings may hinder development across many aspects of their functioning.

Building co-operation

Parents play a vital role in helping their child develop co-operative, pro-social behavior. Stanley Greenspan, the renowned child psychiatrist, describes positive child-parent interaction as involving four key characteristics (Greenspan, 1992):

- Joint attention and engagement

- Two-way communication
- Shared meaning
- Emotional thinking.

All four characteristics recognise the importance of engaging with a child in an equitable manner. As well as taking the role of leader and guide, parents can also observe their child and follow their child's lead.

Recognising that babies and children have 'things to say' can help parents develop appropriate two-way communication channels. When the parent is patient and interested, the child is encouraged to find their voice. This is vital for language development and lays the template for taking turns and learning 'the rules' for later childhood.

Emotional thinking comes from the parents' shared understanding with their child. Encouraging the child to 'use your words' helps the child find a more creative alternative to throwing or breaking something when they have big feelings to express. Over time, a patient parent can help their child learn a language for the 'tsunami' of feelings that at times threaten to overwhelm the child. Emotional thinking is a pre-cursor to empathy and compassion.

RISK FACTORS FOR POOR MENTAL HEALTH

Mental wellbeing can be affected by stressors placed on the family. In these circumstances, families may need professional support to help reduce external pressures and cope with their child's reactions.

Family disharmony and dysfunction

Modern family life is complex. There are many demands on parents' time and attention. However, when parents are concerned or distressed by events and experiences in their own lives, this is noticed by even the youngest family members. A child's behaviour may alert others that they are feeling confused or troubled by what is happening around them.

While it is important that there is a clear division between 'adults' business' and 'children's business', sometimes parents can be encouraged to provide an age appropriate explanation of their own concerns to help a child settle, reassured that they are not responsible for their parent's pre-occupation or withdrawal.

There are many Australian children who live in families where family relations have deteriorated from disharmonious to dysfunctional. Recently published family violence data shows that one in four Australian children has witnessed violence against their mother or stepmother (Victims Support Agency, 2009). The impact of this family violence on children's development is far reaching. For example, when the child's family is continually overwhelmed, the child may develop adaptive ways of managing family life that do not serve them well in other contexts, such as shutting off, or 'day dreaming'.

Helping families in need

Research shows that professional support can help families respond to their children in a more positive way, even when families are facing complex external stressors. The Toddlers Without Tears study (Bayer, 2009) found that families who attended parenting groups used less harsh discipline with their young children (e.g. yelling and smacking) compared to families who weren't offered this program. Bunston and her team have also created a number of programs to address the devastating effects of family violence on young children (Bunston & Heynatz, 2006).

Where there is suspicion or knowledge of a child being abused or neglected, professionals should be aware of their reporting obligations under state and territory legislation.

Addressing challenging behaviours

Parents know it is important for their child to learn how to behave in ways that are socially acceptable to others. The child's parents and other trusted caregivers are the most important teachers in these lessons. As children learn 'social rules', they are likely to exhibit some challenging behaviours which might manifest themselves in the following situations:

- **Episodes of frustration and disappointment.** Learning how to manage frustration and disappointment is vitally important for the child's healthy development. Naming them as 'big' feelings, rather than negative or bad feelings, can be a good place to start. Parents and caregivers should be reminded that these episodes are part of every child's learning and development. This may enable parents and caregivers to take on the role of 'teacher' rather than 'punisher'.

- **Separation anxiety.** The balance between the child's sense of safety within the family and their inquisitiveness about the world beyond is a delicate one. It takes a good deal of negotiation between parent and child to set safe limits and to encourage curiosity and exploration. By three or four years of age, even when children might like to spend all their time with their parents, they should be able to spend time apart as well, confident their parents will return. If a child cannot separate, this is a problem for the child and their parent.

Separation anxiety means that both the child and the parent are worried. Often it can be negotiated when the parent trusts that the child will survive the parent's absence, even in the face of disappointment and protest. If difficulties persist or begin to disrupt school attendance, the family may need a specialist's help to explore what is getting in the way of the child feeling confident to leave the parent's side.

- **Sibling rivalry.** The arrival of a new baby in the family is usually a time of celebration and joy. For the older sibling, it is also a time of conflict and confusion. From the very beginning, siblings need their parents' thoughtful assistance to accommodate one another. Over time and with some help, most children learn to enjoy having other children in the family. Helping children build robust sibling relationships is a good preparation for future friendships and relationships with peers.

It can be quite a challenge for many parents to keep more than one child in mind. When sibling conflict continues, it is often because the older child – who may themselves be very young – gets promoted to being 'the big boy/girl' too soon. It can help to try to see the world from the older child's point of view, and remember that they too have baby feelings. Telling the older child stories of when he/she used to be a baby may also help.

- **Toilet training.** Within a short time of beginning formal schooling, most children have mastered bladder and bowel function. If toileting has become a source of family tension and distress then specialist help may be needed.

Every parent and caregiver will have a different threshold for what challenges them and 'pushes their

buttons'. Helping parents understand that all behaviour is meaningful and communicates something about the child and their experience, or reminding them that feelings and behaviour are inextricably linked, may open the doorway to new possibilities. Children's troublesome behaviour can be a mask for inner feelings of fear, worry, helplessness or hopelessness.

Managing challenging behaviour is made easier when the parent acknowledges that the child has a mind and wishes and desires, which may not always be the same as those of their caregiver. Understanding the world from the child's point of view can help parents come to a shared understanding. This does not mean 'giving in' to the child, but it does help parents to find more effective ways to engage the child's co-operation.

DIAGNOSED DISORDERS

When emotional and social development has become severely disrupted, a child's behaviour may seem entrenched, causing ongoing problems for the child or the family. The behavior in these cases may fit a pattern described as a 'disruptive behaviour disorder'. Disruptive behavior disorders require specialist help, encouragement and support.

Three such clusters of behaviour are recognised:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD)
- Conduct Disorder.

When a diagnosis is accompanied by information and support to help families move forward, a new understanding of the child's experience can be formed,

resulting in the family finding new ways to respond to the child. Without accompanying information and support, a child is at risk of feeling 'blamed' by the diagnosis. A family may also unintentionally 'freeze' their child's development if they are unaware of or confused about their child's potential capabilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Child-parent relationships continue to be the guiding force towards a child's healthy development. However, this doesn't mean that parents intrinsically know how to support their child's emotional and social growth. Recognising signs of poor mental health is complex; problems with emotional and social development can be mistakenly put down to a child being 'difficult'. Many parents will need the support of the professional community to help make sense of their child's physical needs, behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

Professional support means more than just teaching parents a set of skills – it also involves helping parents develop a relationship with their child that embraces an understanding that the child has an independent mind and needs help to make sense of the world. Helping families to build a coherent family story that embraces the highs and the lows, acknowledges the challenges, notes the failures and celebrates the successes, is a creative way to encourage and support them.

Parents also need assistance in knowing where to turn if they recognise, or have been advised, that there may be a problem with their child's emotional and social development or mental health. With understanding and support from the professional

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *As part of your interaction with parents, do you routinely address the social and emotional wellbeing of their child?*
2. *When a child is exhibiting challenging behaviour, do you focus on the child, the family's reactions to the child, or a combination of the two?*
3. *What key strategies would you use when working with families where you feel a child's mental health may be at risk?*

community, together with support from the wider family, most families can overcome the most difficult times in family life, together.

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