

CHILD WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

What is mental health?

A child's sense of wellbeing, or their 'mental health', is linked to their feelings, moods, emotions and behaviours. Parents can help children develop a positive sense of wellbeing from the moment they are born, by providing a secure and consistent parenting style with lots of love, hugs, attention and encouragement.

Addressing challenging behaviours

All children will experience temporary disruptions to their sense of wellbeing as they grow and learn. These 'misbehaviours' are a child's way of communicating something about their experience, whether it's feelings of fear, worry, helplessness or hopelessness.

It is not unusual for parents to find these challenging behaviours frustrating and sometimes even distressing. However, understanding the world from your child's point of view can help you find ways to 'guide' your child through challenging periods, such as those outlined below:

- **Episodes of frustration and disappointment.** Help your child think of frustration and disappointment as 'big' feelings, rather than negative or bad feelings. At the same time, remind yourself that these episodes are part of every child's learning and development.
- **Separation anxiety.** 'Separation anxiety' means that a child is distressed in the absence of their usual caregiver, which in turn causes their caregiver distress.

Helping your child set safe limits while also encouraging curiosity and exploration can be a balancing act, but

both are important. By three or four years of age, your child should be able to spend time apart from you, confident that you will return.

If your child is experiencing difficulties that are persistent or disruptive, you may need a specialist's help to explore what is getting in the way of your child feeling confident to leave your 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 can also be a time of conflict and confusion.

Siblings need their parents' assistance to accommodate one another. When sibling conflict continues, it may be because the older child has been promoted to being 'the big boy/girl' too soon.

Try to make a special point of reminding the older child that he/she is not going to be cast out from your care and attention. Telling your older child stories of when he/she used to be a baby may also help.

With the guidance of parents or other trusted caregivers, children will eventually learn to communicate their feelings and be able to regulate their own sense of wellbeing. This will help them maintain their own positive mental health and wellbeing in the future.

However, if at any time your child's behaviour is causing ongoing problems for your child or the family, it is always best to seek professional help, encouragement and support.

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

For further information contact the Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. Phone 03 9345 7085 or Fax 03 9345 5900 www.rch.org.au/ccch

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