

Adults can improve the mental health of children and young people by

- Parents setting aside at least 15 minutes a day to talk with and really listen to their children. A USA study showed daily talk sessions had a strong impact on child's emotional growth, self confidence and mental health
- Notice the small things children do well and comment on them
- Allow children to cry or be sad Do not negate any of their emotions
- Spend extra time with children at bedtime
- Take charge of the media in your child's life Limit viewing choices and talk about what is being shown
- Ban unacceptable television programmes and keep TV sets out of children's rooms
- Be aware of what children and young people are accessing on the internet and be aware of chat rooms. Consider having your family computer in the family room or kitchen so you can monitor its use
- Teach your child a sense of community through active participation. Join activities to keep your neighbourhood safe and to prevent violence
- Help children learn alternatives to violence for settling conflict
- Create a family charter about how everyone in the family agrees to support each other

Communication

Make time to talk Make sure that in our busy lives you have quality time to talk with children about the great things happening and also about their issues or problems. Help your children cope with their feelings by simultaneously acknowledging their feelings and reassuring them. An extra hug and 'I love you' goes a long way.

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Part of keeping discussion open and honest is not being afraid to say you don't know how to answer a child's question. When such an occasion arises, explain to your child that some things are very unpredictable, and they cause things that even adults have trouble dealing with.

Listen to children. Be open to what children are thinking. Allow them to explain what they think and why. Ask questions. Paraphrase - repeat back to your child what he/she has said in your words to make sure you have interpreted correctly.

Ask how children feel. It is okay to be worried. Ask how your children are feeling and what is making them feel bad. Don't try to talk children out of what they are feeling. If your child is really upset and not coping, talk to someone about it, e.g. teachers, Public Health nurses, GP's or another adult.

Be open to questions Let children know it's okay to ask questions. Answer their questions directly, but do not give them more information than they need or more than you think they can handle.

Listening

As you listen to children and young people, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from THEIR point of view. Don't make judgements about what they say no matter how silly or illogical it may sound to you at first. If you don't understand something, ask them to explain it. Show your respect both for them and their ideas.

As parents, teachers and caregivers know, children and young people are not always able to express what they mean or what they feel, and what they say doesn't always mean the same thing for adults. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what's going on behind the initial words they utter. Comments such as, "That's interesting, can you tell me more about it?" or, "What exactly do you mean by that....?" are examples of ways to elicit more information without judging the rightness or wrongness of what they are saying.

If they seem to be struggling to make something clear, it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarise and focus their concerns. Clarifying questions and statements can help all young people sort out their ideas and feelings without interfering with their thinking process. Good listening also involves paying very careful attention to the things children may NOT be saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages – facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, posture, tone of voice, or others – which may indicate that strong emotions are present.

You can get help through your GP, your school public health nurse, your RTLB, child and family mental health services, other social service agencies and the Ministry of Education.

Practical things to promote mental health and well being and encourage young people to think of others

- Have healthy days at school or at home. Let the children plan the activities and meals
- Ask young people what their issues are and look at exploring ways of dealing with them (see the sheet called Health issues affecting us)
- Write letters to children and schools in other areas in New Zealand e.g. a rural-city exchange and share ways that young people live and look after themselves.
- Find out the sister cities of your city and start an exchange with them around being mentally healthy and what that means in different cultures
- Write stories, poems, paint and draw
- Listen to music and sing with your children
- Encourage memory time where photo albums or photos are brought out about great memories we all have e.g. that great family camping trip
- Have a family meal together at least once a week
- Do something for someone else
- Pass it forward – would this work in your community where when someone does something nice for you, you do 3 nice things for other people.
- Increase physical activity – go for a walk with your children or play sport with them – the benefits are both physical and mental.
- Sort through clothes, toys and other belongings and donate them to organisations who work with families
- Hold a Mufti Day at school and use the funds to buy something for the school that would promote mental and emotional wellbeing, e.g. water coolers, books, sports equipment, musical instruments, or music
- Encourage parents and community to spend time in school together, e.g.. health days, cultural events, and other performances
- 'Take a child to work day' - encourage parents to offer to take someone interested in that area

Mental Health Awareness Week 2003

- Have a 'take a parent to school day' rather than a 'child to work day' where parents can come for an hour and spend time learning about health
- Spend some time in the outdoors, go for a walk or spend time at the beach. This can often be an experience where children and young people think and discuss issues around spirituality and ways to look after their mental and emotional well being
- Hold Parents evenings or sessions where they get information about good parenting, mental health awareness and up to date health information
- Encourage journal writing – this allows young people to record their hopes and dreams and sometimes process decisions and issues in their life
- Be there – be open to opportunities to talk or just be with the young people in your family or community

How to encourage resilience in young people

A worldwide study of how families and communities help develop young people's ability to bounce back from difficulties has shown the importance of

- Letting them know that they have people around them that they can trust and love no matter what
- Setting limits and helping them to understand what these are so they know when to stop before they get into danger or trouble
- Showing young people how to do things right by setting a good example
- Encouraging young people to learn to do things for themselves
- Providing help when they are sick, in danger or really need to learn

It also highlighted the value of young people learning that they can think of themselves as being

- A person people can like and love
- Glad to do nice things for others and showing their concern
- Respectful of themselves and others
- Willing to be responsible for what they do
- Sure things will be all right

And the benefits of creating opportunities for young people to:

- Talk to others about things that frighten or bother them
- Find their own ways to solve problems which they face
- Control themselves when they feel like doing something wrong or dangerous
- Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or take action
- Find someone to help them when they need it

Adapted from Growing up with Young People

Having good friends is such an important part of everyone's life,

Friendship – Children 5 – 13

What's the best thing about having a friend?

They give you encouragement when you are scared to do something

Someone to make you laugh

You can tell them your secrets and you aren't lonely

They never think you are weird and they stand up for you

They help you with your work

If someone is going to do something like go to the zones, someone else might sign up too so they don't have to go on their own

They do things with you

I have different friends for home and different ones for school and different ones for out of school like gym and dancing.

What do you remember about your friends?

We had this party when my friend left and everyone came – all my friends. We watched a movie and danced and talked. It was fun. I'll remember it for a long time. (girl 13)

My friend left and went to Auckland and I'll always remember the last time I ever saw him. After school we walked out the gate and then I got in the car and Mum drove away and he was just standing there. That was two years ago and I still remember. (boy 11)

Thomas came to my house and we played in the hedge. I jumped in the hole in the top and went WIZZ! right down to the bottom. It was funny. Max (dog) jumped all over us and licked our faces. We laughed and our tummies were sore. (boy 5)

As an adult what do you value most about your friends?

My friends are good sounding boards. I have friends for different things. I think you need those differences. Friends who have kids the same age as mine,

Mental Health Awareness Week 2003

friends who I can go out with for the evening and forget you are a parent – and the friends who can baby-sit!

The best thing about friends is their warmness. Their non-judgmental attitude and their acceptance of diversity and difference.

The sign of a good friend is someone who turns up unannounced and I'm in my PJ's and I don't care. A sense of humour helps big time!

I miss my friends from where I used to live. I could borrow their clothes and they could borrow mine. Just turn up, sit on their beds and relax. I haven't found that here yet.

You can talk to a friend on a different level than you do to anyone else without anyone feeling responsible.

Friends allow you to have fun

You can ring a real friend up for absolutely no reason.

The best thing is being able to talk to a friend, just ring them. They are non-judgmental – and they'll always buy me a beer!

I don't have a big group of close friends and we live in different places. Sometimes I don't see them for a while but when I do it's really great. It's like stepping back into a conversation or a life without a break. I can laugh and cry and moan and be silent and it's all ok. And I know that whatever happens we will always, always be there for each other. One of my friends' sons died and everyone just turned up, came from all over the place, and did what needed to be done for the time we needed to do it. I'll never forget that.

As I have gotten older my husband and I have become closer. I would call him my best friend. It happened with my sisters and Mum as well. They just really really understand me, how I am and I don't need to pretend or anything.

What have you observed about your children's friends? What impact do you see friends having on them?

Some friends can be disruptive and others can be positive. How do you get your kids to pick the right friends? I think the thing is to talk about people (their friends) as whole people, you know the good the bad and the ugly. Do they look after them the way they like to be looked after? What might be happening for them? What's important to kids might be totally different to what's important to us as adults. We have to recognize and respect that.

Friends are incredible and very important. When we moved my teenage daughter was very unhappy and reclusive for about 6 months. Then she found some friends and her personality completely changed. She became happy, outgoing, confident – sometimes over the top!

I think social maturity and being able to interact with people in life is more important than academic achievement. Friends make that happen.

Friends help my kids see who they are. They portray an image of what their friends see. They are different when their friends are around – more demonstrative and their strong characteristics really show. They experiment with their friends to see where they fit – what's cool and what's not.

My children are best friends with each other. Sometimes I think people forget that siblings can be great friends too.

When my kids and their friends were good, they were good. But when they were bad it was horrible.

I love watching my kids with their friends and their siblings. I can see how they are with people and I feel good inside to know its ok and they will be safe as they grow because they care about people who really matter to them. I see their loyalty even when the chips are down and it's a wonderful feeling to know they will persevere and be there when someone needs them. As a parent I think – I did something right.

Families can help promote the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people

- Show your children you care about them
- Show affection, interest and regard for their wellbeing
- Encourage them to talk about their feeling and work out problems even when it is difficult
- Comfort them when they are anxious, worried or distressed
- Spend time with your children and help them with their sports and hobbies or play with them and read to younger children
- Consistent care, not harsh discipline
- Being aware of their needs and difference at different stages of development

Take time to care for yourself and keep up contact with friends and family who support you. Constant arguing or fighting between parents is harmful. If you or your partner have difficulties, counselling may be helpful. Sorting out your relationship issues may also help your children

Adapted from NSW Family Help Kit