

**Happy Children:  
Nurturing through Ages and Stages - Birth- age 8  
Dr. Charlotte Hendricks  
www.childhealthonline.org**

**Development of mental health begins the moment we are born. A consistent nurturing and supportive environment is the foundation of mental health throughout life.**

**Promoting Mental Health for Infants**

Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness; it also is a condition in which children and families can experience positive social and emotional development that creates the foundation for success and adjustment throughout life. Good mental health starts during infancy as their intimacy needs are met.

For example, when infants cry, a caring adult responds and tends to their needs and the babies begin to trust their caregivers. As they develop, mentally healthy infants increasingly demonstrate the ability to adapt to their environments; to form warm, trusting relationships with other children and adults; and to be comforted by adults.

The home and childcare environments are critically important in promoting good mental health. Infants need to feel secure and to bond with their parents or caregivers. Caregivers need to be aware of the needs and characteristics of each infant, particularly in reference to temperament, attachment, and emotional referencing.

**Temperament**

Infants are born with a basic pattern of responses to stimuli and people. This is called temperament and there are three basic types--easy, slow-to-warm-up, and spirited. These temperament categories describe the child's type of response pattern. They do not describe the personal characteristics of the child.

Most babies have easy temperaments. They are usually in good moods, adjust easily and quickly to new situations, and adapt well to routines like sleeping through the night or eating on a semi-regular schedule. Most babies can find ways to soothe or calm themselves, such as sucking their thumb or holding a blanket.

Babies who have slow-to-warm-up temperaments may seem shy and need more time than easy babies to warm up to new people and experiences. These babies approach life cautiously. They may withdraw from new things or people; may quickly become over stimulated; and may not cry or fuss much, even if hungry or wet.

Babies with spirited temperaments engage in almost constant physical activity. These babies may be very sensitive to environmental stimuli such as crowded spaces, noises, smells, how their clothing feels on their bodies, and even touch. They may be hard to console when fussy and may have a harder time adapting to changes, such as changes in caregivers.

It is important that parents and caregivers maintain consistency when caring for each and every infant, based on their individual needs. For example:

- Do not change caregivers unless absolutely necessary. If possible, train caregivers to care for different age groups, from infants to toddlers and older. For example, if six infants enroll in a childcare program, they will be placed in an infant nursery and will form attachments to their caregivers. As these babies grow and become toddlers, they may move into a new nursery set up with toddler toys and furniture. Optimally, their primary caregivers will be "promoted" along with them and will continue to be their primary caregivers.
- Do not change placement of infants' cribs.

- Try to establish a routine for the children and stick to it. For example, be consistent in how you put each baby down for a nap--give a baby a bottle, then a burp, rock the baby and sing, and then lay her or him in the crib while still slightly awake.
- Allow children to keep security blankets, favorite toys, or pacifiers.

### **Attachment**

Attachment is an enduring emotional bond to a specific person, generally the parent or the primary caregiver. It is characterized by the infant's tendency to seek and maintain closeness to this person, particularly during stressful situations. Caregivers need to be aware of the importance of their role in attachment.

For children who have healthy family environments, quality childcare promotes mental health primarily by reinforcing the child's family experience. For children who do not have optimal home situations, the quality of the caregiving can help compensate for the lack of nurturing experiences in the home.

Early infant attachment is at the heart of healthy child development. Infant attachment can generally be observed at two points during the day--when the person who is the focus of the attachment leaves the child at the childcare setting and later when that person returns to pick up the child each day.

A securely attached infant will fuss for a few minutes when the parent leaves, but then quickly calm down. When the parent returns, the baby is demonstrably happy. Some infants react differently, however. A baby may cry when the parent leaves and be hard to console, yet act standoffish when the parent returns.

Caregivers and families should work together to help children feel secure, even in stressful situations. Be aware that each time the parent (or specific attachment person) leaves, this is a stressful situation for the infant.

- Do not let a parent leave the child without saying goodbye. Even if the child cries when the parent leaves, that is better than the feeling of abandonment the child experiences if the parent leaves without saying goodbye. Of course, a child who cries when the parent says goodbye should be consoled, and the caregiver should identify the cause of the crying—it may not be the parent leaving, but hunger or a wet diaper!
- Talk to infants. Smile and play games.
- Touch, hold, and cuddle infants. Always hold each infant when giving a bottle or feeding. Never prop a bottle!
- Focus on the routine needs of individual children. Each child has an individual rhythm of eating, sleeping, and playing.

### **Emotional Referencing**

Children react to what they see in adults; this is called "emotional referencing." For example, if the caregiver is visibly angry when she enters the nursery, young children may sense this. Children do not understand why she is angry; they just sense the emotion and often will react with their own unhappy emotions (crying, fussing).

Caregivers should be calm and composed before being with the children. If necessary, ask another adult to tend to the child for a few minutes so you can breathe deeply, drink some water, and settle your emotions. Bring in your happy face as happiness promotes mental health for both you and the children.

## **Mental Health of Toddlers in Childcare**

Happy toddlers are curious and exuberant in nearly everything they do. Toddlers begin to develop social-emotional wellness, the ability to form satisfying relationships with others, to play, communicate, learn, and experience the full spectrum of human emotions.

Toddlerhood also is the age of autonomy and many children will test boundaries. Proper caregiving and a supportive childcare environment will help allow autonomy to develop within the boundaries of safety--physical as well as social and emotional.

### **Security Comforts**

Caregivers and parents should be aware of children's needs, and help them feel secure and loved. Meeting children's immediate needs, including security issues, is essential to good mental health.

For toddlers, feeding usually is associated with comfort; it is a special time for bonding and cuddling. As the child gets older, the caregiver wants the child to feed himself, but the child may not understand this shift. Help children through this process slowly, making sure each child gets enough attention during meals. Sit with the child, talk to the child, touch the child, and most importantly praise the child for self-feeding efforts.

Another comfort measure for many toddlers is using a pacifier or thumb sucking. Other children have favorite blankets or toys. These are important for children. Be patient and realize that the children are using these transitional objects to feel safe. When they are ready, the toddlers will abandon the security items. Try to have duplicates of the objects available for the children for occasions (i.e., when favorite blanket needs to be washed). Remember, to the child, it is all about feeling safe and using methods for self-soothing.

Some toddlers show an increased level of separation anxiety. They may cry when their primary caregiver leaves. Some children enroll in childcare for the first time as a toddler; they may not have experienced previous separation from their parent/guardian.

### **Building Social Skills**

The toddler stage is where children begin to develop the social skills necessary to form friendships. These early social skills are important for children because if a child has few social skills, their peers may not play with them.

Shy toddlers may experience similar rejection because they tend to withdraw socially. As a result, other children do not involve them in play, often resulting in these toddlers feeling rejected. Caregivers can help toddlers begin to develop social skills and build friendships in a variety of ways, such as the following:

- Teach children how to get into the "game" or activity. Some children do not ask, "Can I play?" Instead, they just barge in where they see a gap. They look at an activity, and in their own minds, they process where they fit in.
- Teach children to treat other children as friends. The "Golden Rule" applies throughout life--"Treat others as you want to be treated." Reinforce this concept daily.
- Teach toddlers how to say "no" in acceptable ways. A toddler's response to an invitation to play by another child may be a definite "No," but it can mean several things. It might mean "not now," or "I do not want to do that activity," or any number of things. It is not necessarily a rejection of the inviting child. But the other child may think it is rejection. Toddlers can learn to say "not now" or "later" or "I do not like that." These phrases are more easily accepted by other children.

### **Setting Limits**

Accepting the limits set by adults is one of the challenges for toddlers. While setting limits with your toddler, be clear and consistent.

- Keep rules simple. Two basic rules are: do not hurt yourself, and do not hurt others or property.
- Make simple statements about behaviors. Toddlers are just beginning to talk and they will not be able to understand long explanations.
- Make it clear to the child that even though you do not like a particular behavior, you still love him or her!

Temper tantrums are common at this age, and the best way to deal with them is to prevent them. Try to avoid situations that may frustrate and overwhelm the child. Try to soothe the child before situations explode. Offer help as much as possible, but do not try to complete tasks for the toddler because this may produce resistance and tantrums.

If tantrums occur, do not worry; this is a type of psychological release for a child's frustration. You can either let the child alone (if there is no risk of injury), or you may hold the child and provide comfort and verbal reassurances.

### **Fear**

In the toddler stage, children develop many fears, such as fear of thunder or loud noises, darkness, animals, etc. Living in homes or neighborhoods affected by alcohol or drug addiction or violence can cause fear. Also, young children may feel fear of terrorism or disasters. If a child is afraid of something that is real, such as thunder or loud noises, you can help calm the child by explaining what is happening.

Children also may have fears of real people but for imaginary reasons. These fears come from their environment. A child may fear police officers because he has witnessed a frightening encounter with police such as an arrest, a violent situation, or even a routine traffic stop that left his mother frightened, too.

It is important to acknowledge children's fears. However, children need to trust people who can help them. Help children learn about community health and safety helpers and how they provide help when needed.

Fear of imaginary items or situations also is very real for toddlers. These fears also come from the child's environment. For example, a child may fear ghosts because of a television show or movie, fairy tale, or story told by older children. If the child has an irrational fear (such as a fear of ghosts), then give her a rational solution, such as a magic wand. Children are concrete thinkers. They need something that they can see and believe in. Also, children need creative means for protection.

Development of social skills, autonomy, and the ability to express emotions is progressive and developmental. Communication skills are important in expressing motions appropriately. Encourage toddlers to state how they feel and to use appropriate words.

### **Promoting Mental Health for Preschoolers**

Promoting mental health for preschoolers in childcare programs focuses on developing social skills and friendships. Many preschoolers have difficulty making and keeping friends because they lack the necessary social skills.

Children who display poor social skills and aggressive behavior may be rejected by peers and not welcomed in play activities, resulting in psychological pain. Addressing these social skills and behaviors may prevent problems that might continue throughout the child's life. Efforts to change behaviors are most likely to succeed if they start when the children are very young; and many of these appropriate skills can be learned in the childcare setting.

### **Playing Together**

How can caregivers help children develop social skills? The best approach is through play. You can help a child join a game that other children have started by helping the child find something he or she can add to the activity. Look for a role the child can play that will make the game more fun. Give the child tools or toys that make the game more complete, and make positive comments about the new child's play. Gradually, the children will recognize the contribution and welcome the new playmate.

Preschool children need help in recognizing which of their behaviors make it harder to connect with other children, as well as which behaviors are positive. A child who loudly crashes in, acts aggressively, and tries to be the one with all of the good roles is often rejected. You can gently point out that if a child asks to join others in play, other children may respond to this in a positive manner.

While helping the child become more aware of his or her negative behaviors, you can help develop skills that are more socially acceptable, like waiting turns, sharing, being polite, and coping with frustration. Preschoolers are just beginning to learn these skills and they require 'practice' before they become regular habits.

### **Developing Personal Responsibility**

Understanding that actions result in cause and effect is an important social skill. For example, a young child might fall on and hurt another child. This is an unintentional act, but it still has a result (in this case, pain).

Gently explain the unintentional action caused the other child to feel pain and cry. Do not scold or shame the child. Emphasize that when someone accidentally causes pain he or she is responsible; but he is not a bad person because of it.

Do not try to force the child to apologize verbally. Actions are better than words. After tending to the hurt child, encourage the offending child to help by offering a toy, patting a hand, or other small gestures. The goal is to help both children begin to develop a proper sense of cause and effect, responsibility, and empathy.

### **Aggressive Behaviors**

Some preschoolers show aggressive behaviors. The caregiver's response should be similar whether the hurtful behavior is unintentional or intentional. Calmly step in immediately between the children to prevent further aggressive behavior.

Comfort the child who was hurt. Then, look into the offending child's eyes and say calmly but firmly, "I do not like it when you hit and hurt people" or "No hitting is allowed here."

Encourage the child who was hurt to tell the other child, "You hurt me." After you have helped both children understand the incident, and steps to avoid a repetition have been taken, the children may be reunited.

There often is a pattern to aggressive behavior. Watch to see when and where aggressive action happens. Who is involved? What is the situation? What happens before and after the aggression? Look for a pattern to the situations, places, or other children involved. Can you see frustration developing in the child just before he or she acts aggressively?

Try to identify situations that promote aggressive behavior and redirect the child before aggression occurs. Another caregiver may observe the situation and have helpful suggestions. If the child continues to show aggressive behaviors, consider scheduling a parent conference and possible consultation with a mental health consultant or child therapist.

### **Expressing Emotions**

Recognizing and expressing emotions is another step in developing children's mental health. Young children initially use physical aggression to express emotions because they do not have the words to communicate. Give them words, and show them appropriate ways to express their feelings.

Young children do not yet have the skills to understand the different degrees of the same emotions. For example, if they say they are angry, they are just angry. They do not distinguish between related emotions like being annoyed or being furious. Use concrete examples to help them better understand their range of emotions.

You also can help children understand that all emotions are okay, even the difficult ones. Then, help them learn how to name their emotions and express them in ways that do not hurt themselves or others.

Role playing and demonstrating appropriate responses can help children recognize and express their emotions.

- Anger: Ask the child, "Are you bothered (mildly irritated)? Are you angry (quite upset about the situation)? Are you really mad (foot stomping, want to have a tantrum, mad)?"
- Sadness: Ask the child, "Are you unhappy (do not feel like smiling)? Are you sad (want to cry)? Do you feel really sad (do not want to talk to anyone, want to be left alone)?"

- Happiness: Ask the child, “Do you like that (smiling, pleasant)? Are you happy (laughing, smiling, radiant face)? Are you really excited and happy (cannot wait, jumping up and down happy)?”

Children need love and attention at every age. Caregivers promote mental health every day through simple actions like calling children by their names, putting up pictures or art work by each child, praising all children’s efforts, listening to children, demonstrating affection, and encouraging acceptance of all children.

### **Role Modeling**

Children copy what they see; so it is important to model appropriate behavior and good problem solving skills. Show children how to smile and laugh often! Keep your voice pleasant and reassuring. Avoid shouting or yelling. Respond appropriately to situations. Present a positive and encouraging outlook even in difficult situations. Model good coping skills to show children how adults deal effectively with stressful situations.

Taking the time to help children develop these skills will help them develop healthy social and emotional skills and put in place healthy emotional/social habits that will help them as they grow older.

## **Resources available from [www.childhealthonline.org](http://www.childhealthonline.org)**

- ***Promoting Mental Health*** training module and ***Stress Management for Child Caregivers*** training module. Each ready-to-use modules includes a PowerPoint presentation along with learning outcomes, detailed training notes, instructions for participant activities, reproducible handouts, and evaluation forms.
- ***Growing, Growing Strong: A Whole Health Curriculum for Early Childhood:*** This research-based curriculum makes health and safety interactive and fun for young children. Includes information on learning centers, objectives, evaluation, diversity, and family involvement. Activities are designed to use materials and resources found in most classrooms.
- **HIP on Health Family Information:** Provide staff and families with research-based mini-posters and information sheets. Each of the two sets includes 65 different topics. Printed in black on white paper, these materials can be individually reproduced within your program.
- **Quick Guide to Behavioral Challenges.** Provides sound advice on responding to an array of behavioral challenges such as aggression, defiance, inappropriate language, tantrums, and separation anxiety.
- **Free downloadable posters:** Topics such as “Keep rules simple” and family style eating.
- Visit the website “Links & Resources” page for links to organizations, list serves, newsletters, online courses, national and state recommendations, and topic-specific resources.

**For more information, please contact Dr. Charlotte Hendricks  
[chendricks@childhealthonline.org](mailto:chendricks@childhealthonline.org)**