

# How to nurture the single most important part of your child's well-being: Their mental health

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The key to a healthy year for your kids is to make sure they are surrounded by healthy relationships. In my 30 years as a researcher in autism and child and youth mental health, I have learned that there is no health without mental health, and there is no mental health without healthy relationships.

It's important to remember that children's brains are hardwired to initiate and sustain supportive relationships with adults. And since there are intimate connections between brain and body, supportive relationships have a profound effect on physical health.

Kids want to communicate with us, even if they sometimes act like it's the last thing on their minds. One of our most important jobs as parents is to keep the lines of communication open, whatever the obstacles or whatever disaster has occurred. Open lines of communication will help kids cope with the difficulties of everyday life, which can sometimes seem overwhelming.

Here are a few key tips to help keep the conversation going:

## **Lead by Example**

Look after your own mental health and pay attention to your own relationships with others, including friends and your family. Children are very impressionable. Children and adolescents will often imitate behaviours so providing a positive example will give them the foundation for sound mental health. Being angry with others and not talking to them will encourage your kids to not communicate with you.

## **Show them the love**

Be affectionate with your kids and show them the love! Feeling loved by your parents is important for building trust in relationship with others. Children and teenagers are more likely to open up to you if they are in a loving and stable environment.

### **Share**

Share your experiences with your children. Talk to them about what it was like when you were a kid. You made it through the challenges of childhood and adolescence, so they can too. Kids tend to catastrophize things, so they always appear worse than they are. Empathize with them, agree it's difficult for them and don't dismiss their feelings. Sharing will create a sense of openness and your child will feel more comfortable opening up to you about problems that they may be facing.

### **Give them undivided attention**

Turn off your phone, put down your to-do list and give your child your undivided attention daily; it could be while taking them to school, at the dinner table or at bedtime, even if you are under stress. In order to effectively communicate with your child, they need to feel that you are present and that you are fully engaged and actively listening to them. It is important that your child feels that you are truly invested and care about what is going on in their life regardless of how big or small the problem is.

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