

# YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL HEALTH

A child's emotional health is the way a child feels, thinks, behaves and relates to the world. The child with a healthy emotion (or successful emotion) is happy, interested in the world, makes friends, gives and accepts love, is eager to learn and happy at school, and has no unexplainable health complaints. In contrast, a child with poor emotional health often seems unhappy, has trouble making friends, does poorly in school even though the child is intelligent, and has aches and pains with no physical cause. Some basic factors influencing a child's emotional health are:

1. The parents' emotional background; emotionally mature parents are more likely able to help their children grow well.
2. The parents' acceptance of the child; how much the parents can let a child grow outside of their own dreams affects the child's emotional growth.
3. Home atmosphere; home environment can have a good or bad effect on a child.
4. The child's environment; school experiences, friends or lack of them, relatives, nature of the community all help to shape a child.
5. Heredity; characteristics with which a child is born play an important role throughout life.

What happens in your home or the way family members treat each other, can have lasting effects on your child. When family members get along well and talk over problems together, children feel secure. It's OK for a child to be aware of some of the problems even the best of families have, but too many arguments, criticisms or misunderstandings can be harmful. Worries are a fact of life. But if you are worried or depressed often, your children will know, and it may make them anxious. Families who have gone through divorce are capable of creating separate, healthier home environments for their children.

Make your home a fun place to be. Provide opportunities for growth. Be consistent in your demands and discipline. Set an example by what you do, not just by what you say. Give equal attention to each child and let each develop at an individual pace. Encourage your children to get along well with each other so that not only will you be able to stand being with them, but later, they will find it easier to cooperate with their peers outside the home. Here are eight additional ways to encourage good emotional health in our children:

1. **Understand your child's needs.** Children need love, acceptance and security. Let them know that you are always there if needed and see that they get plenty of warm, personal contact and genuine interest from you.
2. **Encourage independence.** Children should know that you trust their abilities. Let them feed and dress themselves as soon as they're able. Have them share in household chores. Don't be overprotective. Children must make mistakes in order to learn, so give them freedom to grow.
3. **Give guidance.** Give your child a foundation for making choices in a confusing world by discussing your values and beliefs. Teach by example - - what you do carries more weight than what you say.
4. **Give discipline.** Discipline gives a child a sense of order and security. Set fair limits and see that they are kept. Discipline should be consistent and firm, but never excessive. Reinforce good behavior by giving rewards in the form of approval and positive attention.
5. **Share family problems.** Be honest in situations such as death, illness, divorce, and money. Many times children will think they are the cause of a family problem because a parent has not been honest with them. We sometimes forget that children know a lot more about things than we

think they do, but sometimes they have the facts wrong. Getting problems out in the open in a way your child can handle the situation could ease your child's mind.

6. **Understand your child's friends.** Children are influenced greatly by their playmates and always try to live up to what they think are their peer's standards. Children will respect you for having your own standards and not always doing what other parents do. Don't try to choose your child's friends. As most of us know by having parents who tried to do this, it will usually cause resentment. Sometimes we need to trust that our children will realize the good and bad about their own friends and be able to choose friends wisely. Our job as parents is to intervene before it's "too late" by using gentle persuasion. Inviting your child's friends over will allow you to have some control over their activities.

7. **Help your child learn.** Find out about your child's school experiences and listen to what he or she has to tell you. Children learn better if they are relaxed, so avoid pressure.

8. **Share your experiences.** Tell your child about what you do for a living. Spend free time in activities the whole family can share. Choose a day care center or sitter that can offer additional experiences. Teach your child a hobby you enjoyed as a child or one you enjoy now.

### **How can you tell the condition of your child's emotional health?**

Good emotional health means that your child is happy most of the time. Watch how your child gets along with others and listen to what your child has to say. Does he like to learn? Does she want to grow? Can he/she make friends?

Poor emotional health means that your child is unhappy a good part of the time. Children can have some or all of the symptoms of poor emotional health at some time, but if these symptoms are severe or persistent, get professional help for your child:

1. **Poor eating habits** - refuses foods, eats poorly, or too much
- 2 **Bed wetting** - or lack of bowel control beyond the age of four or five)

3. **Withdrawal** (from people and activity, lack of normal aggression or emotion)
4. **No friends** (feels indifferent about others, how they feel)
5. **Slow development** (inactivity as an infant, failure to talk by age three)
6. **Problems sleeping**
7. **Problems with health** (sickness with no apparent cause)
8. **Temper tantrums** or crying spells for petty reasons
9. **Fear with no apparent cause**, "clinging" behavior
10. **Fighting** - picking fights or is senselessly destructive)
10. **Learning problems** (schoolwork below abilities for no apparent reason)

Remember that many of these behaviors just described are "normal" at certain times in a child's life, but what we want to be concerned about, as parents, is excessive behavior in our children. Stress that a child feels at certain times is surely going to be shown through some of these behaviors. Help your child to good emotional health by giving him a warm, accepting home, firm, consistent discipline, enough independence and a good example to follow. *Source: Family Information Services.*

**Diana Converse, M.S.** - Family Life Educator  
University of Florida Extension Service  
5339 S. County Road 579, Seffner, FL 33584  
(813) 744-5519 x 140

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an Equal Employment Opportunity - Affirmative Action Employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin.  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS, STATE OF FLORIDA, IFAS, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA,  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, AND BOARDS OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COOPERATING.