

## WHY DOES MENTAL HEALTH MATTER

It impacts quality of life. Good health is not just about physical health. It is about social and emotional well-being. In other words, good mental health. The single most important influence on a child's social-emotional development is the presence of strong nurturing relationships.

Eighty five percent (85%) of the children referred to Building Blocks exhibit behaviors that hinder their development of social relationships. In seventeen percent (17%) of these children the behaviors are disruptive enough to lead to suspension and/or expulsion from preschool or kindergarten. As a result data shows a statistically-significant reduction in challenging behaviors and a decrease in suspension and expulsion rates<sup>1</sup> Building Blocks helps families to 1) strengthen the parent/child relationship, 2) find effective ways to address challenging behaviors, and 3) connect families with community-based resources and supports.

With success comes decreased parental stress, improved self-esteem, and improved social relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided from the Building Blocks Evaluation Study conducted by The Yale Consultation Center.

## Children's Mental Health Matters!

May is Children's Mental Health Awareness Month.

Ask a friend, relative, or co-worker, "Why does mental health matter?"

Share your answers and spread the word. Mental health DOES matter- for both children and adults!



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[www.SEMHSOC.org](http://www.SEMHSOC.org)

[www.BuildingBlocksCT.org](http://www.BuildingBlocksCT.org)

# How the Home Environment Matters for Children ~

Children benefit from an environment that is organized and calm. Leaving the TV on throughout the day may be background noise for a parent, but distracting to their child. Creating an environment that provides space for quiet activities and relaxation separate from more stimulating activities can help your child be more relaxed in the home. Children thrive in an environment with good routine and rhythm to their day. The following suggestions can help you create a calm, organized environment for your child:



~ Having a simple routine for the day can do a lot to reduce discipline problems and tantrums. Set up your day so that it follows a predictable schedule. Use meal times, bedtime, and nap times as the “pillars” of the day, and create a simple routine around these times.

~ Keeping things in the same location creates predictability and feelings of safety for little ones. It is helpful to clear the clutter: use boxes, bins or shelves and group items (toys; books; CDs;) together. Store them in an area away from the busiest room. Also, making space and clearing a path may lower the feeling of anxiety.

~ Paint rooms in soothing colors such as light blue and beige. Avoid bright, loud colors. Keep distracting patterns, posters, artwork and decorations to a minimum.

~ Lighting can change the feeling of a room to soothe or uplift your child’s spirit. The amount of brightness or darkness in your home affects mood. Perhaps curtains and blinds may need to be opened or closed more. Change light bulbs to lower watts to reduce the intensity or change the color of the light bulb.

~ Children thrive in an environment where they feel secure, and where their imagination can flourish. Having the TV on, even with a “quiet” show, keeps a child strung up at a high energy level. Additionally, having a television on constantly stops your child from using his or her imagination.

Create a nicely ordered life for your child with plenty of alternating times of active play and more quiet mealtimes, story times, and quieter inside play.

Engaging in conversation with your child at mealtime can help build her literacy skills. In fact, a Harvard study shows that “table talk” in the early years is related to children’s academic achievement.

Make a nutritious snack such as deviled eggs, celery stuffed with peanut butter or fruit yogurt shakes with your children. Let them do as much of the preparation as possible.

The first three years are critical for language development and learning to talk. Children need to hear you constantly talk, sing and read to them during these early years. Respond to their babbling and language efforts.

What children need most is loving care and new experiences. Talking, singing, playing and reading are some of the key activities that build a child's brain.

# Promoting Creative Play

*You can do a lot to help your child develop play that supports his or her social, emotional, and intellectual development. Here are some suggestions:*

- \* Encourage and value play that is appropriate to the age and individual interests and needs of your child.*
- \* Help your child bring his own experiences into his play. Children's play is usually more creative and less imitative when it grows out of their daily lives. For instance, providing empty food cartons and a simple toy cash register after a trip to the supermarket can help your child start recreating his experience through play.*
- \* Watch your child as she plays to see what she is working on and what interests her. This can help provide ideas about what play materials and other input might further develop her play.*
- \* Choose new toys carefully. Toys that can be used in many ways usually promote the most valuable play. They give children many opportunities to invent new uses for them over time.*
- \* Find ways to interact regularly (but not always) with your child as she plays. Getting involved with kids as they play - do not interrupt or take over - shows them that adults value play.*
- \* Try to have regular, uninterrupted playtime in your child's life. This tells him that play is important and it helps him develop the skills needed to become involved in meaningful and satisfying play.*
- \* Work to counteract the gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes and violence that characterize many toys. Stereotypes limit children from developing their full potential. Children sort out who they and other people are through their play. Keep this in mind when choosing new toys.*
- \* When your child does engage in violent, imitative play based on TV shows, movies or toys, help her bring in her own creativity and imagination.*
- \* Make thoughtful choices about the role of media in your child's life. What and how much children see in the media can have an enormous impact on their play.*

## Children Learn Through Playing

Play is one of the most powerful vehicles children have for trying out and mastering new skills, concepts, and experiences. Play can help children develop the knowledge they need to connect in meaningful ways to the challenges they encounter in school. Play also contributes to how children view themselves as learners. As they play, they resolve confusing social, emotional, and intellectual issues by coming up with new solutions and ideas. They experience the sense of power that comes from being in control and figuring things out on their own (something children often do not get to do in real life). This helps them develop a positive attitude toward learning.

Games and activities can help improve walking skills. "Ring-around-a-rosy" will let your toddler practice sitting, standing, squatting, jumping up, walking sideways in a circle, and maintaining his or her balance throughout.

Dancing to any kind of music also will improve balance and walking skills.



## Ways to Help Children Avoid Gender Bias

People are defined by their gender from the moment they are born - "It's a Boy", "Boys do this" or "Girls don't do that." Parents, teachers and society treat boys and girls differently, which can result in bias.

To help children understand gender roles and avoid gender bias, it is important to first understand how children learn gender roles. As stated by Szirom, children learn gender through socialization. The designation of pink for infant girls and blue for infant boys begins the social process that teaches girls to be passive, dependent, and submissive and boys to be active, independent and dominant. Infants learn societal expectations for gender-appropriate behavior through the ways they are held, spoken to, played with, and dressed. Children learn gender roles and gender stereotypes from their parents, toys, television, children's books, and schools and teachers.

Benokraitis states, "Early exposure to gender-neutral information is critical in removing gender blinders." While it is inevitable that children will learn gender roles, parents and other adults can also equip them with the skills to understand those roles, to break out of stereotypes, and to avoid gender bias, thus providing children with the freedom to grow up as distinct individuals, regardless of gender.

According to Susan Crawford, it is important that parents/caregivers avoid buying girls' toys and boys' toys unless the child specifically asks for them. Instead purchase books, art and music supplies, games, cards, puzzles, computer games, science and astronomy kits, nature kits or history sets. There are many educational and fun toys and games that do not perpetuate stereotypic role models.

You can help children deal with gender bias with these steps:

- ~ Model appropriate behavior for your children by showing kids how you challenge gender stereotypes within your own life.
- ~ Examine whether boys and girls are treated differently in your home.
- ~ Locate children's books that challenge stereotypes. Recognize and discuss gender bias in children's literature.

### Reference:

Benokraitis, N.V. (2002). *Marriages and families: Changes, choices, and constraints*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc.  
Crawford, S.H. (1996). *Beyond dolls & guns: 101 ways to help children avoid gender bias*. Portsmouth: Reed Elsevier Inc.  
Szirom, T. (1988). *Teaching gender?* Winchester: Allen & Unwin Inc.



## Anything Goes Scavenger Hunt

*A scavenger hunt is a game in which individuals or teams seek to gather a number of specific items – usually without purchasing them. The goal is usually to be the first to complete the list, although players can also be challenged to complete the tasks on the list in the most creative manner. Spring has sprung, and it's time to get outside and enjoy the sun. Here's an idea for a fun family activity that the whole family will enjoy. The Anything Goes Scavenger Hunt is a great way for families to become reconnected with each family member's abilities, likes and strengths while having a great time*

*outside. How To Play:*

1. *Make a list of things to search for. Here are some suggestions for the list:*

- |                               |  |                                     |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| * <i>A green rock</i>         | * <i>Purple flowers</i>                                      | * <i>Something completely black</i> |
| * <i>Something of wood</i>    | * <i>A piece of metal</i>                                    | * <i>Your left shoe</i>             |
| * <i>An acorn or chestnut</i> | * <i>Sunglasses</i>  | * <i>Different color items</i>      |
| * <i>Something soft</i>       | <i>(Note: You can also use items from inside your house)</i> |                                     |

2. *One person should assign different point values for each item in the list. Make some items worth negative points.*
3. *Set up teams with two to three hunters on each team.*
4. *Set a time limit for the hunt.*
5. *Let the games begin. Go hunting!*

*When the time is up, each team should gather their items and tally their scores. Whichever team has the highest score wins.*

## Healthy Attachments Matter!

The bonding experience between parent/primary caregiver and child help prepare the child for lifelong interactions and relationships. At birth, the newborn does not yet have strong connections to another human. Newborns communicate their needs by crying. When the caregiver is able to consistently respond to the infant's needs by distinguishing the differences between cries of hunger, pain or the need to be comforted, the child learns trust and feels secure in her environment. The rocking, hugs, coos, and smiles from their caregiver help the infant survive and grow to meet her potential. Even though there is no language, shared communication is fostered through play, touch and coos.

It is the dependent relationship between the primary caregiver and infant that forms attachment and the infant learns how to view his or her world. As the infant becomes a toddler and more family, friends, and peers enter his life; he continues to develop the capacity to have healthy and strong emotional relationships. It is these experiences of infancy and early childhood that create the roots of attachment. If a child has few or no positive relationships in early childhood or problems with the primary care giver, the child may be at risk for a host of problems. As suggested by Dr. Perry, here are some things you can do to promote the development of healthy attachment:

- Smile and look children in the eyes as you greet them.
- Spend quality time with the child. During this time, get on the floor, listen and establish eye contact.
- Use touch to comfort by hugging, gentle massage, or hold hands.
- Help children learn appropriate social-emotional language (how close to stand, how to use eye contact, when to touch, how to touch).

Remember all children are unique. A shy child is not necessarily an unattached child. If a child is having a hard time engaging others, help facilitate this by actively including her or pairing her with another child who has a matching temperament.

Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children. (1999). Daniel A. Hughes. Jason Aronson; 1 edition Attachment - *The First Core Strength*. Bruce Duncan Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Accessed: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/attachment.htm>.

# The mental health of a parent or caregiver matters!

by Shoshanna Weiss, MSW

Caregivers who experience mental health challenges may find it difficult to deal with life's ordinary demands and routines. This has a tremendous impact on a child's social and emotional development, as they are particularly sensitive to the emotions of their caregivers. They may not know exactly what is wrong or different at home, but they can internalize or display behaviors, which later may affect their own future. A caregiver's relationship with their child is the single most critical factor in the wellness and health of children. Providing responsive, consistent and affectionate care and learning how your child communicates with touch, sounds, smiles or cries are some ways to improve your relationship with your child. Other factors that may support a child's growth include: making certain there is a strong relationship with one other healthy adult, promote positive self esteem, encourage interests outside the home, have help and support from family or friends. As caregivers, it's important to take care of yourself too. Some suggestions to understand and regulate your mood may include: practicing yoga, meditations, eating healthier food, exercising, write in a journal, and talking with a trusted professional, all of which can also be done with your child!



These activities are positive outlets that aim to improve your family and quality of life. Visit [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au) and [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com) for more information on this topic.

## Managing Your Stress Matters!

There is no question that parenting can be very stressful. Whether you are a stay at home parent or a working parent, a single parent or a married parent, mother or father, parent of one child or several children; remaining cool and calm can help get you through the day. Within each of us is a potential to achieve calmness and a more relaxed approach to daily life. Figuring out how to tap into it, even if it is just a few minutes each day, is essential for our well-being and peace of mind. Taking time to relax is a healthy habit that leads to reducing stress, anxiety, and physical ailments, along with improving family life. Patty Fleener, MSW, provides some tips:

- Practice slow deep breathing exercises (in through your nose out through your mouth).
- Use visualization or guided imagery: eyes closed, imagine yourself in a relaxing and safe place, enjoy the present moment, notice the air, sun, smells around you, etc.
- Pamper yourself by taking a warm salt or bubble bath, light aromatic candles, listen to relaxing music, read, enjoy a hobby.
- Do child-like things: swing, play in sand, color, roller skate, ride a bike.
- Order dinner or rent a movie- take a break from your regular routine.
- Learn more about your health and healthy living, take necessary medications as directed.

These and other activities can help you achieve greater control of your emotions and reduce stress in your life. Remember that a more relaxed parent will often have a more relaxed child, enhancing the quality of life for the entire family.