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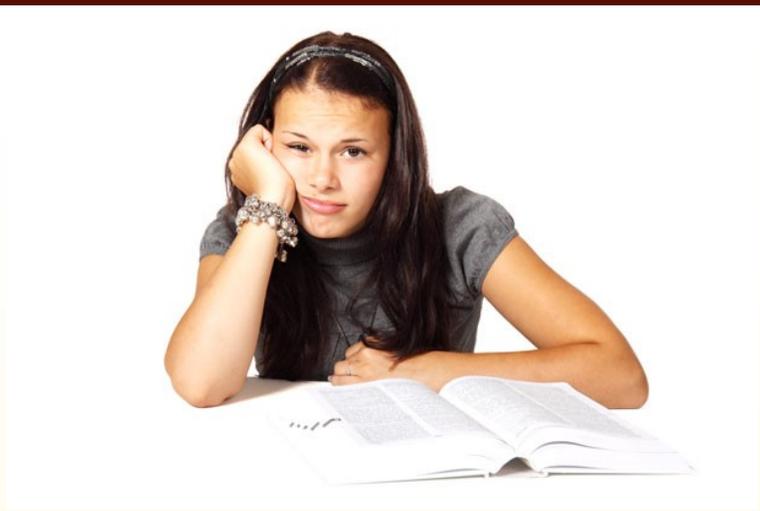
Body, Mind, Spirit & Community



Tips for Families to Support Their Children:
the Connection between
Mental Health and Academic Performance

How we feel about ourselves and our loved ones affects how well we perform at home, work and school.

It is important to keep an eye on how our children feel about themselves, and to track their mental health just as closely – if not more so – as their physical health.



Consider the following scenarios:

Chris is an 8-year old boy who loved first and second grades. Now in the third, he is argumentative with his teacher, bossy with his fellow classmates and whiny at home. He has trouble falling asleep, is sluggish in the mornings and dawdles when getting ready, complaining that he doesn't like school. His teacher has indicated that Chris is not completing his work. No matter how much the parents plead with Chris, his attitude shows no improvement, leaving him unresponsive to the bribe of a new video game .

It was during her PE class that Lisa snuck back into the girls' locker room and rummaged through her classmates' backpacks. She took money and cell phones. She had always been a bit sassy with teachers and rarely turned in her assignments, but now she was in real trouble – the principal suspended her for three days, and her parents are furious with her.

Tom is a junior in high school. He has always hated school, and now he sees no value in it at all. He used to enjoy hanging out with friends but that has changed, and he seems to not enjoy much of anything. He argues with his mom, a single parent who works full-time during the week and part-time on the weekend. All Tom wants to do is play his video games and be left alone. He is failing Algebra II and Chemistry. He has not turned in his last English assignment, last chemistry lab or studied for the up-coming history exam. His mother is on the verge of tears and is at a loss of what to do. Tom doesn't care.





Factors that contribute to positive mental health:

- good nutrition
- good sleep habits
- exercise
- safe home environment
- social connectedness with friends and family

Factors that negatively affect mental health:

- stress
- anxiety
- bullying
- family problems
- learning disabilities
- alcohol/drug abuse

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. (August 2014)”

It may be easy to see that your child has all the attributes at the top of the column at left and conclude that he or she is in good mental health. But the factors below are often invisible, sometimes—as in the case of bullying – purposefully kept hidden by the child. And just one of those negative factors – say stress – can overwhelm all the positive environmental factors you’ve worked so hard to ensure.

With this in mind, let’s return to our scenarios:

Chris might be struggling with some imbalances or skills deficits in his neurological processing system – signs of ADHD and/or high anxiety. He may be overwhelmed by the demands of school. Maybe he is being bullied. Or maybe he is worried about an ailing grandparent.

Lisa might have had a family tragedy recently and is trying to cope with feelings of stress and worry. Maybe Lisa is upset that her friends have abandoned her because their parents see Lisa as a bad influence and the “friends” are now posting nasty comments about her on social media.

Lastly, Tom might be having a hard time dealing with his parents’ divorce and living with a dual-home custody arrangement. Maybe he is realizing he is going to be graduating high school in a little over a year and hears his friends excitedly talking about applying to and visiting colleges. With his grades, he feels he won’t get into college and he has no clue what to do, so why bother trying?



How can we as caregivers help our children?

Observe. Keep checking in with your child. Observe how they are behaving and really pay attention to what they are saying. Try not to judge what your child is doing, but rather explore what skills the child might be lacking or what the unresolved issue is.

Listen. Be available to talk with your kids. They might not be able to express directly what they are struggling with, but remember that behavior IS communication! Ask yourself: "What is my child communicating right now?" Consider doing a quiet activity with your child, such as an art project, as you listen to them talk.

Validate. Let your child know that you hear them and that you affirm that their feelings or opinions are valid and worthwhile. This does not mean you have to agree with their way of thinking. Acknowledge it is their perspective and that perspective is very real to him or her.

Reassure. Let your child know that you will support them in an appropriate way (not necessarily the way your child wants). Focus on engaging your child to collaborate in finding solutions to the concerns at hand. "How can we make things better?"

Remember. Yelling at and punishing your child does not help. It only shames your child; it does not tell your child how to make things better or how to use more appropriate behaviors.

Seek help. If necessary, find a parent coach to help you with setting appropriate boundaries and expectations with your child. Find a therapist for your child if there is concern that your child needs help with learning skill sets or coping with unresolved feelings. Consider joining your child in counseling sessions so that you can be helpful at home in supporting the effective coping skills your child is learning to use.

RESOURCES:

Here are some websites with information about sound parenting strategies:

Ross Greene developed a collaborative parenting model, called Collaborative & Proactive Solutions model:

<https://www.livesinthebalance.org/parents-families>

Positive Parenting Tips by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/index.html>

Positive Parenting Tips by National Institutes for Health (NIH):

<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/09/positive-parenting>

Seven Tips for Practicing Positive Discipline – article by PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/>

