

Childhood Depression Awareness Day

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Mental health problems are real, common and treatable— Depression is never a “normal” part of life, no matter what your age, gender or health situation. May 3rd is Childhood Depression Awareness Day. It was established in 1997 to educate Americans that depression and other mental health problems in young people are real, common and treatable. Although one in five children has a diagnosable mental health problem, nearly two-thirds of them get little or no help. When left untreated, children’s mental health disorders can lead to problems at home, trouble in school and in the community, substance abuse and even suicide. It is easy for parents to identify a child’s physical needs—nutritious and balanced meals; adequate shelter and clothing; sufficient rest and physical activity; immunizations; and a healthy living environment. However, a child’s mental and emotional needs may not be as obvious. Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially, learn new skills, build self-esteem and develop a positive mental outlook.

The following are some basics for maintaining a child’s good mental health:

- Give Children Unconditional Love. Children need to know that your love does not depend on their accomplishments.
- Nurture Children’s Confidence and Self-Esteem. Praise and encourage them. Set realistic goals for them. Be honest about your mistakes. Avoid Sarcasm.
- Encourage Children to Play. Playtime is as important to a child’s development as food. Play helps children be creative, develop problem solving skills and self-control, and learn how to get along with others.
- Enroll Children in an After School Activity, especially if they are otherwise home alone after school. This is a great way for kids to stay productive, learn something new, gain self-esteem and have something to look forward to during the week.
- Provide a Safe and Secure Environment. Fear can be very real for a child. Try to find out what is frightening him or her. Be loving, patient, and reassuring, not critical.
- Give Appropriate Guidance and Discipline when Necessary. Be firm, but kind and realistic with your expectations. The goal is not to control the child, but to help him or her learn self-control.
- Check in on Children after School if they’re home alone. Children need to know that even if you’re not there physically, you’re thinking about them, and interested in how they spent their day and how they’ll spend the rest of it.
- Communicate. Make time each day after work and school to listen to your children and talk with them about what is happening in their lives. Share emotions and feelings with your children. Reading books and stories about feelings can encourage conversation and understanding of emotions.
- Get Help. Early identification and treatment can help children with mental health problems reach their full potential. If you’re concerned about your child’s mental health, consult with teachers, a guidance counselor or primary care provider for more information or a referral to a mental health practitioner in

your area. A free self-assessment is available at www.depression-screening.org or contact Traci Hawkins for hard copy materials.

Traci Hawkins is a clinical psychologist with offices in Brooklyn and Ann Arbor. She has 15 years of experience providing child, adolescent and adult psychotherapy. She specializes in eating disorders, weight loss, depression, anxiety, marriage repair and enrichment, grief and loss, Christian therapy and goal achievement. For more information on childhood depression or other mental health questions, feel free to contact:

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