

Purpose of this Toolkit

All parents want to raise happy and well-adjusted children. The purpose of these information sheets is to educate families about positive mental health and everyday strategies for promoting mental health throughout the day. In studies exploring family needs, parents indicate that they want education on how to support their children's emotional wellbeing using holistic, strength-based approaches. In addition, parents want ideas for affordable family activities that are health-promoting and that help children cope with stress.^{1,2} Parents have noted that some of their biggest challenges revolve around too much screen time, obesity, lack of physical activity, and not knowing how to help their children process feelings and be mentally healthy.

About the Information Sheets

Content draws on current literature about what parents can do to help their children and family as a unit be mentally healthy. Each information sheet provides an overview of the topic, suggested parent strategies and family activities, user-friendly resources, and references. This toolkit is a part of the *Every Moment Counts* initiative developed to help all children and youth become mentally healthy in order to succeed in school, at home and in the community (refer to www.everymomentcounts.org for more information).

Five Family Mental Health Information Sheets

1. **Quality Family Time: The Essential Ingredient for Promoting Family Mental Health**
2. **Promoting Positive Mental Health in Families**
3. **Meaningful Mealtimes**
4. **Family Fun Time**
5. **Relax and Refresh**

How to Use These Resources?

- **Start with one.** Select and read one of the information sheets at a time, beginning with this one.
- **Commit to shared learning.** Encourage your spouse, or, another parent to read the information sheet too. Then, make a point to discuss the information together to share new insights and ways that you can embed new strategies and activities into your everyday family life. Talking about this information with a spouse or friend can help extend your learning and offer opportunities for parent-to-parent support.
- **Commit to shared doing.** As you discuss the information and suggested activities, identify one new way of interacting with your children and one new activity that you can realistically embed in your everyday family life. For example, you might make a habit of taking 5 minutes each day to talk to your children individually about their day and how they are feeling. Or, you may commit to having a minimum of 3 family meals each week. Talking about and making plans is an important first step to making healthy changes.
- **Use the resources.** Consider purchasing one of the books or using website materials to extend your learning and obtain more ideas for family activities.

Quality family time is important for children's mental health. It involves parental sensitivity and interactive time doing enjoyable activities together.



Quality Family Time: The Essential Ingredient for Promoting Family Mental Health

Studies have consistently found that quality family time is one of the most important contributors to children's mental health and adjustment to life.³ Quality time is also important for promoting family bonding. What influences the quality of time spent together? One factor is parental sensitivity in developing a positive emotional relationship with their child. This involves being able to recognize their child's emotional state and respond in a comforting way. Another aspect of quality time is having interactive time together. This refers to when children and parents are fully engaged in an activity together.

Other benefits of quality time include:

- Children feel important, loved, and that they 'matter'. Children who believe that they matter to their families (i.e. that they are important and make a difference in the world) are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior.³
- Children have a chance to talk about and process their daily experiences, thoughts, and feelings with a close adult. Parents have an opportunity to role model healthy communication of feelings and regulation of emotions.
- Parents have an opportunity to be a positive role model and communicate clear family rules. Children can model parents' behavior.
- Parents have an opportunity to observe and learn about their child's interests, strengths, and weaknesses in order to guide them in life choices.

Suggested Family Activities

There are many activities that promote happy and healthy children. The key is making them enjoyable and giving full attention to each other. Examples include: eating family meals, playing board games, attending religious events, doing chores together, cooking, and participating in sports. Children and youth appreciate both unplanned, spontaneous time together (e.g. driving in the car, doing chores together, informal play) as well as more structured and planned activities (e.g. vacations). Refer to the other Information Sheets for more ideas!

Resources

1. **Building Blocks for a Healthy Future Family Guide.** The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) developed a program called "Building Blocks for a Healthy Future" that emphasizes the importance of spending time together, healthy communication, establishing clear family rules, and being a positive role model. The Family Guide describing these building blocks in family-friendly language is available for download at <http://cacenter-ecmh.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ParentGuideLong.pdf>.
2. **Child Development Institute.** Website - <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com>. The goal of the website is to promote healthy development so that children can reach their true potential for a successful and happy life. A wealth of information is provided for parents on child development, psychology, health, parenting, family activities, and other useful websites.

Every Moment Counts is committed to building capacity of all school personnel, families, and community providers to promote children's mental health and contribute to prevention and intervention of mental health challenges through professional education, website resources, and coaching. Website: www.everymomentcounts.org

Developed by occupational therapists. Occupational therapists (OT) are skilled in analyzing the interaction between the skills needed to successfully participate in an activity (e.g. play, mealtime, & social interaction within families) and how to modify the activity and/or environment in order to promote participation. In addition to having a sound knowledge of the sensory and motor requirements of a task, OTs are skilled in addressing the social and emotional aspects of participation.

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¹ Carroll, L., & Vickers, M. (2014). The role of families in health promotion: Family wisdom about health and wellness knowledge, strategies, and barriers. Retrieved on April 22, 2017, from <http://www.familyvoices.org/admin/miscdocs/files/FV-IMPACT-Issues-Brief.pdf>

² Coverdale, G. E., & Long, A. F. (2015). Emotional wellbeing and mental health: An exploration into health promotion in young people and families. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 135(1), 27-36.

³ Fernandez, G. (2012). Importance of family time of kids' mental health and adjustment to life. Retrieved from <https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/psychology/importance-of-family-time-on-kids-mental-health-and-adjustment-to-life/>

An important part of creating quality family time is developing a positive emotional relationship with your child. To do this, parental sensitivity is key - being able to recognize your child's emotions and respond in a comforting way. In addition, helping children learn how to develop and take care of their mental health is vital. Being mentally healthy helps children and adults function better in everyday life and be happy.

What is Positive Mental Health?

Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. "Mental health is a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity".¹ It involves 'feeling good emotionally' and 'doing well' in everyday function'.

Tune into and talk about the 4 characteristics of positive mental health with your children.

| Characteristic of Positive Mental Health | Parents: Tune into your child's feelings, thinking, and behavior; look for signs of positive mental health |
|---|---|
| 1. Feeling good emotionally; positive affect or emotional state | Observe whether your child smiles during the day and looks happy and content. A goal is feeling good emotionally about three fourths of the day. Notice what activities and interactions make your child smile and feel happy. |
| 2. Positive emotional state and social relationships | Tune into your child's concentration and notice significant changes. Take an interest in her/his social relationships and encourage healthy friendships. Does your child have at least one good friend and enjoy time with friends? |
| 3. Ability to engage in functional activities (schoolwork, self-care, leisure, sleep) | Is your child able to complete everyday tasks such as homework, dressing, hygiene, eating, and sleep? Note changes in appetite (too little or too much) and sleep. |
| 4. Coping with life stressors and being able to bounce back (resilience) | All people experience daily stressors (small and big). Tune into how your child copes with challenges (e.g. poor test grade, being teased) and problem solve solutions. |

How to Promote Positive Mental Health?

Small moments make big differences in how children and youth feel and function throughout the day! **Be a mental health promoter!** Read the following mental health promotion ideas and activities and think about how you can **embed** them naturally into your everyday interactions with your child.

Be a Mental Health Promoter!

Mental Health Promotion Strategies: What Families Can Do

- 1. Participate in enjoyable activities.** Experiencing positive emotions (e.g. joy, happiness, contentment) can be powerful 'nutrients' in helping people be mentally healthy.² Help your child do activities that are meaningful and fun. When a child smiles during an activity and is intently engaged, you know that it is the just right activity.
- 2. Make caring connections.** Close relationships provide meaning, support and a sense of belonging.³ Make a point to spend some quality time together each day. Examples: Have a 5 minute 'check in' time before bed; give a hug; offer to help clean her/his bedroom together.
- 3. Focus on character strengths.** Tune into your child's character strengths (e.g. humor, persistence, kindness, courage), label them, and help them use them. Example: For children who are nurturing and kind, encourage them to volunteer at animal shelters or nursing homes.⁴
- 4. Talk about feelings.** Promote emotional literacy - the ability to identify, understand and respond to emotions in oneself and others in a healthy way.⁵ Make a point to ask 'How are you feeling?' every day and take time to listen to what your child has to say. Let your child know it's OK to experience and talk about negative emotions like anger, jealousy, and fear.
- 5. Talk about mental health.** Make positive mental health a natural part of everyday conversations.⁶ Make a point to say, "That taking care of your mental health is as important as taking care of your physical health!"
- 6. Promote health behaviors.** Regular exercise, good sleep, and eating a healthy diet all contribute to one's mental health. Encourage 30 minutes of active play or exercise each day. Take a walk together. Even 5 minutes of walking can have a positive effect on mood by decreasing feelings of anxiety and depression.
- 7. Offer calm moments.** Do activities that help people 'be in the moment' such as relaxation, yoga and mindfulness approaches. Teach your child how to do deep breathing when stressed (Inhale to a count of 5, hold for 3 seconds, exhale for a count of 5, repeat 5 times). Build in everyday ways to relax as a family (e.g. morning stretches, TV free zone).
- 8. Think positive.** Promote positive self-talk. People who think positive tend to be happier, healthier and cope better during challenging times. Be a 'realistic optimist' by putting situations in perspective. E.g. "Today was a difficult day, but we will work together to make tomorrow a better one." Keep a gratitude journal with your child.⁶
- 9. Foster kindness.** Being kind, thoughtful, and caring with others increases feelings of happiness.⁷ Parents, model acts of kindness. Encourage small, spontaneous acts of kindness (e.g. giving a compliment, smiling at one another) during daily family interactions. Plan larger acts of kindness (e.g. make a meal and deliver it to a family in needs, rake leaves for an elderly neighbor).

Resources

- 1. What every child needs for good mental health.** Mental Health America (MHA) is a non-profit organization geared toward promoting mental wellness for all Americans. The article "What Every Child Needs for Good Mental Health" is a guide for parents in promoting positive mental health in their children. It provides a basic understanding positive mental health, how to encourage and promote confidence and self-esteem, the importance of play, and suggestions on guidance and discipline. Link: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/every-child-needs>
- 2. Embedded Strategies tab on the Every Moment Counts website.** <http://www.everymomentcounts.org>

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¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General—Executive Summary*. Rockville, MD.

²Fredrickson, B. L. (2009). *Positivity: Groundbreaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strength of positive emotions, overcome negativity, and thrive*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

³*Ten Keys to Happier Living*. Retrieved from <http://www.actionforhappiness.org/10-keys-to-happier-living>

⁴Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Free Press.

⁵Keyes, C. L. (2007). Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health. *American Psychologist*, 62, 95-108.

⁶Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *The HOW of happiness: A new approach to getting the life you want*. London: Penguin Books LTD.

⁷Otake, K., Shimai, S., Tanaka-Matsumi, J., Otsui, K., & Fredrickson, B. (2006). Happy people become happier through kindness: A counting kindnesses intervention. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 7, 361-37

The purpose of this information sheet is to educate families on the importance of making family meals a priority and to share suggestions and resources for creating positive mealtime experiences.

Why are Family Mealtimes so Important?

Family meals offer opportunities to develop strong parent-child relationships and promote family bonding. Time spent eating a meal together gives families a chance to enjoy each other's company, share conversations, and learn about each other. Children and youth have an opportunity to talk their feelings and important school, extracurricular, and social issues. Parents can tune into their child's emotional well-being, offer ways to cope with challenges, and embed mental health promotion strategies (see #2, Promoting Family Mental Health).

Benefits of Family Meals

Sharing family meals is associated with greater academic achievement, resilience, and self-esteem. Both the quantity and quality of family meals are important for improving family mental health. When families have more meals together, teens demonstrate better emotional wellbeing and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. They also tend to have better nutrition and show fewer risky behaviors.^{1,2} Sharing a family meal also offers a chance to talk about nutrition, individual tastes, and food preferences. Lastly, involving children in the full range of activities that make up having a family meal provides a lot of opportunities to teach important life skills necessary for an independent and healthy adulthood. Examples include: planning a menu, finding and reading recipes, grocery shopping, cooking, setting the table, serving food, and cleaning up after the meal.

What is Meaningful Mealtime?

A meaningful mealtime is when the family enjoys eating a meal together giving full attention to each other. By limiting distractions, including cell phones and television, the focus is placed on the quality of interaction between family members.³



Enjoy Eating a Meal
Together!

General Recommendations

1. **Plan a minimum of 3-4 family meals per week** (including breakfast, lunch, and dinner).
2. **Plan a menu of meals for the week.** Talk about meal planning with your children and request their input on what they'd like to eat. Have your child write out the grocery list and help with the grocery shopping.
3. **Create a positive mealtime environment.** Turn off electronics. Set the table so that it looks inviting (e.g. attractive placemats, absent of clutter, scented candle, flowers). Play calming classical music. Make dinner feel special.
4. **Involve children in meal preparation, setting the table and serving, and clean up.** This helps children feel a part of the entire mealtime process.
5. **Value time together.** Even if a particular meal feels hectic, recognize that the act of being together and eating can create feelings of closeness, comfort, and stability.
6. **Parents should model and encourage mealtime etiquette** (e.g. proper use of eating utensils, napkin, chewing with one's mouth closed, and manners).
7. **Make mealtime conversations matter.** Commit to having meaningful and enjoyable conversations that allow all family members to talk and share their thoughts and feelings.
8. **Seven ways to be a better listener:** 1. Stop whatever you are doing; 2. Look your child in the eye; 3. Pay attention to nonverbal messages; 4. Do Not Interrupt; 5. Ask questions to encourage more conversation; 6. Check that you understood your child correctly; 7. Ask open-ended questions to foster conversation.⁴

Website Resource: Family Dinner Project

This website (<https://thefamilydinnerproject.org>) offers a variety of family-friendly information and ideas for making mealtimes meaningful. The Family Dinner Project is a nonprofit organization operating from the Project Zero offices at Harvard University.

Conversation tab: Offers ideas for having developmentally appropriate conversations for 3 different ages.

- 'Conversation starters' provide a variety of interesting questions to start a conversation. E.g. If you were a season, what season would you be?
- 'Pickles and Predicaments' help families talk about what to do when in a dilemma with questions to guide conversation.
- 'Challenging Conversations' help families talk about life's challenges and what to do. E.g. Talking about bullying.
- 'Recipe for Conversation Shareables'. Each card presents a topic to talk about and includes a 'recipe' for conversation starters. E.g. Talk about managing stress.
- 'Conversation Starter Shareables'. Each attractive card provides a one-question conversation starter. E.g. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you want to live?

Fun tab: Offers creative activities and recipes.

- 'Fun with food prep'. Offers age-appropriate games, crafts, and activities surrounding food preparation.
- 'Between dinner and dessert'. Fun activities are offered to help keep children at the table after dinner. E.g. Design and create your own placemat.

Food tab: Provides a large selection of recipes organized under different categories such as 'One Pot Wonders', 'Comfort Foods', and 'Before & Afters' (appetizers & desserts). Recipes come with attractive photos and clear instructions.

Resources

⁴Nicholaus, B., & McGrath, T. (2009). *The Meal Box*. Loyola Press. This is a deck of cards that provides fun questions and family faith tips to get mealtime conversations started. E.g. 'If you could open the back door to your house and step out into the perfect backyard, what would the yard be like? Be specific.'

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¹Utter, J., Denny, S., Peiris-John, P., Moselen, E., Dyson, B., & Clark, T. (2017). Family meals and adolescent emotional well-being: Findings from a national study. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 49(1), 67-72.e1

²Elgar, F. J., Craig, W., & Trites, S. (2013). Family dinners, communication, and mental health in Canadian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* (52) 4, 433-438.

³Cook, E. & Dunifon, R. (2012). Do family meals really make a difference? Parenting in Context. Cornell University College of Human Ecology. Retrieved from <https://www.human.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/PAM/Parenting/Family-Mealtimes-2.pdf>

Family Fun Time is defined as time that parents and children spend doing enjoyable play and leisure activities together. When interviewed, parents indicate that they value leisure activities for improving communication and strengthening family relationships.¹ Another parent goal of family leisure is to promote a healthy lifestyle for their children. Teaching children the value of taking a break from work to play together, do creative activities, and be active are important lessons that can be passed down by having regular family fun time.²

Family leisure activities generally fall under two categories:

1. Common, everyday activities that tend to be low-cost, home-based, and require minimal planning. Examples: board games, playing in the yard, watching movies together, going for a walk, and cooking together.
2. Less common, planned leisure activities that provide new experiences for families. Examples: vacations, camping, sporting events, theme parks.

Which is better? Although both types of leisure help promote family functioning, youth consistently indicate that they prefer simple and spontaneous activities.² Low-cost, easy to implement leisure activities are effective in promoting family bonding and wellbeing.

Family Rituals

Family rituals are things you do that are unique to your family. Rituals communicate, 'This is who we are and what we value'.¹ Examples:

- Special things that are only done in your family like code words for things, funny nicknames you have for each other, or ways that you greet each other in the morning or say goodbye
- Traditions surrounding special events like birthdays (e.g. always having helium balloons or a special dinner)
- Rituals surrounding holidays and religious events, like Mothers and Fathers Day, Christmas, Chanukah, or Ramadan (e.g. decorating your house in a particular way, making homemade cards, cooking special foods like homemade pasta)
- Sharing common family interests like watching sports on TV, playing favorite board games, picking apples in the Fall, or playing musical instruments.
- Rituals may be woven into everyday activities, like mealtimes. Families may have special ways of setting the table (e.g. plates for special events, lighting candles), saying grace, repeating funny family stories, and having special foods on certain holidays.

Why are these activities important? Family rituals give children a sense of belonging and security. Special things done together build shared memories that last forever. Rituals can help children feel safe and a sense of comfort during stressful times (e.g. when moving; after a traumatic event, like floods or fires).

Special Things Done Together
Build Shared Memories



Family Fun Time Ideas

- **Family Game Night:** Choose one night each week or month to play board games or card games. Suggestions: charades, Pictionary, BINGO, Yatzee, scrabble, etc. Have each family member take a turn to pick the game.
- **Family Movie Night:** Pick a night to watch a movie at home on TV! Watching something that your child enjoys allows you to learn more about her/his interests while spending quality time together. Make time to talk about the movie.
- **Indoor Camping:** Set up a tent or sleep in sleeping bags in the living room! Tell spooky stories and make indoor s'mores
- **Take a Nature Walk:** Go for a walk outside and share your observations of the nature around you. You can even bring a bucket with you and collect items you and your children find interesting, such as rocks, pinecones, or leaves.
- **Create a Scavenger Hunt:** Include items that can be found indoors, outdoors, or both! Have your family work together to find all the items on the list.
- **Share your Hobbies:** Teach your children how to do arts and crafts, play a favorite sport, or cook a meal together.
- **Outdoor Fun:** Play yard games (bocce ball, corn hole, lawn darts, croquet), bubbles, Frisbee, chalk, squirt guns, jump ropes, roller skating.

Sample Games

1. **Snow Tag:** Play in snow, sand, or even a cut grass path that you make. Make a circle in the snow/sand with a minimum 15 foot diameter. The path should be at least 8 inches wide but not more than 1 foot. Walk across widest point to widest point and repeat to make a 6 slice pizza. Stay on the paths created! **Tagger:** Start in the middle of the circle where the "pizza slice" lines all intersect. Ask if everyone is "Ready?" **Taggies:** Start on the perimeter of the outer circle and respond with "Ready!" to begin. **Rules:** Tagger and Taggies can only run on the path. Two players cannot pass each other. If a player leaves the path, he/she become 'it'. If the tagger goes outside of the path they are removed from the game and a new tagger is voted on.
2. **Red Light Green Light:** Select a person to be the Spotlight. Her/his back is turned away from the Runners. Runners start behind a line about 10 yards or more away from the spotlight. Stoplight: Will yell "Green Light!" so that the Runners run towards the stoplight. The Stoplight will yell " Red Light!" and turn around as quickly as possible to catch any Runner that is still moving. If the Runner is still moving they are out. Movers: When you hear "Green Light!", run as fast as you can towards the Stoplight but stop moving before the stoplight sees you after saying "Red Light!". The first person to run past the Stoplight wins and becomes the Stoplight for the next round.

Resources

1. *Fun Family Activities for Kids: Ideas & Resources.* Unicef KID Power website. Retrieve from <https://unicefkidpower.org/fun-family-activities-resources/#outdooractivities>. This website provides a lot of fun family activities including:
 - Indoor activities: games like Uno, Monopoly, Apples to Apples; indoor planting activities (Venus Flytrap)
 - Outdoor activities: hide and seek; making a sandbox; gardening
 - Daytime activities: Frisbee; flying a kite; red light green light; biking
 - Night activities: Stargazing; baking cookies; listening to nature
2. Copeland, C. (2016). *Family Fun Night: Your Ticket to New Traditions.* Cider Mill Press Book Publisher. This book provides a wealth of family fun activities from traditional board games to family scavenger hunts so that families can rediscover the simple pleasures of being together. Easy-to-read instructions are given with creative suggestions for playing cards, last-minute fun, embracing screen time, outdoor family fun, etc.
3. Kennedy, R. R. (2005). *The Family Fitness Fun Book: Healthy Living for the Whole Family.* Hatherleigh Press. This book provides a large selection of indoor and outdoor play activities from basic tag to relay races and pop bottle ring toss. Simple instructions are provided along with ways to make the games easier or more difficult. This is a 'go to' book for keeping kids moving and having fun!

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¹Ward, P. J., & Zabriskie, R. B. (2011). Positive youth development within a family leisure context: Youth perspectives of family outcomes. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2011(130), 29-42.

²Shaw, S. M., & Dawson, D. (2001). Purposive leisure: Examining parental discourses on family activities. *Leisure Sciences*, 23(4), 217-231.

³Family rituals: What are they? Raising Children Network: The Australian Parenting Website. Retrieved from http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/rituals_and_how_they_work.html

All families deal with stress at certain times from typical daily stressors like busy schedules to more significant stressors like illness, financial challenges, or disasters (e.g. flooding, hurricanes). Children and youth may feel stress due to friendship challenges, academic difficulties, or being teased or bullied. In a family, if one person is stressed, the entire family may be affected.¹

What is Stress?

Stress is the feeling we get when situations put too much pressure on us. Family members who are stressed may feel irritable, anxious, worried, or depressed. Too much stress affects how children and parents interact and function. Signs of stress include: an increase in arguments, snapping at each other, sleeping difficulties resulting in fatigue, and a tendency to withdraw from each other.¹

Relax and Refresh

Children model their parents' behavior, so it is important that parents cope with stress in healthy ways. There are many different ways that families can promote relaxation and prevent stress. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Aim for balance.** Work toward a healthy lifestyle that involves a balance of work, play, and rest. Avoid taking on too much work or planning too many social activities. All families need some 'down' time to relax and refresh. Encourage children to take a break. Learn to say 'no'.
2. **Make time to talk about it.** If you your child or spouse is looking stressed or anxious, make a point to ask how they're feeling and give them your full attention. Problem-solve ways to decrease stress and cope with challenges.
3. **Create a positive home environment.** Decrease clutter and make sure some living spaces are relaxing to spend time in (e.g. soft lighting, calming scents, pillows, comfortable furniture, TV-free zones).
4. **Develop healthy family habits** that help prevent and decrease stress such as eating a healthy diet, staying physically active, getting enough sleep, and doing fun activities together.
5. **Do activities that are relaxing.** Come up with a list of relaxing activities that can be done together as a family (e.g. taking a walk, listening to calming music, going on a picnic) or alone (e.g. reading a good book in bed, sipping hot chocolate or herbal tea, taking a warm bath) and make a point to do them.

Mindfulness-based Strategies for Reducing Family Stress

Mindfulness-based strategies have been found to be helpful for reducing stress¹, improving parent-child relationships, and increasing self-regulation and coping.² Yoga, stretching, and deep breathing have been shown to decrease the physical and emotional effects of stress. When relaxation strategies are done together as a family, it can benefit the family as a whole.^{1,2}



Relaxing Together
as a Family can
Benefit the Family
as a Whole

Strategies for Relaxation to do Together as a Family

Think about teaching one to two of the following strategies to your child.³ Better yet, do them together!

1. **Deep Breathing** helps slow down the body's stress reaction by decreasing the heart rate and increasing feelings of being in control. How? Do Balloon Breathing (diaphragmatic breathing): "Close your eyes and place your hand on your stomach. Image your stomach is a balloon. As you breath air in through your nose, your stomach will rise or fall like balloon. Hold for 3 seconds. As you release air through your nose, your stomach will deflate like a balloon. Imagine you are letting all your worries leave your body." (See Appendix C of the Calm Moments Cards http://www.everymomentcounts.org/up_doc/Appendix_C_8-28-16.pdf)⁴
2. **Yoga** and stretching helps to relax built up tension in muscles while deep breathing. Holding yoga poses helps a person feel connected with one's body. 15 simple yoga poses with diagrams and instructions are provided in Appendix C of the Calm Moments Cards http://www.everymomentcounts.org/up_doc/Appendix_C_8-28-16.pdf.⁴
3. **Toe tensing** draws tension down from the rest of the body. Lie on your back and focus on your toes. Move your toes up toward your face and hold for 10 second. Relax for a count of 10. Repeat³
4. **Visualization** (or guided imagery) uses imagination to release negative thoughts and think of something soothing (e.g. lying on a warm beach and listening to waves). Try color visualization. Close your eyes. Imagine a favorite color that makes you feel peaceful. With each breath, imagine taking in the color and moving it throughout the body while breathing out. Imagine being filled with this relaxing color.³
5. **Laugh.** Laughter can be a great stress reliever. Make a point to tell jokes and be silly.
6. **Color Mandalas.** Mandala's are ancient art forms. They are symmetrical geometric designs made inside a circle. How to Use: "Close your eyes. Focus your attention inward and notice what colors come to mind. Open your eyes. Begin to choose colors that you visualized. Start coloring either from the center and move outward or start at the edge and move inward." Refer to <http://www.centrum-mandala.cz/en/mandalas-children>.⁴
7. **Listen to music.** Have your child listen to fun and/or calming music after school for 10 minutes behind closed doors without interruption or activity.
8. **Make a point to give hugs and cuddle.** Hugging a loved one can decrease stress and help us feel emotionally connected. Cuddling with a pet can be calming as well.



A OK Pose

Sit cross-legged. Form the "OK" sign with your fingers then place hands on your knees with palm side up. Sit up with your chest high, lift the crown of your head toward the ceiling with shoulders down and back. Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose. On the out breath, state to yourself "I am A OK". Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Resources

⁴Calm Moments Cards (Deiningner, Kolic, & Young, 2014). These 17 cards provide thinking, focusing & calming, and sensory strategies for reducing stress. Parents can refer to the cards specific to starting the day or doing homework. The Appendices provide fun activities that can easily be done at home. This is one of the Every Moment Counts model programs. Website: http://www.everymomentcounts.org/view.php?nav_id=213

³LoveToKnow.com provides high-quality useful information. Top Ten Relaxation Techniques for Children by Kelly Roper. Website: http://stress.lovetoknow.com/Top_Ten_Relaxation_Techniques_Children
15 Mindfulness and Relaxation Apps for Kids with Anxiety. (2017). 'Parenting Chaos' website. Retrieved from <http://parentingchaos.com/anxiety-apps-kids/>

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