



Building emotionally healthy families

Emotional health begins at home. It's important because it affects how children see the world, and it shapes the relationships within the whole family – now and later in life. Infancy and early childhood are especially important, but even parents who successfully guide their children through that phase may need advice in guiding their children through adolescence. Following is helpful parenting information for families at all stages.

Emotionally health infants & toddlers

Recent research shows that a person's experience in infancy and early childhood plays an important role in that person's development of competence.

For example, an infant whose cries are answered learns that he or she can control their environment. An infant who cries without receiving a response learns that he or she has no control and eventually stops trying. The first child's experience teaches him or her to explore new areas, to change things, if desired. The second child's experience teaches him or her that it's useless to try. This child learns merely to endure.

The latest research shows that the following steps contribute to the greatest emotional health in infants, which leads to strong emotional health in adulthood. Parents should:

- **Develop a strong parent-child bond** – it's one of the most important factors for strong emotional health. The bond can be with the mother, father or other primary caregiver. With this bond, your children will feel more secure, be more likely to explore – within the boundaries you set – and will be more likely to ask for help when needed. This child also develops independence by trying to do things alone until he or she needs help.
- **Make sure your child has a secure relationship with you.** Children with a secure relationship with an adult can function well in a nursery school or other environment outside the home. They have learned that they can master their environment and have full confidence that their mother or father will return as expected after each session.
- **Provide a stimulating environment for your child** – with limits. An interesting environment helps children develop emotionally. For instance, talk directly to your youngster sometimes – without doing anything else. Most parents talk to their child while changing their diapers, feeding them or tickling them. But parents who also talk to them without any other activity end up with children who have strong language skills and who

can express themselves clearly and easily with words. Also, some babies can be over stimulated if parents try to talk and tickle at the same time, for instance.

- **Provide a rich social life for your child.** The most competent children have twice as much social experience as their peers. A 12- to 15-month-old, for instance, can greatly benefit from playing a few hours a day with siblings, other children or even various adults. This helps a child learn subtle social skills that can build confidence and form leadership skills. Even 9-month-old babies can benefit. Babies who have played with other babies are more confident around newcomers and are more likely to make the first approach than babies without such experiences.
- **Provide toys that will encourage competence.** For infants, a mobile can become a confidence-builder by taping a piece of soft cotton yarn loosely around a baby's wrist and tying the other end to the mobile. When the baby moves his hand, the mobile moves, and the baby loves it. The baby learns that he or she can control the mobile – the first step in controlling the environment. Other such toys include a rattle – it makes a noise only when the baby shakes it – and a mirror. The baby sees something in the mirror only if he or she makes a move first. For older children, a rubber ball or building blocks are much better than a do-it-all toy that requires a push of a button and probably costs hundreds of dollars.

The whole family

As children grow and families become busier, sometimes family members grow apart, and that can be emotionally harmful. In fact, the most emotionally healthy families are those who listen, talk honestly, play together, foster a strong sense of right and wrong, and respect for privacy. But even if your family seems to have time only to argue now and then, don't be discouraged. Arguing can be a sign that your family members feel that they can express their anger or other emotions honestly.

For more help

If you need more advice, call Genesee Health System Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740, or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. © www.genhs.org