

# Infant and child mental health



**Children's mental health is just as important as their physical health. Mental health develops from birth. It supports the development of a child's body, mind, emotions and social abilities. Children can grow and learn, feel good about themselves, form healthy relationships and build resilience for the hard times. These are lifelong skills.**

**Parents play an important role in children's mental wellbeing from the start. They can also act early to get help if a child shows signs they are struggling.**

## Infant mental health

The very early years are an important time to build good mental health. Young brains, particularly in infants under two years of age, are sensitive to experiences and relationships. They develop best when babies have loving and secure relationships with parents/caregivers. Some ways to help your baby's development are to:

- smile at them often and interact warmly
- talk and play with them, watch and wait for their response
- show you enjoy playing with them. This lets your baby know they are important to you
- respond with care and concern when they cry. This helps a baby feel safe and secure. It tells them they can trust their feelings and that you are there for them
- try to understand what they might be feeling. Babies and children experience many different emotions. Encourage and respond warmly to their efforts to engage you in their world.

Being a new parent can be both joyful and challenging at times. Sometimes the relationship with your baby doesn't go smoothly. If this is the case, it's important to reach out for support to give them the best start in life and avoid future problems. Services such as the Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS) can help you understand and connect with your baby.

**Helping to build and support your baby's mental health gives them the best chance for health and wellbeing throughout life.**

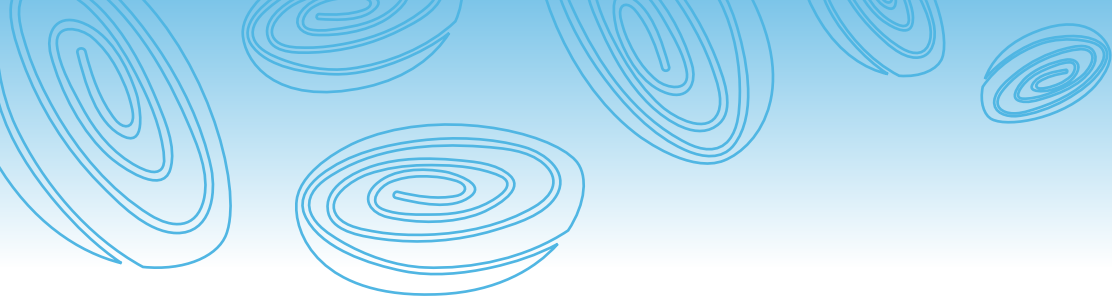
## Children's wellbeing

Children are usually developing well when they:

- feel good about themselves
- like being with family and friends
- enjoy play and leisure activities
- are willing to try new things
- can adapt to change and cope with difficulties.

Everyone feels sad, angry, afraid or upset at times, especially when things go wrong. Not everyone will respond to the same event in the same way. Some children cope better than others with stress or things that upset or frighten them. Some may want to talk a lot about something that distresses them. Others may keep their feelings more to themselves.

Children show their feelings in the way they act. Their behaviour will tell you how they feel so it's important to try and understand what the behaviour means. The support and understanding they receive from people around them helps children cope with problems and learn to manage their emotions.



Problems can happen at different times in a child's life. They can show in:

- how they behave, eg aggression, withdrawal
- their feelings, eg worry, sadness, fear, anger
- how they think, eg negatively, or in ways that don't make sense
- their relationships, eg difficulty communicating, arguing a lot, extreme shyness.

If problems persist and start to affect other parts of their life, seek professional help. Getting help early can stop things becoming worse.

## What influences children's mental health?

Many things can play a part in problems with how children behave, feel, think or interact with others. They can be related to the child or the whole family and can include:

- problems with friends, social isolation or not fitting in
- bullying (including online) or discrimination
- problems with school work or learning
- not being engaged in activities or school
- changing homes, schools, towns or country (migration)
- separation from parents, family break-up or divorce
- big stressors for the family, eg homelessness or financial issues
- death or loss of someone close
- a parent's unresolved trauma
- lack of trusting relationships with parents or other significant adults
- family violence
- emotional, physical or sexual abuse, chronic neglect
- serious illness, disability or injury
- family history of mental health problems.

The more stress some children have to deal with, the more likely they are to develop problems.

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**While we can't always prevent 'bad' things from happening in a child's life, it is important to try to minimise stress and help children develop ways of coping.**  
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## What to look out for

Parents may notice a change in their child's behaviour or that it is different from other children of the same age. A child may often be distressed. Changes can be gradual or quite sudden. Children can show signs of problems internally, eg becoming withdrawn or externally, eg acting aggressively.

Notice how severe the problem is, how often it happens and how it affects your child at home, school or other places.

### Signs in young babies can include:

- being unusually quiet
- not wanting to look at you
- often being unsettled, or problems with feeding
- not being comforted by you when crying.

There are many reasons why these things may be happening for your baby. Talk with your doctor or CaFHS nurse. They can help you work out what's going on and get any support you need.

### Signs in toddlers and pre-school children:

- lack of a warm relationship with you, or being overly attached
- not playing
- not enjoying games with you
- not beginning to talk, or stopping once they have learned
- cannot be comforted when upset
- frequent, unexplained tantrums
- harming themselves or others, eg ongoing biting, hitting or aggressive play
- going backwards in their learning, eg toilet training
- cannot put two words together by age two



- changes in weight, eg not growing and putting on weight, or weight loss
- being over-friendly with strangers
- not relating to others - acting as if people were not there
- repeating the same play or activity time and time again.

### Signs in young primary school age children:

- withdrawing from people or usual activities
- crying and being clingy all the time
- fears, worries or being highly anxious about being left alone
- ongoing sleep problems, eg nightmares
- constant activity (beyond regular playing)
- difficulty focusing or concentrating
- marked drop in school performance
- unexplained laughing or crying
- feelings of hopelessness
- soiling or wetting pants
- never doing what they are asked or being aggressive to people or pets
- feeling afraid to do usual activities
- daydreaming that interferes with daily life
- lots of tantrums.

### Signs in older primary school age children and teenagers:

- withdrawing from family, friends and social activities
- marked change in school performance or attendance
- changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- being preoccupied with weight or physical appearance
- abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- anti-social behaviour such as stealing, vandalism, lighting fires

- hearing or seeing things that others can't
- ongoing worries or fears
- sadness, depression and being irritable
- frequent outbursts of anger
- signs of self-harming such as cutting
- thoughts about not wanting to live or being better off dead.

**If you notice your child being worried, sad or angry much of the time, or there are significant changes in how they behave, it is important to get help.**

Reach out for help too if any problems in your relationship with your child continue to worry you, eg if the relationship is not working as you had hoped or expected.

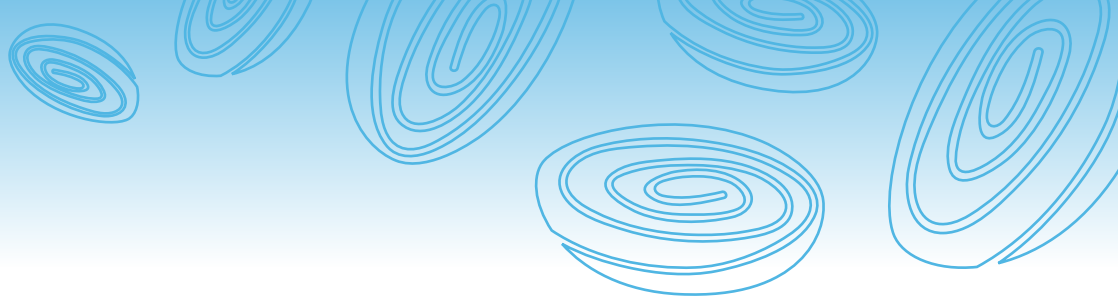
## Supporting your child's mental health

While there are things that can increase the risk of children developing problems, there are also things that can provide a 'buffer' and help protect them. The most important thing you can do is make sure your child feels loved, safe and secure, and accepted and valued for who they are. Having a stable family life, consistent routines, physical activity and healthy eating can help. You can also help children build their coping skills and confidence, and make sure they have trusted people to talk to. Over time children build their resilience to deal with life's challenges.

### 'Tuning in' to your infant or child

- Talk, smile, sing and play with your baby. Comfort them when they cry.
- Notice any changes in your child's behaviour.
- Spend one-on-one time with them each day – know what's going on in their life including online activities.
- Be interested in what they enjoy and what they are doing at school.





## Feelings and skills

- Talk about feelings - let children know you understand how they feel. Help younger children name their feelings.
- Be patient as children learn skills to manage their emotions. Make sure you are not expecting too much for your child's age or development.
- Stay with children who are overwhelmed with big feelings. This helps them to calm and lets them know you are there to help. They learn that strong feelings can be managed and are nothing to be afraid of.
- Let children know that everyone feels sad, upset, frustrated or angry at times. It is OK to cry and express strong feelings such as anger, but not to hurt people.
- Talk with children to help them prepare and understand that change, loss and grief are a normal part of life.

## Talking and listening

- Talk with children as often as you can, eg at mealtimes or in the car. Try to be open and relaxed. Really listen to what they say. Let them know you are there for them.
- Talking together helps children learn to express their feelings. If they are used to talking with you, especially about sensitive things, they will be more likely to come to you if they feel upset.
- Talk about things that might stress children, eg what they see on TV or online. Reassure them they are safe, even if what they see is scary.
- Talk openly with older children about world events and sensitive topics such as gender, sexuality, drugs and alcohol.
- Protect them from knowing too much about adult problems – it can stress and worry them.

**Help children have a safe network of family and friends to talk to.**

## Showing your love

- Let children know you love them in as many ways as you can. It builds their sense of security and belonging.
- Give lots of hugs and cuddles if they are open to this.
- Do things together as a family – both fun things and chores. Celebrate special occasions.

**Children cope best when they feel loved, safe and secure. They can build resilience to deal with the hard times.**

## Building optimism and confidence

- Notice the things children work hard at and praise their efforts.
- Encourage them to be optimistic and positive. Model a positive outlook yourself.
- Encourage their involvement in a range of activities so they can build skills and confidence.
- Help them learn how to get along with others – it will help them make friends.
- Support children's learning at school. Talk with their teacher about getting more support if they need it.
- Support children's exploring without confining them to traditional gender roles - this helps all children feel safe to learn about the world around them and who they are.

## Supporting gender diverse children

Being transgender, non-binary or gender diverse is **not** a mental health condition. However the discrimination, harassment and rejection people often face can lead to poor mental health. An important protective factor is the love, acceptance and support of family. This helps children (and young people) build resilience and confidence in who they are and what they want in life. If they do become distressed, connect them with gender diversity health professionals. They can offer support and discuss other options to reduce distress. (See Parent Easy Guide 'Transgender and gender diverse children and young people'.)

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.



## If you are concerned about your child

If you are concerned about your child it is important to get advice from professionals who work with children.

- A first step could be to talk with your child's teacher. You could also ask about the mental health support provided by your school. They can work with you to support your child and get any extra help they need.
- Talk with your doctor.
- Contact a mental health service - those listed at the end of this Guide are a good place to start.

### Health assessments

Going to a mental health professional for an assessment might help you understand what's happening for your child and get any help they need. It does not always mean they will be diagnosed with a clinical condition. Keeping a diary of what your child is doing before you go to the appointment can be useful. You may be asked about their development and how they behave.

## Looking after yourself

It is important to look after your own feelings, health and wellbeing too. This makes it easier to support your child. Make time to do the things you enjoy. Stay connected to supportive family members and friends, or a good GP. If you often feel unhappy or stressed talk to a doctor or counsellor, or you could contact a service listed in this Guide.

### Want more information?

#### Services for children

##### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment  
Free service for children aged 0-5. Nurses can help with children's health, eating, sleeping and development

##### Adelaide Primary Health Network

Phone 1300 898 213 for information about a range of free mental health services for children and young people from age 5 in metropolitan Adelaide <https://adelaidephn.com.au>

##### Primary Health Network Country SA

For regional youth mental health providers see [www.countrysaphn.com.au/community/mental-health-2/youth-mental-health-2/](http://www.countrysaphn.com.au/community/mental-health-2/youth-mental-health-2/)

#### CAMHS Connect

Phone 1300 222 647, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri  
The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) provides services for children and young people with severe or complex mental health needs [www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/divisions/mentalhealth/index.html](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/divisions/mentalhealth/index.html)

#### Women's and Children's Hospital Gender Diversity Service

Medical and mental health referrals accepted for anyone up to age 17 [www.wch.sa.gov.au/patients-visitors/adolescents/gender-diversity-adolescents](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/patients-visitors/adolescents/gender-diversity-adolescents)

#### Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800 any time day or night  
Phone and online support for children and young people aged 5-25 <https://kidshelpline.com.au>

#### Headspace

Information and free, confidential support to young people aged 12-25 for a range of mild to moderate mental health concerns. The Adelaide centre also provides a specialist early psychosis service To talk face to face find your local centre at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>  
Call 1800 650 890 to talk by phone or chat online at [www.eHeadSpace.org.au](http://www.eHeadSpace.org.au)

#### Services/resources for parents

##### Parent Helpline

1300 364 100 for advice on child health and parenting

##### ForWhen Helpline SA

Phone 1300 242 322, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri  
Connecting new and expecting parents struggling with their mental health to services that are right for them from conception to 12 months after birth

##### Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636 any time day or night or chat online  
Mental health support for all ages [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Information on children's development including mental health and wellbeing <https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au>

##### Australian Association for Infant Mental Health

'Letter From Your Baby'  
[www.aaimh.org.au/resources/letter-from-your-baby/](http://www.aaimh.org.au/resources/letter-from-your-baby/)

##### Emerging Minds

Facts sheets on communicating with your baby, child or young person during hard times <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/communicating-with-your-baby-during-adversity-or-tough-times>

##### Raising Children Network

Parenting information for children aged 0-18, including mental health and wellbeing <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

##### Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'About babies', 'Young people, feelings and depression', 'Grief and loss', 'Children with a disability', 'Dealing with a crisis', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)





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of South Australia**

**Parenting SA**

A partnership between the Department  
of Human Services and the Women's and  
Children's Health Network.

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

**Important:** This information is not intended  
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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