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Supporting Your Child's Mental Health

A Parent's Guide



دائـــرة الـصـحـــة
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

وزارة التربية والتعليم
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

دائـرة التعليم والمعرفة
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

هيئـــة أبوظـــبي للطفـــولة المبكـــرة
Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority

Supporting your child's mental health survey

Dear Parent,

As part of our efforts to promote awareness and prevention in the field of children's mental health, the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority is committed to providing accessible and practical resources that help families better understand and support their children's wellbeing.

We invite you to complete this brief survey to help us assess the usefulness of the Parent's Mental Health Guide and gather your feedback to improve future content.

All responses are confidential and will be used solely to inform awareness and prevention efforts.



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Introduction

Being a child comes with many challenges – there is a lot to learn and many changes to navigate. Just like physical health, mental health needs regular care and attention.

Checking on your child's mental health is important for building strong relationships, adapting to change, and managing life's ups and downs.

It can be stressful for parents and caregivers to see their child struggling, and knowing where to find trusted information can be difficult.

This brochure offers simple guidance to help parents understand their child's mental health and how to support them. It includes tips for parents on talking to children about their feelings and when to seek professional help if needed.



What is mental health?

Mental health is an integral and essential component of health. The WHO constitution states: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

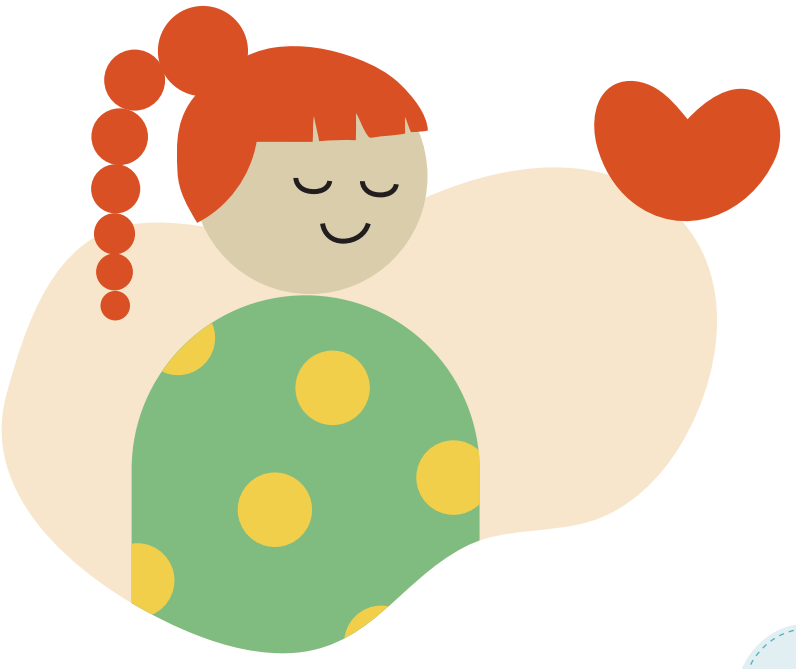
It is normal for young people to feel sad, stressed, or anxious at times, but if these feelings persist and start to affect daily life, extra support may be needed. Mental health challenges can vary in how they are experienced and in their level of seriousness. It is therefore important to pay attention and seek help when necessary.

Good mental health helps us handle life transitions and positive and difficult situations, feel in control, and reach out for support when needed.



What are the common risk and protective factors that can impact a child's mental health?

Child mental health is influenced by a complex interplay of factors involving the child, family, and wider community, which can increase the risk of mental health challenges. Conversely, certain individual, familial, and community attributes can foster positive mental health and reduce these risks. It is critical to note that while some child characteristics may elevate the likelihood of mental health difficulties, children are never responsible for the challenges they experience.



Community

Risk Factors

- ✗ Socio-economic inequalities
- ✗ Stigma/ discrimination
- ✗ Lack of access to support services
- ✗ Environmental stressors
- ✗ Lack of supportive network

Protective Factors

- ✓ Inclusive environment
- ✓ Safe and supportive neighborhoods
- ✓ Strong social networks
- ✓ Availability of community services

School

Risk Factors

- ✗ Bullying
- ✗ Social isolation
- ✗ Negative teacher-student relationships
- ✗ Limited access to support services

Protective Factors

- ✓ Anti-bullying programs
- ✓ Peer support
- ✓ Supportive teacher-student relationship
- ✓ Positive school climate
- ✓ Access to support services

Family

Risk Factors

- ✗ Family disharmony
- ✗ Family conflict (divorce, domestic violence)
- ✗ Mental health and substance use challenges
- ✗ Trauma
- ✗ Socio-economic instability

Protective Factors

- ✓ Family harmony and stability
- ✓ Positive parenting practices
- ✓ Parental involvement
- ✓ Stable emotional and mental health
- ✓ Emotional availability and support

Child

Risk Factors

- ✗ Genetic influence
- ✗ Chronic illness/disability
- ✗ Substance use
- ✗ Low self esteem
- ✗ Ineffective coping skills (e.g., avoidance, aggression)

Protective Factors

- ✓ Secure attachment experience
- ✓ Access to appropriate healthcare services
- ✓ Effective coping skills (e.g., emotional regulation)
- ✓ Strong peer relationship

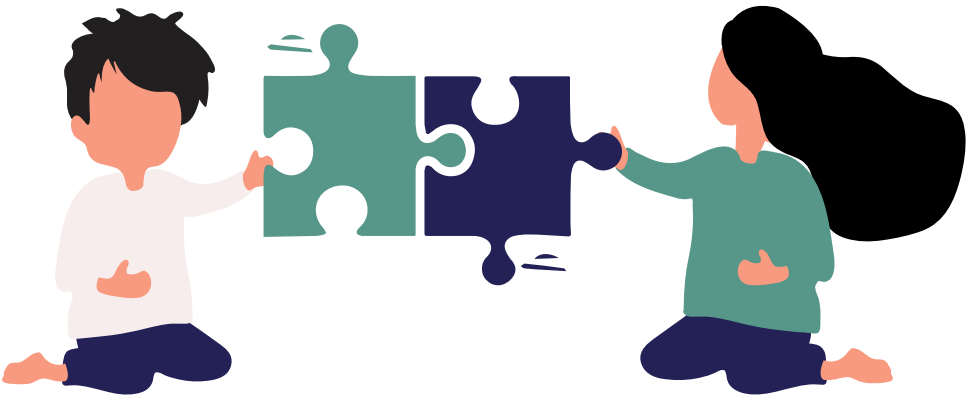
These risk and protective factors, while important for guiding the development of prevention and intervention strategies, should be viewed as broadly defined indicators rather than definitive determinants of mental health outcomes.



How can you differentiate between typical behavioral changes vs. signs of concern in your child?

It can sometimes be difficult to recognize when your child's behavior is part of growing up or when it may be an early sign of mental health issues. As children mature, they still benefit from guidance and reassurance.

Many children find it difficult to express what they're experiencing. Regularly observing children's development and behavior can help parents spot potential concerns and areas where support might be needed.



Monitor changes in behavior:

Pay attention to gradual or sudden shifts in your child's behavior or performance. Identifying patterns or triggers can help determine if there's something that can raise concerns



Connect physical and mental health:

Pay attention to how your child's physical health may be affecting their mental well-being. Frequent illnesses, fatigue, or other physical symptoms could signal underlying mental health concerns



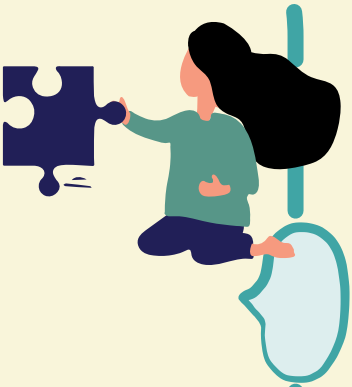


Consider stressors:

Think about how various stressors, such as family health issues, family conflict, financial difficulties or bullying might be impacting your child

Observe age-appropriate development:

Keep an eye on how your child is developing in relation to typical milestones for their age. If you are unsure of the typical developmental milestones or notice significant deviations, please consult a paediatrician or specialist in child development



When should you seek additional support regarding your child's mental health?

Certain signs may suggest mental health challenges that need attention or support. It is important to recognize whether these changes are typical for your child's age or may be cause for concern.





Early childhood
(Infancy - 3 years)

Typical behavior

- Distress when separated from a loved one
- Avoidance of certain foods, which often improves with repeated exposure
- Changes in sleep patterns due to environmental changes
- Low frustration tolerance, leading to tantrums (commonly referred to as “the terrible twos”)

Signs for concern

- Significant difficulties with sleeping, eating, communicating (both non-verbal and verbal), or coordinating movements
- Frequent and intense temper tantrums
- Difficulty calming or soothing themselves
- Excessive fear of changes in daily routines
- Poor responsiveness to communication cues or stimuli
- Repetitive behaviors or intense interests that are difficult to interrupt or redirect



Childhood
(3 -9 years)

Typical behavior

- Fear of the dark (common until age 7)
- Some stress or anxiety when facing new tasks or major life changes
- Shyness or taking longer to warm up to others
- Minor struggles with group activities or competitiveness
- Boredom when tasks are too easy or uninteresting
- Questioning and curiosity about topics like health, death, and spirituality (especially around age 9)

Signs for concern

- Excessive general worries or specific fears, such as losing loved ones
- Difficulty sleeping unless close to a parent
- Unexplained decline in school performance
- Social withdrawal or extreme shyness
- Significant trouble focusing or following schedules
- Impulsivity or aggressive behavior
- Repetitive behaviors or rituals that cause distress if interrupted
- Persistent feelings of sadness
- Regression in autonomy or self-care skills, such as eating, bathing, or using the toilet



Adolescence
(10 - 18 years)

Typical behavior

- Arguing or rebelling against parents and teachers
- Fluctuations in sleep patterns
- Fluctuations in eating habits
- Desire to take on new, challenging tasks
- Occasional conflicts with friends or shifts in social groups

Signs for concern

- Persistent sadness, fatigue, or lack of interest in activities
- Ongoing negative thoughts or expressions of suicidal ideation
- Unexplained decline in school performance
- Engagement in risky behaviors, such as self-harm, substance use, suicide attempts, or taking extreme physical risks
- Impulsivity or aggressive behavior
- Drastic changes in eating habits or noticeable weight fluctuations
- Persistent disruptions in sleep patterns that cannot be solely explained by late-night socializing

What are common mental health disorders in children?

There are transition phases in a child's development. During transitions, parents may observe behaviors that are surprising. Parents should remain informed about developmental phases to be able to understand and estimate the severity of the behaviors observed.



Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is one of the most prevalent mental health disorders in children. It is characterized by difficulties in maintaining attention, regulating impulses, and, in some cases, heightened levels of activity. Children with ADHD may struggle to focus on tasks, frequently exhibit restlessness, or engage in impulsive actions that seem inappropriate for their age. While occasional inattentiveness or restlessness is typical in children, ADHD symptoms are persistent and interfere with daily functioning.

Key signs

Frequently forgets to complete tasks, misplaces important items, struggles to follow instructions, or speaks out of turn in structured settings like classrooms



Cognitive and learning delays and major difficulties

No child likes to fail school and be left behind. Some children do not learn at the same pace of their peers despite multiple explanations.

Key signs

If the child manifests delay in all academic subjects, or understands verbal explanations and instructions but struggles with executing academic tasks, becomes irritable or avoidant while asked to do homework



Anxiety related disorders

Anxiety can be common in children when transitioning through different developmental phases or if exposed to major changes or challenges in life. However, some children are more anxious than others and this impedes their independence and socialization

Key signs

School refusal, fear of being separated from parents and checking on parents multiple times, suffering from physical pain that does not come from a medical condition, refusing to speak to the teacher or in public, avoids group of friends.



Mood related disorders

Children express their emotions in a fluid way and show a variety of emotions in synchrony with the events. However, some children overreact to certain situations and overreaction persists.

Key signs

Anger outbursts, persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, isolation, risky behaviors



Bullying and maltreatment

Bullying is the repeated physical, psychological, social or verbal aggression exercised by children who feel they are in a position of power against other children who are perceived weaker or powerless. Maltreatment is any act or omission of act that would cause harm to children, prevent their development in a sound, safe and healthy manner including forms of physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect, exploitation

Key signs

A child may not immediately realize that they are a victim of bullying or maltreatment. They may also not reach out to their parents for protection. Therefore, it is important for parents to notice major changes in their child's behavior and emotional expressions, sudden strong school refusal, sudden avoidance of certain activities they use to enjoy, changes in daily routine, such as sleeping and eating



Eating disorders

Eating disorders range from excessive reduction in food intake to excessive eating. They are associated with body shape concerns. Changes in appetite may be associated with mood disorders and may not be part of an eating disorder.

Key signs

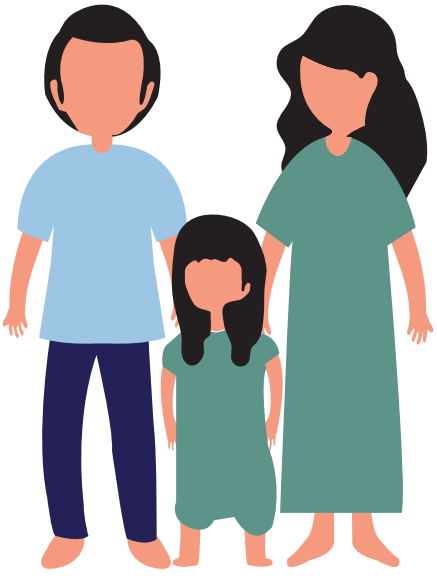
Changes is eating habits: not eating in public, reducing portions, selecting foods, knowing the composition of each food and the calories intake.

Significant weight loss or gain



How to talk to your child about mental health?

A parent's first instinct is to protect their child from difficult emotions, but stress and challenges are a natural part of life. Rather than shielding them from everything, parents can help their child develop strong coping skills. By showing how to manage tough times, encouraging them to talk about their feelings, and teaching them to ask for help when needed, parents can support their child's emotional growth and resilience.



Do's

- **Build positive conversations:** Regularly talk about positive topics, not just when something feels wrong. Acknowledge your child's efforts, no matter how small
- **Model healthy behavior:** Be emotionally honest, showing that it's okay to express vulnerability, stress, and emotions, helping your child understand these feelings are normal
- **Create a safe environment:** Choose a private, safe space for conversations where your child feels confident there won't be punishment
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Use open-ended questions in simple language to let your child guide the conversation
- **Listen actively:** Avoid distractions such as checking your phone, and allow your child to express fully



Don’ts

- **Avoid viewing mental health as weakness:** Don’t treat mental health struggles as a sign of weakness or shame. Help remove stigma by being supportive and understanding
- **Avoid distress moments:** Don’t initiate conversations when emotions are high
- **Resist giving advice or comparing:** Avoid comparing by saying phrases “I went through this before” or “You should try this,” or “look at more miserable people” look at your sister, brother, cousin, who are doing great” as it can make your child feel dismissed or misunderstood
- **Don’t blame yourself:** Avoid feelings of guilt or self-blame, as they can make it harder to focus on supporting the child. Remember, it’s not your fault



When to ask for professional help?

Addressing concerns early can prevent challenges from escalating. There is no need to handle everything alone - professionals can provide the guidance and care needed to navigate difficult times. Consider seeking help if:

Issues persist:

Despite best efforts, the issue persists or even worsens over time

Changes are too drastic:

If major changes are noticed in mood, behavior, or health that are difficult to manage alone

Personal efforts have not helped:

Different strategies have not brought the needed improvement

Uncertainty about next steps:

If you are uncertain about what steps to take next, a professional can provide guidance

Whom to ask for professional help?

Supporting a child with mental health or learning challenges often requires the collaboration of several professionals, each playing a unique and vital role. From initial screenings to specialized interventions, these professionals work together to ensure that children receive the comprehensive care they need.

Pediatricians and general practitioners

These professionals play a crucial role in identifying the severity of symptoms in children. They provide initial support, offer guidance, and refer the child to a mental health specialist for further assessment and treatment

Child psychiatrist

These doctors specialize in the diagnosis and medical treatment of mental health conditions. They address both the psychological and physical aspects of mental illnesses, using a combination of therapeutic approaches. In some cases, a neuropsychogical evaluation may be required to further needed to confirm the diagnosis and treatment plan

Psychologists

These specialists include:

- Neuro-psychologists who use standardized assessment for diagnosis and tailored intervention planning
- Child psychologists who provide counseling and psycho-social strategies for overall emotional and behavioral challenges
- Educational psychologists who specialize in evaluating learning styles, classroom behavior, and educational challenges to identify barriers to learning and developed tailored strategies

Rehabilitation professionals

Rehabilitation professionals are specialists who focus on helping children improve specific skills that are essential for their daily functioning, education, and social interactions. Some key rehabilitation professionals include:

- **Special education teacher:** Provides academic interventions for children with learning disorders or significant challenges. They create tailored learning materials and strategies to facilitate the child's academic progress
- **Speech therapist:** Supports children with language delays or disorders and those with specific learning difficulties related to reading and writing

- **Psychomotor therapist:** Works with children who have motor coordination issues, difficulties with hand grip, or a short attention span. The therapist focuses on improving motor and visual coordination skills
- **Social worker:** Assists children who have experienced maltreatment, providing essential support to address the social and emotional impacts of their experiences

Before proceeding with any rehabilitation intervention, it is essential to have a clear diagnosis and treatment plan. This ensures that the child receives the most efficient support while avoiding unnecessary fatigue or stress.



What are key considerations when visiting a mental health professional?

Seeking help for your child's mental health is a courageous and compassionate decision, rooted in your deep care for your child's well-being. It is normal to feel uncertain, but being prepared can help you and your child feel more confident and supported throughout the process. Here are some key considerations to keep in mind before, during, and after the appointment

Before the appointment

- Define the problem and set a goal - why are they visiting the mental health professional, and what do they hope to achieve from the appointment?
- Not worrying about how to present the information, share observations and worries. Prepare a list if this helps
- Have a conversation with your child and write down any important information. This can help ease the pressure of discussing everything during the specialist's visit and ensures nothing is overlooked

During the appointment

- **Support your child in expressing concerns:** Help your child articulate their concerns clearly, ensuring he/ she feels heard and understood
- **Understand the mental health assessment:** Discuss the assessment process with the mental health professional required to establish a diagnosis and outline a treatment plan (e.g., child interview and observation, parent interview)
- **Understand the diagnosis:** Ensure both you and your child fully understand the diagnosis. Ask the mental health professional to explain it in terms that are appropriate for your child's level of understanding
- **Understand the treatment:** Learn about the different treatment options and how they can meet your child's unique needs (e.g., psychotherapy, medication, family counseling)
- **Learn to provide support at home:** Engage actively to understand the treatment and strategies that you can adopt at home to support your child effectively

Are there any printed materials, resources, or website recommendations that can help?

What are the different treatment options, and what are the risks and benefits of each?

What can be done at home to further support the child?



After the appointment

- Regularly follow-up on evaluations to ensure the diagnosis remains accurate, monitor progress, and adjust the treatment plan as needed. Keep in mind that a mental health diagnosis is often a working diagnosis. Children develop rapidly, so the diagnosis reflects a snapshot of the child at the time of assessment
- Help your child follow through with the prescribed treatment plan
- Request exercises that can be done at home to support the child's progress
- Contact your child's mental health professional immediately if symptoms worsen
- Be patient - finding the right treatment plan may take time
- Coordinate with the referring mental health professional, and the other members of the team (teachers and school coordinators and counselors, other rehabilitation professionals, and the referring mental health professional)
- Request to observe some sessions
- Monitor your child's fatigue if he/she is involved in several interventions, and communicate with the treatment team to prioritize the important ones



Self-care tips for parents

Parenting a child going through a difficult time can be incredibly demanding, and it's natural to feel tired or even frustrated at times. Don't feel guilty - these situations are challenging, especially when balancing other responsibilities like other children and work.

It is important to prioritize own mental health to ensure that you have enough energy to support your child. Self-care means actively taking responsibility for your own well-being. While it may be hard to find time, self-care isn't something to do only when it's convenient – it is essential for overall health.

Here are some self-care tips



Manage stress reactions

- Be mindful of own stress limits, as caring for a child recovering from mental health challenges can be draining
- Identify the main triggers of stress and take steps to address them

Here are some self-care tips

Recognize the importance of keeping yourself healthy



- Set aside time each week for activities you enjoy, such as meditation, exercise, or hobbies
- Maintain healthy eating and sleeping habits. If your child frequently disrupts your sleep, try to take naps during the day
- Encourage your child's independence by allowing some separation. This helps them build autonomy and gives you time to recharge



Stay socially connected and seek support when needed

- Avoid isolating yourself, especially when the mental health recovery journey with your child gets challenging
- Reach out to family and friends for support, and ask for help when needed
- Seek mental health support for yourself, if needed, to help navigate challenging times and foster resilience

Remember

- A caring, committed, and involved parent is all a child needs; embracing balance and realistic expectations fosters a healthier environment for both you and your child
- Excessive worrying is counterproductive
- Staying informed about your child's condition and treatment options is empowering
- Seeking help and support is a sign of strength, not weakness



Additional resources

Abu Dhabi Early Intervention Guide

Click here

Mental Health Literacy for Parents

Click here

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – Parent Resources

Click here

Guide on mental health resources for early childhood development practioner

Click here





Guidebooks and reports

Guide on mental health resources for early childhood development practitioners

Key **causes** of **mental health** issues, **ways to manage** mental health, and local support **resources**

هيئة أبوظبي للطفولة المبكرة
Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority

Parent's guide to mental wellbeing

Managing the **mental wellbeing** of parents to lead a psychologically healthy life

دائرة تنمية المجتمع
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Mental health and resilience booklet

Information on **managing stress**, **anxiety**, and **depression**

ABU DHABI PUBLIC HEALTH CENTRE | مركز أبوظبي للصحة العامة

Mental health report

Overview of mental health illnesses and **common mental health disorders in the UAE**

وزارة الصحة ووقاية المجتمع
MINISTRY OF HEALTH & PREVENTION

Healthcare workforce bioethics guidelines

Ethical guidance for **healthcare professionals** with a specific **focus** on **workforce wellbeing** in chapter Four

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Sharjah Health Authority

دائرة الصحة
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

وزارة الصحة ووقاية المجتمع
MINISTRY OF HEALTH & PREVENTION

Online support platforms

Takalam online counseling

Mental health **coaching sessions** and **counseling**

Takalam online counseling

Mindtales

Digital wellness courses and **online psychological counselling services**

MindTales

Pura

Personalized psychiatric care and **support**

PURSHEALTH

24alife

Corporate well-being programs, onsite workshops, and **wellness programs**

24alife

Tanfees

Family, marriage, psychological, and educational counseling

تنفيس
TANFEES

Mental health support centers in Abu Dhabi

	Contact details
Sakina	80050
Family Services Call Center	+800 33322
Health Plus Family Health Center	+971 600503035
Intercare Health Center	+971 26390080
NMC Royal Hospital	+971 22035000
Reem Hospital	+971 800 7444
Beautiful Mind Medical Center	+971 2 621 2230
Maudsley Health	+971 2 610 7777
American Center for Psychiatry and Neurology	+971 2 492 6000

Please refer to ECA's Guide on Mental Health Resources for an extensive list of mental health support centers

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The Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority is committed to the highest standards and we have young children and their families at the heart of all we do. If you have any suggestions or feedback on how the content in this guide could be improved, please get in touch

+971 2 499 9499
8:30 am – 4:30 pm
info@eca.gov.ae

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