

MATTERS OF THE HEART: MENTAL WELLNESS FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

Starting conversations about mental health with children and youth can feel overwhelming, especially when they've experienced trauma. These discussions are key to nurturing their emotional well-being and building trust. This handout offers practical tips for parents and caregivers to make these conversations easier.

Understanding Mental Health vs. Mental Wellness

- **Mental health:** The overall state of a person's mind.
- **Mental wellness:** Proactive steps to maintain optimal mental health.

For children with trauma histories, trust-based relationships are crucial to their mental and physical well-being. Just like we care for our bodies, our minds need ongoing attention.

Talking about mental wellness regularly helps kids feel more at ease discussing their feelings—just like talking about physical health. Consistency helps children feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions, especially if they've experienced trauma or emotional instability. Making these conversations part of daily life makes children more likely to reach out when something feels wrong.



Building Comfort With Mental Wellness Discussions

- **Create a safe, open space:** Choose times when children are relaxed and let them know you're always ready to listen.
- **Choose a relaxed setting:** Find a quiet, comfortable place to talk without interruptions or distractions.
- **Signal openness:** Let them know you're genuinely interested in listening to their thoughts and feelings.
- **Use open-ended questions to encourage conversation, such as:**
 - *"What was something good and something hard about your day?"*
 - *"What's something you're looking forward to or not looking forward to tomorrow?"*
 - *"What was the most meaningful conversation you had today?"*
 - *"If you could replay a part of today, what would you do differently or the same?"*

The Role of Open Communication in Healing

For children with complex emotional histories, open communication isn't just about talking but building trust. When children feel safe discussing their feelings without judgment, it helps them process emotions, reduce fear, and seek support when needed.

- **Active listening is key:** Show that you're fully present. Don't rush their responses; validate their feelings by repeating what they share.
- **Normalize mental health discussions:** Reinforce that all emotions—whether joy, sadness, frustration, or anger—are natural and part of being human.
- **Practice patience:** Complex emotions can cause us to shut down emotionally. Be comfortable sitting in silence. Give them additional time to process and think through their feelings. When they are ready to talk, you will listen and provide support.

Practical Tips for Ongoing Conversations

- **Tailor to their age:** Use language and examples that match their developmental stage, like comparing emotions to physical health—feeling sad can be like having a tummy ache.
- **Be honest:** Share your own experiences with mental wellness when appropriate. This helps normalize the conversation.
- **Encourage help-seeking:** Let children know that seeking help, whether from you or a professional, is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Providing Support and Knowing When to Seek More Help

There may be times when more help is needed. If you notice consistent signs of emotional distress, don't hesitate to seek professional support. You can always contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center for guidance or access to additional resources.

In addition, consider connecting with other foster parents, relative caregivers, and adoptive parents who may have similar experiences and can offer valuable insights and support. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center can also connect you or your family to support group resources.

Recommended Resources

Training From **Champion Classrooms**

- **Mental Health 101: An Introduction to NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Wisconsin**
- **Compassion Resilience for Caregivers of Children**
- **The Many Faces of Anxiety: Recognizing and Responding to Fears, Worries, and Panic**

Additional WiFCC Resource

- **Families Like Mine 2020 Presentation - Mental Health & Wellness: Adversity & Healing Within Our Families**

Additional Resources

- **NAMI Wisconsin**
- **Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health**