

Love, Empathy, and Connection: Supporting Mental Health

What is Research Showing?

- The best predictor of a child or a youth's mental health is having a loving and supportive caregiver in their lives. This is likely due to what scientists and child development specialists are calling **attachment**.

What is Attachment?

- **Attachment** is the deep connection that infants initially develop with their caregivers. This connection keeps them safe from outside dangers and provides emotional regulation.
- A secure attachment with a caregiver is characterized by a positive, trusting relationship where the infant or the child prefers their caregiver's company over other adults.
- Secure attachment gives the infant confidence to explore and play because they know how to access their caregiver's support if required.
- Attachment to the caregiver is required for the healthy development of the child.
- Secure attachments not only teach the child to regulate their own emotions, but can also begin to teach the child to recognize and respond to the emotion in others. This forms the foundation of **empathy**.

Why is Empathy So Important?

- **Empathy** is essentially our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. We can understand where someone else is coming from and we can validate their emotions.
- Showing empathy is a particularly important skill to have when we are supporting those with mental illnesses.

How Can Parents Help?

- The best thing caregivers can do to foster attachment and empathy is to promote strong connections they have with their children.
- Do your best to focus your attention on your child's wants or needs. Choose to listen to what interests your children and take time to engage with them, be it through conversation or even just play.

Strategies for Connection

Practice self-care

- Talk to your support system and ask for help when you need it.

Encourage your child or your youth to talk to you

- Show an interest in the things that interest them and ask questions about topics you know they like.

- Validate whatever feelings they express. If your children feel that you are listening and understand them, they are more likely to share again with you in the future.

Take time to play with your children and teenagers

- Research is showing that play is one of the most important means of learning in children and it is proven to help children regulate their emotions and arousal levels.
- Play gives you an opportunity, as their caregiver, to show your child how invested you are in them.

Remember . . .

- Love, empathy, and connection will go a long way in supporting mental wellness.
- As a caregiver, you have one of the most important jobs in the world. But, be aware that this is not solely your responsibility and there are always options for help if you are ever in need of some extra support.

Resources

- Teenmentalhealth.org (2018). Parents: <http://teenmentalhealth.org/care/parents/>
- Canadian Paediatric Society (2018). Your Child's Mental Health: https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/mental_health
- The Psychology Foundation of Canada (2016). Kids can cope: Parenting resilient children at home and at school: <https://www.dsb1.ca/Programs/MHWP/Programs/Documents/Parenting%20Resilient%20Children.pdf>
- The British Psychological Society (2007). Attachment theory into practice. Section 3 by Blaustein, M. E. & Kinniburgh, K. M. Retrieved from: <https://www1.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/DCP/cat-378.pdf>
- TED Talk - Brown, B. (2010). The power of vulnerability: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
- Call Health Link Alberta: 811
- CYFAMH Intake: 780-342-2701
- Youth Addiction Services Edmonton: 780-422-7383
- Mobile Response Team: 780-427-4491
- Call 211 – Alberta Community resources
- CMHA Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868