

The importance of well-being and mental health for you and your child with special health care needs

Why is well-being and mental health important to consider?

Well-being is important for dealing with the stresses of daily life, realizing your abilities, working productively, and contributing to the community. One approach to understanding and promoting the development of mental-health and well-being is to help your child meet developmental milestones. But remember, health comes first for a child with special health care needs.

What are the developmental milestones of childhood?

- ▶ Infants and toddlers: Focus on helping your child develop an attachment to caregivers and gain control over his or her emotions. Emotional control is an important goal of this stage because it helps children make friends and get along with others.
- ▶ School-age children: Focus on helping your child master key developmental tasks like exploring appropriate independence, developing friendships with others, and achieving academic goals.
- ▶ Adolescents: Focus on helping your child build skills for independence, self-identity, friendship, and romantic relationships.

How can a chronic health condition affect development of well-being?

Children with special health care needs have higher rates of mental health issues. During infancy and early childhood frequent or long separation from caregivers, like during hospitalization or painful medical procedures, can lead to attachment issues.

For school age children, diseases that affect the brain and central nervous system, medications, or other medical treatments may increase the likelihood of learning problems. Social development may be affected when children experience frequent absences from school for treatments or hospitalization.

During adolescence, teens who begin to take over their own health care may choose activities that compromise health status. An adolescent with special health care needs may not develop physically and sexually at the same rate as his or her peers and that can have an impact on self-image and esteem.

What can parents do?

- ▶ Infants and toddlers: Infants thrive on parental attention, so promptly and lovingly pick up your



infant. This will lead to less crying, more self-soothing, faster responses to parental soothing, and will help the infant develop a secure attachment. Set limits for toddlers and teach alternatives to hitting and/or tantruming. Children who do not hit others have more friends, are better liked, and develop better language skills.

- ▶ School-age children: Have reasonable expectations and allow your child to solve his or her own problems when appropriate. Continue to set limits but with empathy and logical consequences.
- ▶ Adolescents: Continue to build self-concept by setting limits, but focus on helping your teen develop independence. Sometimes this means accepting that teens may make decisions based on social needs before their health needs.

When should parents ask for help?

Parents should seek help for their children if they notice:

- ▶ Mood changes, sadness or withdrawal for longer than two weeks, or mood swings that cause relationship problems
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating or sitting still
- ▶ Intense feelings or overwhelming fear that interferes with daily life
- ▶ Behavior changes such as fighting, out-of-control actions, or decreased school performance
- ▶ Unexplained weight loss
- ▶ Physical harm, suicidal thoughts, or self-harm
- ▶ Substance abuse

Resources for families

<http://mchlibrary.jhmi.edu/>

Maternal and Child Health Library

<http://www.brightfutures.org/mentalhealth/>

Bright Futures materials on mental health

http://www.mchlibrary.info/KnowledgePaths/kp_CSHCN.html

Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs Knowledge Path

<http://www.loveandlogic.com/ecom/p-560-love-and-logic-solutions-cd.aspx>

Love and Logic Solutions audiobook/CD

<http://www.chp.edu/CHP/P01658>

Psychological Complications of Chronic Illness, Children

<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/health/p/complications/>

Psychological Complications of Chronic Illness, Adolescents

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Wyoming Family to Family Health Information Center

<http://www.uwyo.edu/wind/f2f/>

Wyoming Institute for Disabilities: 1-888-989-9463

UPLIFT–Federation of Families: 1-888-875-4383



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