Mental health is the new self-esteem

What is your state of mind like? What is the state of your child’s mental health at the moment?

These are questions that we need to ask ourselves continually.

The busyness of life means that many of us feel that we are living our lives on the run and there is little time or chance to relax.

It is one thing to feel a little stretched. In some ways this is quite a healthy state. We usually achieve little if we are in a constant state of inertia.

But it is another thing entirely to feel constantly stressed because we are so busy or demands just stack up so that before we know it we are snowed under and life seems out of control.

For the sake of our mental health we need to create space so we can relax and not feel that our lives are spinning out of control. The same circumstances hold for children.

Left to their own devices children generally have sound mental health habits. They attend to about the right ratio of play, rest and work - that is, play comes before work and just after rest in most children’s scheme of things (just like dictionary order). I have never had to say to my children, “Now get back to playing. You have done enough work for one day.” It is always the other way around and so it should be.

But it seems things maybe changing in these times of highly orchestrated, adult-initiated childhoods. It is not so much that work comes before play rather that play is so highly structured that much of the spontaneity and self-directedness of play is lost.

The last decade has seen almost universal acceptance by parents and caregivers of the place of self-esteem in a child’s development. But we need to be careful not to over-organise and over-complicate children’s lives at the expense of free, unstructured ‘muck around’ time.

The importance of ‘muck around’ time is underestimated. Research maintains that self-initiated leisure is essential for good mental health and emotional well being in adolescents. Teenagers who have an interest outside of school or their normal range of ‘work’ have a tremendous insulator against stress, anxiety and depression.

Parents and teachers can fill up children’s and young people’s lives with all types of activities that there is little space or time left to pursue their own interests or to just ‘muck around’.

Most of us know intuitively that ‘muck around’ time is the prerogative of childhood.

The opportunity for some free, unstructured time is something that we adults need to remember as we model good mental health habits for the children and young people in our lives.

Quick Parenting Quiz

True or false.

1. The average Australian child watches 19 hours of television a week.

Answers:
1. True.

2. Junk food advertising is two times more common during children’s television programs.

Vitamins for parents

Little things count - involving children in decision-making:

Do you give children opportunities to make decisions that affect themselves and their family?

Decision-making is a skill that needs to be continuously practised. It is an important part of being an autonomous human being. Parents can step back and allow children to make decisions about such things as: what to have for dinner, how to make grandma’s visit a pleasant, what time they should get up in the morning or whether to do homework before or after dinner.

It is in the small areas that affect children’s lives that autonomy with guidance needs to be given. Limits can be given to help children make wise or appropriate choices. For instance, they may choose how they use their pocket money but you may insist that it be distributed between spending, saving/investing and charity.

Bright idea

Adopt one, dump one

If a child has a full schedule of extra-curricular activities and he wants to take on a new hobby or interest then he may have to consider omitting one of his present activities. This basic time management practice is a life skill that all children should learn as it prevents schedules being overcrowded, not to mention being a great sanity-saver.

Wise & Witty Words

“Becoming responsible adults is no longer a matter of whether children hang up their pyjamas or put dirty towels in the hamper, but whether they care about themselves and others- and whether they see chores as related to how we treat the planet.”

Eda Lesban

“It is not giving children more that spoils them; it is giving them more to avoid confrontation.”

John Gray,

“Children Are From Heaven”

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