

Nurturing Child and Guardian Mental Health Through Our Communication with Children



HGPI Health and Global
Policy Institute

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Introduction

For children to grow up in a healthy way, they need seamless, comprehensive support all the way from pregnancy and birth through to adulthood.

Mental health problems in particular have become a serious issue affecting children in recent years, calling for support systems to be set up from the preschool years and more opportunities for early detection and intervention.

Children's mental health is said to be heavily influenced by their relationships with adults, especially their teachers, parents and guardians, and other caretakers.

Their relationships with their parents and guardians in particular will change over time but last a lifetime.

In order to support children's mental health, parents, guardians, and other caretakers need to not only have a clear understanding of their child's stress, but also be able to properly manage it along with their own.

This pamphlet summarizes ways to relate to children, signs of child mental health issues, and methods for dealing with them that mainly parents and guardians of preschool children, kindergarten and daycare teachers, and anyone that helps take care of children should know.

We hope that this pamphlet will give you even a little more confidence and help you rediscover the joys of raising children.

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What It Means to Raise a Child

There are countless handbooks, manuals, and strategy guides out there. When it comes to child raising, books on “this and that-style parenting” get featured and a range of helpful advice based on different findings and experiences gets shared on TV and streaming services. But what we need to remember is that these are no more than **practical examples of what has worked for other people’s children.**

Needless to say, these suggestions can certainly help guide you in how you interact with your children and provide useful tips when you are struggling. Many of them will naturally be effective. But on the other hand, some may not. The fact is that **much of the advice you get from books and TV may be ineffective.**

What we want to emphasize here is that **you will not know what method works best for the child in front of you until you try it.** Of course, we do not recommend blindly trying everything. You should take these books, TV programs, and your own experience as points of reference to take into account as you work to find the right method for your child.

The idea that **there is no “right answer” when it comes to raising children can cause anxiety and doubt.** While it is true that there is no so-called “one-size-fits-all” approach, it is entirely possible to find the best solution for your specific child. You can do so by observing your child’s reactions. As you try out different approaches with your child, you will find those that make them laugh, empower them to do more things, and bring them joy. Sure to say, these are good approaches that fit your child best.

The person that knows your child most is not some expert or the author of a famous book, but you. **Any approach that lets you pick up on your child’s each and every reaction, notice subtle changes day to day, wrestle with worry, and ultimately rejoice together falls under what we call “raising children.”** As children grow, their parents and guardians do too. The hardships, pain, and worry that come with raising a child may never go away, even after they reach adulthood, but it is our hope that you will not be afraid to worry and focus on the joys of raising children instead. And we hope that this pamphlet will be of help to you in some way.



Praise or Discipline, Which Is Best?

In this chapter, we will discuss some key points to consider when dealing with children.

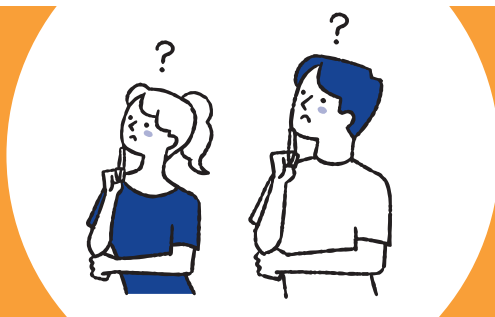
Two views we often hear are that children should be raised with praise to nurture their good qualities or with strict scoldings so they will not grow up spoiled and weak. Our conclusion is that while both are important, **balance is key, praising them well and disciplining them in a comprehensible way that lets them know what they have done wrong.** Let us take a look at a few major points.

“Praise” can actually mean many different things. The first type of praise is meant to **commend**, which is likely the most common form of praise. Second, there is praise that says “I see you,” showing that you are **paying attention**. The third is of **encouragement**, saying “Keep up the good work!” Fourth, there is praise of **approval**, as in “That’s the way to do it.” The fifth type is praise of **gratitude**, and sixth is of marvel, like saying “You can do that now? That’s amazing!” The seventh shows **agreement**, saying “I approve of your thinking and way of doing things.” Praise can send so many different messages to both your children and others, it is a truly magic word!

Children and adults alike are able to tackle things with more confidence when they receive words of praise that carry these types of messages. When behavior is praised, people also try to engage in that behavior more and more. If you are able to **create a cycle of positive reinforcement where the child receives praise for putting in a bit of effort, uses that praise as emotional fuel for them to do their best again, and then receives even more praise,** they will go on to feel assured in life.

What are some of the points to consider when it comes to scolding, then? First, there are two main types of behavior that should be scolded: **1) behavior that hurts the child and/or others, and 2) behavior that risks causing an accident, like running out into the street.**

Other behavior like not listening, breaking a promise, or lying is an opportunity to teach children how they should act rather than to scold them. If your child will not put their toys away no matter how many times you tell them to, you can teach them by saying “This toy goes in here.” This will give them a sense of accomplishment, and they may even learn to put their toys away on their own next time if you praise them without hesitation. When they have broken a promise or told a lie, it is good to encourage them to apologize based on their current ability and level of understanding, saying “What do we say? We say ‘I’m sorry.’” If you **help them learn how to convey an apology well, let them experience the feeling of being able to apologize on their own, and praise them for it, you should find them doing it relatively more.**



Find Your Child’s “Cans” to Make Everyone Happy

Try to picture who those “people that can do anything” are. Are they so-called prodigies? Or maybe Japan’s top athletes? In reality, no one can do everything. We all support each other in various ways in life. No matter how many examples you give of people with remarkable abilities, there is no end to the list of things they cannot do. But when we think of all the things that we ourselves cannot do, we start to feel dejected and lose confidence, making the things we actually can do difficult. When it comes to your child, start by clearly identifying and sharing with your child what they can do and what they are good at.

The next step is to categorize your child’s abilities based on the level they can do them at. The table below has some examples.

	I can do it easily on my own	I can do it sometimes if I try	I almost never can, even if I really try...
Getting Dressed	I can put on a jacket by myself	I can zip zippers if they line up right	I can’t button buttons on my own
Eating	I can eat with spoons no problem!	I can’t hold chopstick well, but I can still eat with them mostly	I still can’t use chopsticks holding them the right way
Bathroom	I can go to the bathroom without objection if prompted	I go to the bathroom on my own sometimes	I can’t wipe myself clean yet
Play	I can play with building blocks by myself	I share toys with friends sometimes	I still can’t understand games with rules
Friendship	I’ve memorized the names of some of my friends	I play with friends sometimes when they invite me	I still don’t invite friends to play on my own

Our focus here is on the column in the middle: “I can do it sometimes if I try.” The key here is to push these toward the “I can do it easily” column. Trying to improve the “I almost never can” column first is not likely to yield results any time soon and can end up diminishing the confidence of parent or guardian, caretaker, and child alike. If you work on turning things “I can do sometimes if I try” into things “I can do easily,” learning tricks and gaining confidence along the way, they will eventually be able to tackle the things “I almost never can” today.



Signs of Mental Health Issues in Children and What to Do About It

In this section, we will discuss the signs of mental health issues in both children and adults and how to deal with them.

Mental health issues mainly present as “stress” and trigger a variety of different bodily responses. Let us give a few examples of what stress can look like.

When you’re stressed, you might...

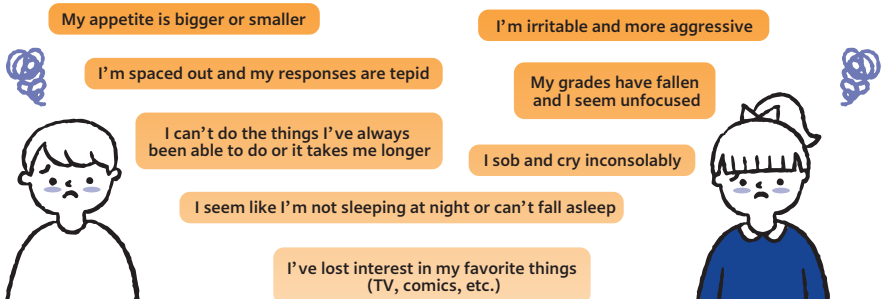
- | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Get sweaty palms | <input type="checkbox"/> Have trouble concentrating | <input type="checkbox"/> Get irritated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feel your heart pound | <input type="checkbox"/> Lose motivation | <input type="checkbox"/> Get flustered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Get shaky hands and feet | <input type="checkbox"/> Lose your appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> Get angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feel dizzy | <input type="checkbox"/> Have trouble sleeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Feel down |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have stomach pain | <input type="checkbox"/> Oversleep | <input type="checkbox"/> Cry |

Not all of these will show up in everyone, and we know that different people are prone to different stress responses. Some of them are complete opposites. As you can see in the examples above, some people have trouble sleeping while others oversleep.

We also know that these stress responses are seen not only in adults, but also in children. Children are known to exhibit almost the same responses as adults when stressed, but they have been found to show a number of characteristic ones.

The people around children - their parents, guardians and teachers - are the ones who will be able to spot these stress responses, that is to say the signs of mental health issues. But it is also a well-known fact that they are hard for adults to recognize on their own. The key to properly picking up on these signs is **not overlooking any changes from before when the child was relatively well.**

If something is not quite right, ask if they are having fun at kindergarten, daycare, or school, eat their favorite foods with them, and play together. **Try to identify some specific, enjoyable experiences to help them realize that there are plenty of activities out there that can provide joy.**



When Parents and Guardians Show Signs of Mental Health Issues

The stress responses and signs of mental health issues introduced in Chapter 4 can, of course, show up in parents and guardians as well. When they do, it is important to determine whether the problem is at a level that can be overcome (1) on their own, (2) with support from family and those around them, or (3) only by consulting a hospital, clinic, or other medical institution. **If signs of mental health issues have been observed for roughly two weeks in a row or more, or the symptoms are causing a negative impact in daily life, like an inability to do household chores or an unwillingness to go to work, consider the possibility that the person is facing a level (3) issue when choosing how to respond.**

If you are trying to overcome mental health issues on your own or with support from those around you, we recommend that you try starting off with things that you can do and that are readily manageable for you. When doing so, it is also important to not get caught up in being perfect. If you start off with something you are not good at or that is hard for you to manage aiming for perfection, it will often take a lot of time and effort and you may find yourself in a situation where things do not work out at all in the end. But if you take on things that are more manageable instead, you will have a better chance of feeling “slightly better” by building up a series of small wins, even if it is still difficult to accomplish something big. The idea is that if shooting for 100 means there is a risk that you will end up scoring 0, then aiming for 50 from the get-go could be an option. If you continue to find yourself ultimately unable to do things you should be able to, you may be facing a level (3) issue. Opt to consult a hospital or clinic.

It is also important to take a preventive stance so you are less likely to fall prey to mental health issues in the first place. Stress is actually not necessarily a bad thing. We know for a fact that a certain degree of stress and tension has a positive effect on our ability to control our behavior and exert our abilities. Other emotions like anger, sadness, and anxiety that are generally considered negative are also not definitively bad. There are no inherently “good” and “bad” emotions. But some emotions can prevent us from doing the things we normally do and interfere with our everyday lives, so nevertheless, it is important that we are able to live with them.

People who believe that stress is a good thing that helps elevate them are said to have better mental health and greater long-term wellbeing than those who believe stress is a bad thing. We encourage you to **think about the actions you can take not only to avoid stress but also live with it.**



When in Need of Help

As mentioned in Chapter 1, our troubles and worries will never completely go away. We will always have worries in some shape or form, and we must learn to live with them. But even if you find a problem hard to solve on your own, you may be able to overcome it with support from those around you.

That includes your family and friends, and your child’s kindergarten, daycare, and school teachers. Schools have teachers serving in a variety of capacities that each bring special skills to the table, including homeroom teachers, teachers in charge of specific grades, school nurses (health teachers), and school counselors certified as psychologists.

Some people, on the other hand, may be afraid to have those close to them know about their problems. Save the Children Japan, an international NGO dedicated to helping children, lists a number of primarily public institutions you can consult on its “Oyako no Mikata” [Friends of Parents and Children] consultation directory. We will highlight a few here that are available for different issues.



Child-raising Issues

Municipal child and family consultation desks

Offer consultations to help with concerns and worries regarding children and child raising. Provide tailored advice for individual children and families to support you in your daily life. Search “name of municipality” + “child-raising consultations,” etc.

Child guidance centers

Nationwide hotline available for consultations on a wide range of issues from child-raising to discipline and parenting fatigue when in distress. TEL: 189 (“ichi-haya-ku” [act quickly])

Children’s Mental Health

Child Mental Health Institute Map (National Center for Child Health and Development)

A searchable map by the Child Mental Health Network Development Program of hospitals, clinics, and other institutes providing mental health care for children. Search “child mental health institute map.”

Personal Mental Health Care

“Kokoro no Kenko” nationwide hotline

Connects you to your local “Kokoro no Kenko” [mental health] helpline and other public counseling services provided by the prefecture or designated city you are calling from.
TEL: 0570-064-556 (toll free)

Domestic Violence (DV)

Specialized counselors are available to discuss domestic violence from a spouse or partner. Your call will be transferred to your nearest counseling center that you can consult with directly.
TEL: #8008 (nationwide)



Reference Materials

Health and Global Policy Institute

Health and Global Policy Institute (HGPI) is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan and private health and global policy think tank established in 2004. It aims to achieve citizen-centered health policy by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders and generating policy options for the public from a neutral standpoint. It represents an independent voice not bound by the positions of any particular political party or organization, working to foster fair and healthy communities by shaping ideas and values from broad, forward-looking perspectives and acting as a catalyst of change, making an impact on society from a global point of view.

HGPI Website

<https://hgpi.org/en/>



FY2021 HGPI Child Health Project “Building a Mental Health Program for Children and Measuring its Effectiveness” Website

<https://hgpi.org/research/ch-survey-202206.html>



Studio Sora’s “Sora Tsushin” [Sora News]

Studio Sora publishes monthly columns on key points when it comes to raising children, tips for solving child-raising issues, and perspectives on support as well as rehabilitation for children with developmental disabilities.

Studio Sora Website

<https://studiosora.jp/>



Sora Tsushin Website

<https://studiosora.jp/column/category/care/>





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