

PROMOTING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN IN CARE

WHY?

Many children in care have lived through very difficult early experiences. They are at risk of poor emotional well-being and poor mental health. Working on developing positive mental health and emotional well-being (even when there are no major problems) is essential for healthy development and is as important as physical health.

HOW?

Promoting positive mental health means helping young people to develop the emotional and social skills they need to cope with life and so prevent or cope with emotional problems. This means help them to become more *resilient*. A resilient child can “bounce back” from the difficulties that always happen in life. Consistent support using a range of activities can nurture and promote resilience.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP DEVELOP RESILIENCE SKILLS?

There are a number of factors that help develop these skills which have a protective influence on mental health and emotional well-being:

A supportive and stable home with caring, consistent relationships – A stable placement is crucial to allowing relationships to develop and children to form a secure attachment to an adult. They should feel safe (both physically and emotionally) with that person and be able to develop a trusting, loving relationship.

Being included and remembered – Looked after young people can often feel isolated and lonely. They want to feel part of the family and community they live in. Feel they belong. Some want to have opportunities to meet with other looked after children. Most also need help with feelings about the experiences and events that led to separation from their family.

Praise – How you talk to children affects their self-esteem. Blaming, criticising, labelling and demanding are likely to give children negative messages about themselves. When you call a child words like selfish, naughty, or “just like your mother/father” you label them. Labels stick and children end up believing them. Labels and negative comments do not give useful information about what you think is a problem or what you would like them to do differently. So there is little opportunity to do anything about it. Praise and appreciation build self-esteem. Describing clearly what you are praising shows you have noticed them and allows them to take a step back and see their own achievements so that they can value them as well.

Social and emotional skills – Working on the following skills helps to develop resilience. It is important to remember that these are skills – and so children need adults to help them learn them. How you deal with these is one way to teach children:
* being a successful learner * building & keeping friendships * dealing with conflict effectively & fairly * learning how to solve problems with others & alone * managing strong feelings * recovering from setbacks & trying in the face of difficulties * working & playing cooperatively * competing fairly and losing with dignity and respect for others * understand & value difference in people.

Opportunities to express themselves – Play and leisure activities – including sport, art and drama – promote emotional well-being by developing confidence and self-esteem, and by giving opportunities to develop supportive friendship networks, learn social skills and find positive role models.

Support and encouragement with education– Positive school experiences improve career options in later life, they also boost self-esteem and confidence, provide friendship networks and opportunities to develop and practice social skills.

Preparation for leaving care – Young people need to prepare for independence and the many challenges they will face. They will continue to need support and encouragement into early adulthood.

More info: www.youngminds.org.uk
www.ncb.org.uk/healthycare
www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk
or your local library