**Better mental health for happier youth**

**Social media example**

As parents or caregivers, encouraging children to express themselves and have an early understanding of what mental health means is important. Teaching them from a young age that their mental wellbeing matters is one of the best ways to equip kids with the right skills to stay mentally healthy: Link to article.

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**Article**

As part of our mental health focus at Vitality, we’re exploring the role that mental health plays when it comes to the overall wellbeing of our kids. This is a key concern – globally – for modern parenting with the increase in screen time and the rise of cyber bullying and unrealistic beauty/lifestyle standards portrayed online.

*So, what is contributing to the rise of poor mental health in our youth?*

“There isn’t just one easy answer here,” says Lee Corrigan, Head of Product Development for Vitality and mother of three. “But I’d point to screen time as something we need to get a handle on. This is the amount of exposure a child gets to digital devices like a smartphone, computer, television, video game console or a tablet and this has been linked to mental health risks including impaired cognitive development and decreased attention span.”

Lee adds that we’re seeing that prolonged screen time can negatively affect a child’s sleep cycles, learning patterns and even their ways of interacting socially.

**Balancing online with outdoors**

“It’s a tricky balancing act that I personally find hard to navigate with my kids, too,” says Lee. “On one hand, with how quickly the world is changing digitally with the various tech advancements, you want your child to have access to this so that they don’t get left behind. Digital tech is being brought into the classroom more and more and is a fundamental part of the education strategy. But, you also want your children to have a healthy childhood, spent away from screens and with much more active time spent outdoors.”

*What’s ‘normal’?*

It is common for children and adolescents to encounter some sort of behavioural or emotional issues as they grow up – and for most, these problems resolve themselves without needing much intervention. As parents or caregivers, encouraging our children to express themselves and have an early understanding of what mental health means is important. Teaching them from a young age that their mental wellbeing matters is one of the best ways to start equipping our kids with the right skills to stay mentally healthy.

**Mentally healthy kids = mentally healthier adults**

A mentally healthy childhood helps your kids to reach developmental milestones, learn how to process emotions and cope with problems. This enables them to start building healthy habits and social skills which will carry through to their adult years.

“This also means a better quality of life – as your kids are better prepared to deal with the dynamics of school and home life and the unavoidable stress they’ll face growing up,” says Lee. “Where you notice big changes in your child’s behaviour or perhaps if they battle to sleep or start to withdraw from people or activities they like, these are the signs to take seriously.”

In addition to the negative impact of too much screen time on both mental and physical health, being online can also expose your children to problematic parts of the internet – social media being a key culprit here.

“Having the right age restrictions on online content like YouTube videos and ensuring that you’re supervising your kids when they’re online is critical,” says Lee. “There is so much out there that can be confusing to your child, and you need to make sure they are protected until they are at the right age to consume this type of content and even then, be there to explain what they see."

*The ‘Tik Tok/Instagram versus reality’ conversation*

“Just like adults, when we see constant picture-perfect portrayals of people’s lives, this curated aesthetic can make children, especially adolescents, feel ‘less than’,” adds Lee. These unrealistic standards, whether it’s expensive gifts or holidays, or even beauty standards, can erode a child’s sense of self-worth, so it’s important to be aware of this and reduce the amount of exposure your child is getting to these exaggerated worlds.

**Here are 4 ways to promote mental wellbeing in children:**

1. **INTRODUCE CHAT TIMES**

Pick a regular time of the day to have catch-up chats with your children, either over breakfast or their evening meal so that you get them used to talking about their feelings and relaying their day. An easy exercise to try is called “peak and pit” – where the family mentions the best part of their day (peak) as well as the not-so-great part (pit). This allows follow-up questions to ensure the ‘pit’ moments are properly addressed to help them work through emotions in constructive ways. “I also find car drives a valuable time to catch up with my children to talk about difficult topics,” says Lee. “There is something about both facing forward that helps a child feel like they can talk about potentially tricky topics or for you as the parent to have more difficult conversations. And, importantly, these need to be when you are alone with your child.”

1. **ENCOURAGE THEIR INTERESTS**

The latest dance routine, artwork or pop song might not be to your taste, but embrace your kid’s interests and encourage them to try out new activities and hobbies. Learning new things, joining social groups and feeling part of a group helps to build confidence and connects your child with others, boosting their mental wellbeing.

1. **BUILD HEALTHY HABITS AND ROUTINES**

Healthy habits are key. Try to have structure around regular routines, especially around eating times and exercise. A good night’s sleep is also important, so have a fixed time for going to bed and waking up. Structured or unstructured exercise also allows children to manage stress and get better quality of sleep. “Using exercise has been a brilliant way for us to connect as a family and my children always love these times. Something as simple as a walk or a hike makes us all feel connected,” Lee adds.

**And one final (important) tip?**

1. **PRIORITISE YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH**

As the old saying goes: your own cup needs to be full before others can sip from it. You need to make sure you’re getting self-care and looking after your own mental wellbeing in order to support others around you, especially your children. Recognise and acknowledge when you’re feeling down or overwhelmed so that you can immediately take a step back and do things that make you feel better. This could be some alone time, a short walk or even a healthy snack.

Role model this behaviour to your child showing them it’s ok to sometimes struggle and this is nothing to be ashamed of.

“What is great to see is that mental health – and conversations about good mental health for kids especially – is becoming far more common in our modern life, and there is less stigma now attached to these types of conversations so people are more likely to reach out for help when they need it,” concludes Lee.

*For more information about Vitality’s evidence-based approach that encourages and rewards members for healthier living, visit the* [*Vitality website*](https://www.vitality.com/)*.*

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