

## Are Your Kids Psychologically Illiterate?

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As a society, we've perfected the art of **teaching sex education** and telling our kids that drugs are bad. We know how to take them to the doctor when they have that lingering cough or when something is twisted, sprained, or broken. So why aren't we placing that same value on their emotional health and psychological well-being?

The 15th anniversary of the Columbine tragedy has come and gone, and we have seen a rise in school and other mass shootings - 83 in the United States in the first four months of 2014, according to a Web site devoted to mass shootings that provides the statistics on the dead and injured. The media identify the shooters as ones with psychological problems, yet we hear over and over again that their

friends and families "had no idea." We have a nation full of mental health providers, yet so many individuals never actually get desperately needed treatment, or they get sub-par treatment.

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### Talk to Your Kids: Easy to Say, Hard to Do

It's easy to detach a bit from our children, especially as they enter those unpleasant adolescent years. But this is the time when we really need to hang on, stay present, and **talk with our teens**.

Most weekday mornings, I escort my daughter to her classroom. She has yet to become completely embarrassed by my presence (she's only 8), so I still get to walk hand-in-hand with her, all the while reminding her to pay attention, play nice, and enjoy her day. When I pick her up, I ask her about her day and what she learned. It is not easy getting this information out of her. Thus we embark on a game of 20 questions. While this game often feels more like the game of 2,000 (gray hair-inducing) questions to elicit the occasional non-"I don't know" or non-"I don't remember" response, I do it because I want to know about her life. I want to know about her thoughts, her experiences, her feelings, her friends, and whether she ate the cleverly disguised vegetables in her lunch. Part of my job description as mom is to be involved in her life even if it means dyeing my roots every few weeks.

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### Why Kids Need an Emotional Health Curriculum

When sex education is taught in middle school, it's discussed in clinical or biological terms. Kids learn about birth control, STDs, and safer sexual practices. We teach them about their secondary sexual characteristics, what their bodies are going to experience, and to speak up when someone makes them feel sexually uncomfortable. We teach kids that "no means no" and that it is okay to say no. Sex is normalized to be something that is healthy and something to be enjoyed when in a happy and loving relationship.

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Kids learn about drugs even earlier than that. They learn that drugs are bad, why they are bad, and that they can lead us down a path that is not in our own best interest.

What does not get discussed is **why people use drugs** or why people engage in unsafe or uncomfortable sexual practices. We are taught which things are not good for us, but we are rarely, if ever, taught why these same things are not good for us. Happy people don't abuse drugs. Happy people don't use their bodies as mechanisms to gain love and acceptance. So why not teach our kids an emotional curriculum to fortify the academic one?

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It's inevitable that we will experience some level of depression and anxiety at least once in our lifetime. In fact, it's likely to be more than once. Like sex and drugs, mental health should be taught to kids in clinical or biological terms. We need to develop - and help our kids develop - psychological literacy and learn to **recognize at least some of the symptoms of depression** and anxiety in ourselves and in our kids.

Our bodies sometimes recognize stress and anxiety before we do. Adults often feel tightness in their neck and shoulders or get frequent headaches. Kids will complain of frequent stomach aches. If we or our kids are no longer able to enjoy the everyday things that we used to enjoy, it may be time to talk to someone about our feelings, like a parent, a friend, a teacher, or a mental health professional.

#### **4 Ways You Can Help Your Kids**

Since our schools are hopelessly underfunded, it's not likely that psychological literacy will ever be taught. Learning how to maintain our psychological well-being is important and not too complicated. These key universal factors can help you and your kids maintain a healthy emotional life:

**1. Exercise.** Physical activity is a natural serotonin booster. Serotonin is the chemical in our brain that is most closely associated with depression. If we naturally increase the serotonin levels in our brains, we are less likely to be depressed. Get up and move and get your kids to do the same.

**2. Eat well. Stop overstuffing yourself.** If you claim that you're "full" all the time, it might be time to consider that you may be eating too much. Cut that portion in half. In addition, unless a doctor or dietician has recommended it for a specific condition, you don't need special gluten-free, soy-free, salt-free, sugar-free, carbohydrate-free, peanut-free, flavor-free, meat/chicken/fish-free,

**4. Laugh.** Think about it - **you can't be sad when you're laughing.** Being the psychologist-in-residence at a comedy club, I have been privileged to witness how often an audience member will approach a comedian after their set and thank them for making their bad day just a little bit better. Listen to your kid's really bad knock-knock joke. Remember that the joke may not necessarily be in the material, so pay attention to the delivery.

Our kids learn by the examples we set and by the encouragement we provide. We should make sure they have easy access to supportive, stigma-free resources. It's time to add emotional literacy into our kids' curriculum.