

Minding the Mind: Help your child stay mentally healthy

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How's your child doing? Is (s)he acting "normal?"

Too often parents and schools want diagnosis and treatment for behaviours categorized as mental illness in a child that isn't acting "normally." Sadly, these undesirable behaviours that are frequently medicated are the expression of feelings that are authentic and normal. Rather than looking for psychiatric labels and medication, look at life around the child – family, friends, school, church, etc. – and the (lack of) coping strategies that (s)he's developed to survive.

Depressing behaviours are about the past, and something significant that's been lost. Someone moved or passed away; the family relocated and a special place or friend is missed; a family change displaced the child's unique position.

Gently explain to your child that sadness is a normal part of human life, and there may always be an empty place in their heart for what was lost. Even Jesus wept at the loss of His friend Lazarus! Encourage writing a letter to the lost person or thing about their feelings, or creating a memorable collage of pictures to hang on their bedroom wall. For people missed due to distance allow regular contact by Facebook or MSN, or better yet encourage some good old-fashioned letter writing. (There's still something special about receiving hand-written letters!)

Angering behaviours are about the present, and some sense of injustice. Death of a close family member; diagnosis of major illness; parents arguing, separating, or divorcing; bullying at school; life changes due to poor choices by another family member; parents who micromanage the child's life.

Note that angering is very different from tantrumming – which is children trying to control their parents – and shouldn't be tolerated!

Don't meet a child's anger with anger. It's best to let them vent for a while, giving them time alone. When the anger dissipates take the opportunity to explain that God the Father is also angered by injustice, but that His plan for our lives can seem unjust because we don't see through His eyes. Maybe the opportunity will arise to teach the essential skill of Biblical peacemaking; but always try to help them find constructive uses for angry energy (i.e. exercise).

Anxietying behaviours are about the future, and some perceived or expected threat to safety. Even Jesus was terribly afraid of His own future - so much that he sweat drops of blood! A child who fears school may be bullied (including online) or frequently criticized by a teacher; they may act out because of abuse or parents separating; they might fear new situations and the things that may happen.

Parents and teachers should be aware of what's happening to a child at school and intervene when necessary; understand how a child is affected by an unstable or uncertain home life and try to find them some stability; they can slowly and safely (re)introduce feared situations or things, or find a professional who can help with phobias.

Diagnosing and medicating the problems and feelings of childhood and adolescence doesn't help a child to grow into a man or woman of God but may create a situation of chemical dependence, lifetime uncertainty, and inability to constructively navigate the realities of this sorrow-ridden life.

What to do instead?

Pray constantly for the safety that only God can provide your child.

Limit the amount of time children spend engaged in electronic media. Unmonitored internet can introduce boundless evil; TV and movies display chronic unrighteousness and horror; many video games are legitimizing the most ungodly actions and putting them into mental practice for later use in reality. Such fantasy environments put children in a trance and make them vulnerable to (now not-so-)subtle societal programming.

Talk to your child about feelings and growing up. Make sure that you never deny them their feelings, nor should the rules of the family/school suppress emotions – this will often lead to greater emotional problems and/or physical symptoms later in life.

Keep your child safe, but frequently engaged with family, friends, and activities that encourage personal growth and health of mind, body, and soul.

Seek help when necessary; but before consenting to labels and treatments, ask the question: will this benefit my child?

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