

THE
GREEN BOOK

The Green Book: Nurturing Kid's Mental Health

This booklet is offered to parents, caregivers, and all those who regularly interact with children as a companion to **Red Flags in Children's Behavior**. The "red book" alerts those who interact with children to the warning signs of a developing mental illness. The premise of the "green book" is that the best defense against mental illness is resilient mental health. Simple, regularly practiced habits can strengthen children's mental health, increase their enjoyment, and shield them against the more serious consequences of mental illness.



Sound health habits serve us well throughout our entire lives. Good health, whether physical or mental, is critical to a child's ability to learn and develop. In fact mental health and physical health work hand in hand in helping children reach their full potential. In the same way that we learn healthy habits from

early childhood, even the youngest children can begin to develop habits that strengthen and protect their mental health. While some illness in our lives is inevitable, those who regularly practice sound physical and mental health habits are much more likely to resist illness and recover more quickly when it occurs.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual:

- realizes his or her own potential
- can cope with the normal stresses of life
- can work productively and fruitfully
- is able to make a contribution to her or his community

This booklet contains short practices useful for developing habits related to each of the four bulleted areas of the WHO's definition:

**POSITIVE REGARD, RESILIENCE,
BUILDING ON STRENGTHS,
AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT.**

Positive Regard

Positive regard is more than simply being nice. Positive regard is founded on the belief that every child, indeed every person, has an innate human dignity that is worthy of our respect. It means that each of our encounters conveys the attitude that this child has the capacity to enrich our world by simply being in it. Our positive regard for the youngsters in our care is critical to the creation of their self-identity.

"We learn to value ourselves according to the way others respond to us."

Listen past the words

- Give kids a chance to prove their mettle.
- Be sure their challenges are achievable and praise their success.
- Give another chance if they fall short, but be sure to praise their effort.

Emotional literacy

We can expand children's emotional literacy by helping them to name their feelings:

- Name and acknowledge children's feelings.
 - ~ "Wow! You're really excited today."
 - ~ "Learning to put boots on can be frustrating."
 - ~ "Are you a little anxious about starting school?"

"Good" and "Bad" feelings

- Feelings, in themselves, are amoral. Avoid attaching moral equivalents to feelings.
- Help children learn acceptable ways to express or manage their feelings.

More to me than what you see.

Children have many ways of expressing their concerns.

- Listen hard, noting non-verbals.
- Ask questions for clarity.
- Let children draw their feelings or concerns in a picture. Have them tell you about it.

Find the good. Praise it. *(Alex Haley)*

- At least five times a day, tell your little one something positive about him or herself.
 - ~ "Look at that big smile! It makes me smile too."
 - ~ "What a polite way to ask for help."
 - ~ "I'm so happy to see you can do that all by yourself."
- This also works for big kids.

Resilience

Physical health and resilience

Since mental and physical health work together, taking care of our physical health can play a big role in protecting and nurturing our mental health.

- Increase the intake of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Decrease processed or fast foods in their diet.
- Cut back on sweets, sodas, and sugary drinks. Drink more water.
- Get at least 30 minutes or more of vigorous exercise a day.
- Assure that children get the sleep they need. Teens need 7-9 hours of sleep a night.



Problem solving.

Teaching some simple problem solving skills

1. Name the problem.
2. List a number of possible options for resolving the problem.
3. Consider the best option based on ease of implementation and effectiveness.
4. Implement the option and then evaluate.
5. If it doesn't work, find out why and go back to number one.

Emotional regulation

Guide children in finding appropriate expression for their feelings from the time they are young. Tantrums are emotional blowouts resulting from children's developing independence and their limited means of expression. But, left untreated, emotional dysregulation can follow a child well into adulthood with explosions of anger or violent behavior, or in more subtle expressions like emotional stuffing, substance abuse, eating disorders, and self-injury.

Setting limits:

Knowing what is expected of them actually provides children with a sense of security. Limits (rules) serve as both guidance and protection for children.

- Set clear, age-appropriate limits.
- Be consistent their enforcement.
- Expect children to naturally test their limits.
- Expand limits as children prove themselves capable of greater freedom.

Set high expectations, but leave wiggle room for failure

- Expect the **best**; it tells kids they are worth it.
- Leave room to explore, risk, try out new **ideas**, and even to make mistakes or fail.
- Learning from mistakes or recovering from failure are important lessons learned best in a **safe** and supportive environment.

Resilience focused correction:

Corrections can be served up as a sandwich with the correction and the expected behavior sandwiched between affirmations of the child's strengths. "I know you are working hard to develop a strong character. It must be a disappointment even to yourself to realize that sometimes you fall short, but lying about it is not a good solution. A better choice is to truthfully acknowledge your mistake, say you are sorry, and sincerely trying to do better. Everyone makes mistakes, but it takes a person of character to admit their mistake and make the necessary change. I trust you will do that from now on."

"If we listen to children, we will be surprised by their ideas and perceptions."

Patricio Cuevas-Parra

Positive self-talk:

The interior dialog that every person carries on within themselves can be an outstanding agent for building and maintaining sound mental health.

See the resource page for suggestions.

"Good thinking, bad thinking"

The middle of a meltdown is not the best time for correction. Our family used to play this game at dinner. It always began: "What if a little boy or girl..." followed by a story of a fictional child's praiseworthy behavior or behavior that needed correction. Then we asked: "Good thinking or bad thinking?"

The kids told us why the fictional child's behavior was good thinking or bad thinking. Once the game was well established, a raised eyebrow and the question "Good thinking or bad thinking?" was often the only correction needed.

Stress reduction:

Start building your child's arsenal of stress relievers with some of the following:

- walking the dog,
- talking with a friend,
- listening to music,
- quiet time alone in their room

Safe havens for chronic stress

Simple stress relievers can be useful for minor stressors. However, chronic stress or trauma can seriously undermine a young person's mental health. We must not underestimate the deleterious impact on children caused by abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, or unstable caregiving. Chronic stress also comes from no fault situations such as a parent's job loss or military deployment, illness, poverty, or homelessness. Schools, churches, neighborhood youth groups and activities, and one-on-one mentors can become the lifeline that help children navigate chronically stressful situations in their lives.

Building on Strengths

Strengths are innate patterns of thought or behavior that come naturally, engage the child's interest, and bring them pleasure. Strengths appear in a variety of arenas: in relational traits such as humor or compassion, in learning styles, and in a variety of activities. Our task as caregivers of children is exploratory: assisting children in discovering their strengths and providing opportunities to develop them. The discovery of strengths can direct a child's choice of employment, companions, leisure activities and hobbies. In short, a child's strengths provide the building blocks for a satisfying and productive life.

Varied and repeated experiences. New experiences open the door to unleashing potential interests and strengths. Repeated experiences allow children to gravitate and return to those they find most delightful or satisfying.

- Vary free time activities.
- Use magazine pictures to arrange in categories such as work people do, environmental features, animals, colors and shapes. Note the ones that engage their interest.
- Vary word games with active games, puzzles with books, video games with singing, dance, or music.
- Whenever possible take advantage of cultural opportunities such as museums, parks, festivals, parades and playgrounds.

Strength-based instruction

The goal of developing individual strengths can be more powerful in a child's positive development than the more usual effort given to remediating weaknesses. Strength based instruction values the diversity of learning styles and acknowledges the variety of gifts that others bring to a project or task. The resource pages at the end of this booklet have practical exercises for parents and educators to help youngsters of all ages discover and utilize their strengths.

Identifying strengths. Children naturally want to please the adults in their lives. Discovering their strengths may require observation when they are unaware of our attention.

- Observe children in unstructured play, alone and with others

- Note their distinguishing traits, quirks, interests and preferences
- What activities do they truly enjoy?
- What kind of social interactions seem most spontaneous?
- Simply note rather than evaluate the child's preferences and social interactions

Strengths journal.

Like a personal photo album, a strengths journal can be a storehouse of cherished memories. It can also provide a context for life shaping decisions. In each child's journal list the inner qualities, external behaviors, interests and traits that set them apart. How might those characteristics be positively encouraged? How might their individual preferences and tendencies provide direction later in life?

Self-regulating and quieting techniques

Children's discovery of their innate strengths will require focused attention and the ability for self-reflection. Mindfulness, prayer, meditation, and journaling all have well-researched benefits for increasing focus and attention, as well as for calming, reducing stress, and promoting sound mental health.

- Have children shake out, close their eyes, and take a deep breath before beginning a task or taking a test.
- Bring the child's attention into the present moment by saying grace or an expression of gratitude before meals
- Ask children to listen for a full minute and describe what they hear.

See websites on the resource page for more ideas.

Empowerment through choice

Even the youngest child enjoys having a say in life's daily activities. Allowing active engagement in everyday choices conveys respect for a child's preferences. Kids can make choices about:

- What they would like for lunch or snack.
- Kinds of chores or when to do them.

- Options for screen time
- After-school activities
- Appropriate clothing options.
- Teachers can give homework options related to learning styles

When giving choices, it is wise to limit the options to ensure the choice will be appropriate.

Strengths, Skills, and Talents

Dazzling talent can be deceptive. It can be easy to overlook the training and grueling practice that refine innate talents into skills and eventually into remarkable accomplishments. A child's innate strengths provide the energizing

force behind the focused attention and disciplined practice needed for productive work that brings both personal satisfaction and contribute to the greater society. The test of strength based success is the personal pleasure and satisfaction it brings.

The "Why" of Choice

"Why did you choose to weed the garden rather than vacuuming the living room?"

"I like to be outside."

"You would rather work outside than inside? What about working outside is better?"

"It's more interesting."

"Working outside is more interesting than inside? What makes it more interesting?"

"I can find bugs and worms."

"Oh. You like bugs and worms and find them interesting?"

"No, they are kind of creepy, like little monsters. I like to pretend some are good and some are

bad, and they fight each other. I'm thinking about making a scary movie about bugs and things."

Simply asking "why?" and then clarifying the response by rewording it, and digging deeper, can guide strength recognition.

Positive Engagement with Others

Children's mental health is profoundly strengthened by doing things that positively impact others. A child's social development begins at birth.

Our health and well-being, indeed, our very survival are all intimately connected to our ability to interact with others. The importance of social/emotional learning cannot be overstated. Fortunately an abundance of resources are easily accessible.

This short booklet will focus on only one aspect of social interaction: the deliberate effort to use what is best in ourselves to bring out the best in others. The adults in children's lives can nurture and guide such interactions in small, unobtrusive ways as well as by promoting participation in organized activities.

Modeling

Persons who become involved in significant efforts to improve the lives of others often recount their memories of watching their parents' social engagement. Bring kids with you when you:

- volunteer at food pantries,
- walk for causes,
- attend a meeting to address a local community issue.

Active response to community needs simply becomes part of a healthy, satisfying life.

Giving children a voice

Children can benefit from having a say in decisions that affect them at every level.

- Give children structured opportunities to express their feelings and to proffer solutions for the problems they encounter
- Engage with schools, clubs, businesses, and youth related organizations that encourage children to share their concerns, opinions, and suggestions.

Change the range

Most children tend to grow up in relatively narrow, homogenous circles. Expanding those circles can shatter narrow preconceptions and open children's minds to both the complexities of our world as well as the commonalities among the human family.

- Make opportunities to actually meet, interact with, and have meaningful discussions with persons from vastly diverse circumstances
- Include differences in income, age, gender, education, religion, politics, careers, or global culture

Start small

Everyday even the smallest child can do little things that show concern for others.

- pick up and return a dropped item
- help someone with a heavy package.
- send a note to a classmate who is home sick
- invite the new kid to group outing or party
- shovel an elderly neighbor's sidewalk.

Express approval whenever kids find little ways they can help out or make someone happy.



"True happiness comes more from kindness than from having fun."

Martin Seligman

Mentoring

A mentor can make the defining difference in a young person's life. Businesses will sometimes allow employees a couple of hours a week for mentoring. A young person who has been mentored is more likely to go to college, become a mentor himself, and assume leadership roles. *Mentor.org* is a national resource for finding mentoring organizations or for finding a mentor.

Developing a sense of belonging

Help children feel needed and included by:

- Inclusion in planning family activities or celebrations,
- Assignment of age appropriate chores,
- Team or group membership

Self-talk story:

We can also do positive self-talk with groups. Claire, of *Claire's Story*, needed to teach grammar (called Mechanics) to her seventh-graders. They moaned every time she *told* them it was time for "Mechanics". Weary of their groaning, she told them that any time she said the word "mechanics" they were to jump up onto their chairs and shout at the top of their lungs: **Mechanics is fun! It is easy and I am good at it!** She made sure to sneak the word into other places apart from grammar. Her students loved it and over time the lessons became more acceptable or at least less noxious. The practice did backfire on a poor substitute who had not been warned in advance, but in general, this group self-talk was a great success in increasing improvement in grammar.



Online Resources

General Resources

Great resources promoting children's mental health in general.

<https://childmind.org>

www.redflags.org

www.understood.org

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/every-child-needs

Self-regulation:

A useful how-to article for teaching young children to meditate.

www.doyouyoga.com/4-simple-techniques-to-teach-your-children-to-meditate/

FLIP IT A highly recommended self-regulation program piloted by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addictions and evaluated by Miami University's Center for School Based Mental Health Programs
www.centerforresilientchildren.org/flip-it/

Theresa Kellam, Ph.D. recommends a process called ACT when setting limits for small children.

www.startelegram.com/living/family/moms/article3825319.html#storylink=cpy

Books

Martin Seligman. *The Optimistic Child.*



Jenifer Fox. *How to Discover and Develop Your Child's Strengths.*

Book and Song for Self-talk:

Watty Piper. *The Little Engine That Could*



"Whistle a Happy Tune" www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYoj67BTfsU

Sites on Building strengths:

Download the strength's activity page from *Understood.com*

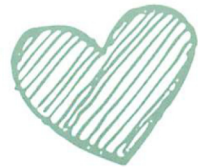
www.understood.org/~/media/972a63a8a93943fcaefe57e515a6b1b7.pdf

List of character strengths with practical suggestions for reinforcing them in children

www.handsonscotland.co.uk/page_pdfs/flourishing/character_strengths_0.pdf

Excellent site for teens and tweens on developing strengths

<http://sourcesofinsight.com/strengths-and-talents/>



Articles on Inclusion

Children as partners in development

www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Post-2015%20Policy%20Brief%202_Child%20participation.pdf

Why Children are Inspiring Social Movements

www.huffingtonpost.com/nancy-gofus/children-inspiring-social-movements_b_1397244.html

Older kids can even be given a say in designing the focus of their learning within carefully set parameters.

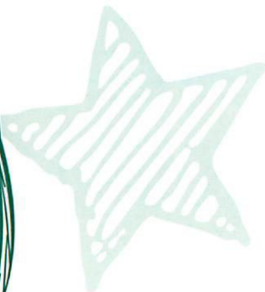
<https://edutopia.org/blog/five-strategies-more-voice-choice-students-rebecca-alber>

Story:

What do I like about me?

An intermediate school teacher asked her students to write a couple of things they each liked about themselves. Then each was invited to read one or two things out loud for the rest of the class. Lucy could not come up with even one thing she liked about herself. The teacher admitted that it was a risk, but she asked the rest of the class to help her out. The response was overwhelming. "Lucy is always kind." "She has very neat handwriting." "I like the way she takes turns and gives other kids a chance." "Lucy is a good listener." "She's good at reading out loud."

The class felt good about helping Lucy see so many strengths, and Lucy just beamed at being so affirmed by her classmates.



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Quick Tips

- Young egos are fragile. Handle with care.

- Teach empathy by practicing empathy.

- Offer a variety of assignments.

- Belly breathing.

- Do not do for your children what they can do for themselves.

- "When the going gets tough, the tough go to bed."

- Find what you love, do it whenever you can

"The messages children give themselves are shaped by the messages they are receiving from the people and the environment around them."

- Include children's voices in your plans.

- Listen closely. Question to be sure you understand.

- Everyone has a job from the toddler up.

- Remove an agitated or distressed child from stimulation until they regain control.

- Do your happy dance. Children enjoy seeing you happy.

- Make opportunities for meaningful engagement.
 - ~ Participation in service days
 - ~ Collecting food for a food pantry
 - ~ Visiting a home for the elderly
 - ~ Writing letters to servicemen