

'Ingredients' for Promoting Mental Health in Children and Adolescents

Joni Orazio, MD, DFAPA

We live in a complex world with increasing rates of mental illness in children. Children need love, emotional support, guidance, spirituality, safety, encouragement, security and a healthy community. What more do they need? The following 'ingredients' are recommended.

Don't be a 'perfect parent'. Parents will make mistakes. How you handle them has a tremendous impact on your relationship with your child. Own it, learn from it, and move on. Feeling guilty will alter your good judgment and cause insecurity in parental decisions.

Allow your children to **fail**; it's necessary. Failure allows them to learn, become confident, independent, resilient and teaches them to persevere.

Limit **social media**. Wait until your children mature and appear capable of handling the inevitable ugly comments, vulgarity, sexism, sexual material, flawless filtered pictures, and knowledge of exclusion from peer activities. Social media drama is unhealthy, so implement breaks each day, and make it a bedtime rule to place your child's cell phone in another room to prevent sleep disturbance and reduce mobile dependence.

Limit **video games** to 2 hours a day on weekends and less on weekdays. When children play video games, excitatory neurochemicals are released. Their brains

become acclimated to this excitation, and they'll find activities that don't produce this stimulation unfulfilling, unsatisfying and boring. Ultimately, this is reflected in children's' motivation for learning. How are educators expected to compete with this excitement, despite innovative teaching methods they use?

Feed your children **healthy food**. Often, society promotes refined and processed foods. Our brains run on the fuel we eat. Many mental health issues improve on a healthy diet with the developing brain being especially vulnerable.

Cultivate a life of **physical activity** whether organized sports, playing basketball in the driveway or taking a walk. Live this by example. Physical activity reduces the risk of mental and physical problems and creates a healthier sense of body confidence and image.

Cultivate **diverse interests**, such as learning a musical instrument, community service, hobbies, outdoor activities, or mastering something new, such as painting or writing poetry. A variety of interests gives them options and promotes diversity in peer groups.

Finally, don't promote **entitlement**. Not earning or working hard to receive material things, or worse, receiving despite problematic behavior is ill advised. An entitled child can become an adult who is self-centered, lack empathy, diminish emotional intelligence and chronic unhealthy relationships, as well as an empty parent wallet.