

# NIH News in Health

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## Positive Parenting Building Healthy Relationships With Your Kids

Parents have an important job. Raising kids is both rewarding and challenging. You're likely to get a lot of advice along the way, from doctors, family, friends, and even strangers. But every parent and child is unique. Being sensitive and responsive to your kids can help you build positive, healthy relationships together.

"Being a sensitive parent and responding to your kids cuts across all areas of parenting," says Arizona State University's Dr. Keith Crnic, a parent-child relationship expert. "What it means is recognizing what your child needs in the moment and providing that in an effective way."

This can be especially critical for infants and toddlers, he adds. Strong emotional bonds often develop through sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting in the first years of life. For instance, holding your baby lovingly and responding to their cries helps build strong bonds.

**Building Bonds** • Strong emotional bonds help children learn how to manage their own feelings and behaviors and develop self-confidence. They help create a safe base from which they can explore, learn, and relate to others.

Experts call this type of strong connection between children and their caregivers "secure attachment." Securely attached children are more likely to be able to cope with challenges like poverty, family instability, parental stress, and depression.



A recent analysis shows that about 6 out of 10 children in the U.S. develop secure attachments to their parents. The 4 out of 10 kids who lack such bonds may avoid their parents when they are upset or resist their parents if they cause them more distress. Studies suggest that this can make kids more prone to serious behavior problems. Researchers have been testing programs to help parents develop behaviors that encourage secure attachment.

**Being Available** • Modern life is full of things that can influence your ability to be sensitive and responsive to your child. These include competing priorities, extra work, lack of sleep, and things like mobile devices. Some experts are concerned about the effects that distracted parenting may have on emotional

bonding and children's language development, social interaction, and safety.

If parents are inconsistently available, kids can get distressed and feel hurt, rejected, or ignored. They may have more emotional outbursts and feel alone. They may even stop trying to compete for their parent's attention and start to lose emotional connections to their parents.

"There are times when kids really do need your attention and want your recognition," Crnic explains. Parents need to communicate that their kids are valuable and important, and children need to know that parents care what they're doing,

he says.

It can be tough to respond with sensitivity during tantrums, arguments, or other challenging times with your kids. "If parents respond by being irritable or aggressive themselves, children can mimic that behavior, and a negative cycle then continues to escalate," explains Dr. Carol Metzler, who studies parenting at the Oregon Research Institute.

According to Crnic, kids start to regulate their own emotions and behavior around age three. Up until

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then, they depend more on you to help them regulate their emotions, whether to calm them or help get them excited. “They’re watching you to see how you do it and listening to how you talk to them about it,” he explains. “Parents need to be good self-regulators. You’re not only trying to regulate your own emotions in the moment, but helping your child learn to manage their emotions and behavior.”

As kids become better at managing their feelings and behavior, it’s important to help them develop coping skills, like active problem solving. Such skills can help them feel confident in handling what comes their way.

“When parents engage positively with their children, teaching them the behaviors and skills that they need to cope with the world, children learn to follow rules and regulate their own feelings,” Metzler says.

“As parents, we try really hard to protect our kids from the experience of bad things,” Crnic explains. “But if you protect them all the time and they are not in situations where they deal with difficult or adverse circumstances, they aren’t able to

develop healthy coping skills.”

He encourages you to allow your kids to have more of those experiences and then help them learn how to solve the problems that emerge. Talk through the situation and their feelings. Then work with them to find solutions to put into practice.

**Meeting Needs** • As children grow up, it’s important to remember that giving them what they need doesn’t mean giving them everything they want. “These two things are very different,” Crnic explains. “Really hone in on exactly what’s going on with your kid in the moment. This is an incredibly important parenting skill and it’s linked to so many great outcomes for kids.”

Think about where a child is in life and what skills they need to learn at that time. Perhaps they need help managing emotions, learning how to behave in a certain situation, thinking through a new task, or relating to friends.

“You want to help kids become confident,” Crnic says. “You don’t want to aim too high where they can’t get there or too low where they have already mastered the skill.” Another way to boost confidence while strengthening your relationship is to let your kid take the lead.

“Make some time to spend with your child that isn’t highly directive, where your child leads the play,” advises Dr. John Bates, who studies children’s behavior problems at Indiana University Bloomington. “Kids come to expect it and they love it, and it really improves the relationship.”

Bates also encourages parents to focus on their child’s actual needs instead of sticking to any specific parenting principles.

It’s never too late to start building a healthier, more positive



## Wise Choices Tips for Connecting with Your Kids

- Catch kids showing good behavior and offer specific praise.
- Give children meaningful jobs at home and positive recognition afterward. Don’t be overly critical; instead, help them improve their skills one step at a time.
- Use kind words, tones, and gestures when giving instructions or making requests.
- Spend some time every day in warm, positive, loving interaction with your kids. Look for opportunities to spend time as a family, like taking after-dinner walks or reading books together.
- Brainstorm solutions to problems at home or school together.
- Set rules for yourself for mobile device use and other distractions. For instance, check your phone after your child goes to bed.
- Ask about your child’s concerns, worries, goals, and ideas.
- Participate in activities that your child enjoys. Help out with and attend their events, games, activities, and performances.

relationship with your child, even if things have gotten strained and stressful. “Most importantly, make sure that your child knows that you love them and are on their side,” Metzler says. “For older children, let them know that you are genuinely committed to building a stronger relationship with them and helping them be successful.”

By being a sensitive and responsive parent, you can help set your kids on a positive path, teach them self-control, reduce the likelihood of troublesome behaviors, and build a warm, caring parent-child relationship. ■

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**Web  
Links**

For more about building healthy parent-child relationships, see “Links” in the online article:  
[newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/09/positive-parenting](http://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/09/positive-parenting)

# Hurtful Emotions

## Understanding Self-Harm

People deal with difficult feelings in all sorts of ways. They may talk with friends, go work out, or listen to music. But some people may feel an urge to hurt themselves when distressed. Harming or thinking about harming yourself doesn't mean you have a mental disorder. But it is an unhealthy way to cope with strong feelings. Finding new ways to cope can help you get through difficult times.

Some unhealthy ways people may try to relieve emotional pain include cutting, burning, or hitting themselves. These behaviors can be difficult to detect. People usually keep them a secret. Wounds can often be treated at home and covered with clothing or jewelry.

"The largest percentage of people who engage in non-suicidal self-injuring behaviors are teenagers," says Dr. Jennifer Muehlenkamp, an NIH-funded psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Around 2 out of 10 teens and college-aged students report trying this behavior at least once.



### Wise Choices Ways to Cope

There's no right or wrong way to deal with intense emotions. If you're feeling distressed:

- Talk with friends.
- Watch a funny movie or read a comforting book.
- Listen to music.
- Get active. Go for a walk or get some exercise.
- Distract yourself with any activity or hobby you love.
- Avoid smoking, drinking, and other risky behaviors.
- Take care of your body. Eat and drink well. Get enough sleep.
- Realize it's okay to cry it out.

Those are the key ages because youths are changing environments, Muehlenkamp explains. "Transitioning into college or from junior high into high school creates a lot of potential change. You lose the familiarity of your social group, and your social support might shift. There's a lot of new stress and pressures."

People who are anxious, are depressed, or have an eating disorder are also more likely to turn to self-injuring behaviors. So are those in sexual minority groups who experience discrimination and bullying, such as those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual.

"Self-injury is a sign that someone is struggling," says Muehlenkamp. "Many youths transition out of it. But those who engage in it more repetitively and chronically may benefit from a direct clinical intervention."

If you're a parent or caregiver who's concerned, look for frequent unexplained injuries and clues like bandages in trash cans. Watch to see if the person wears appropriate clothing for the weather. Someone who is self-harming may wear long pants or sleeves to cover their injuries, even when it's hot.

"The way most people find out is the person who is self-injuring will disclose it," Muehlenkamp says. They often tell a friend or a sibling first.

If someone confides in you, "your first reaction is essential to whether or not they will seek help,"



Muehlenkamp explains. "Be as nonreactive and nonjudgmental as possible."

Not everyone who self-injures is suicidal. But the only way to know is to ask. If they express any suicidal thinking, get them connected with a mental health provider. You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for advice.

Parents can open conversations with their kids by asking them if they've heard of self-harming behaviors or if they know friends who do it. If a friend has confided in them, they can offer to go talk to a trusted adult with their friend to get them help.

There are no medications for treating self-injuring behaviors. But some medications can help treat mental disorders that the person may be dealing with, like depression or anxiety. Mental health counseling or therapy can also help you learn new ways to cope with emotion. See the Wise Choices box for tips on handling strong emotion. ■



### Web Links

For more about self-harming behaviors, see "Links" in the online article : [newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/09/hurtful-emotions](https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/09/hurtful-emotions)



## Health Capsules

For links to more information, please visit our web site and see these stories online.

### Flu Vaccine Skin Patch Tested

Each year, millions of people nationwide catch the flu. The best way to protect yourself is to get a flu vaccine every year. But only about 6 out of 10 children and 4 out of 10 adults got the 2015–2016 flu vaccine.

To help increase these numbers, scientists are trying to develop easier ways to give the flu vaccine. A new study shows that a special skin patch may work as well as a shot with a hypodermic needle. The patch is about the size of a dime and has 100 tiny needles that contain flu

vaccine. The needles are just long enough to pierce skin. Once inside skin, they dissolve within minutes.

NIH-funded researchers compared giving the vaccine using the skin patch to the usual flu shot. About 100 people took part in the study. More than 7 out of 10 people who had the patch said they preferred it to the flu shot.

The researchers analyzed blood samples to see how well the vaccine activated the body's protective responses against the flu. The patch

seemed to work as well as the shot.

The people who got the skin patch didn't report any serious side effects. Some described a slight redness or itchiness where the patch had been.

"This bandage-strip sized patch of painless and dissolvable needles can transform how we get vaccinated," says Dr. Roderic I. Pettigrew, director of NIH's National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering. More studies will be needed to test the safety and effectiveness of the skin patch. ■

### Health Information You Can Trust

When you're searching online for answers to your health questions, you may feel overwhelmed by the number of websites you come across. How do you know which ones to trust? Which websites have reliable and up-to-date information?

First, consider the source. Government websites end in ".gov" and university or other educational institution websites end with ".edu." These are online sources that you can usually trust. If you see ".org" or

".com" at the end of a web address, it may also be a trusted site. However, check it closely to make sure. The information may not be evidence-based. Or, the site may be trying to sell you a drug or service.

Also, find out who is reviewing the health information before it's published. A trusted, credible source will often describe how they review information. For example, NIH's National Cancer Institute (NCI) website says, "Medical experts,

cancer researchers, and editors review the content before it is published to the website."

Third, look for the date. Online health information sources should show when the information was posted, reviewed, or last updated.

NCI's recently updated *Using Trusted Resources* webpage has tips to help you find reliable resources. To read more about trusted resources, visit [www.cancer.gov/using-trusted-resources](http://www.cancer.gov/using-trusted-resources). ■



### Featured Website

#### Alzheimer's Disease Resources

[www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers)

Alzheimer's disease is a brain disorder that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills. Learn about symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment. Caregivers can also

find advice on how to provide everyday care, make the home safer, and respond to changes in communication and behavior.

The screenshot shows the NIH National Institute on Aging website. The main heading is "Alzheimer's Disease & Related Dementias". Below the heading, there is a paragraph of text: "Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia in older adults, affects more than 5 million Americans. Thousands more live with related disorders, including frontotemporal, vascular, Lewy body, and other types of dementia. NIA is the lead federal agency for Alzheimer's disease research. Click the boxes below to learn more." There are six small image thumbnails arranged in two rows of three. The top row thumbnails are labeled: "Basics of Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia", "Causes of Alzheimer's Disease", and "Symptoms and Diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease". The bottom row thumbnails show various people and scenes related to dementia research and care.

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