

# Mood Hygiene – *Child*

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CHOC CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

It is important to teach our children how to keep their minds and bodies healthy. The following strategies can help prevent problems with depression, anxiety and other difficult mental health symptoms. Learning healthy living skills in childhood can help children manage all the stresses in life as they grow into adulthood. For those children and adolescents who have mental health symptoms already, these strategies can help manage symptoms and lessen some of the challenges they may face.

## Sleep

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Lack of sleep can lead to some of the same symptoms as mental health problems, such as problems with concentration, being tired (fatigued), low mood. For children who have a mental health diagnosis, too little sleep can also make worse.

People are often surprised how much sleep children need at different ages. As you can see, most children don't get as much sleep as they need:

- Infant                    14 – 15 hours
- Toddler                 12 – 14 hours
- Preschool               11 – 13 hours
- School age             10 – 11 hours
- Adolescents            9.5 hours

If sleep is a problem, there are some behavior changes that can help to make sleep easier, called "Sleep Hygiene." These can be useful to try as a first step.

## Activity/Exercise

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Exercise can be very effective in helping decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety. Children's bodies are made to move and they need a certain amount of movement each day. Without that activity children can have symptoms that may look like a mental health problem, or have their mental health symptoms get worse. Experts say children should have at least 60 minutes a day of activity (like running, playing outdoors, playing a sport).

## Diet/Nutrition

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Children's and adolescent's bodies are continuing to grow. Their bodies need a variety of different foods, including vegetables, fruits, protein (which can be meat or vegetable), and carbohydrates. When people are feeling depressed or anxious, they often crave foods that are high in carbohydrates, sugars and/or fat (donuts, chips, cookies, etc.). In the end, however, those food end up leaving kids feeling more depressed and anxious as their bodies process those foods. Having a more balanced diet (any food is OK, but all in moderation) will help children feel more comfortable and energetic.

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## Coping Skills

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We don't always think about teaching children healthy coping skills, but these can also be very helpful in decreasing mental health symptoms. Healthy coping skills can include:

- Teaching children how to identify, name and talk about their feelings (all feelings are OK, it's just what you do with them that can be unhelpful)
- Teaching children how to take deep full breaths to help their body calm down
- Talking with children about how to solve problems (but let the children tell you what they might do and guide them rather than tell them).
- Give targeted positive feedback to your children when you see them using positive skills or developing good social skills (help them to know what they should be doing)
- Help children face their fears, give them coping strategies (such as breathing, challenge their negative thinking) and help them be successful
- Help children identify healthy ways to deal with anger (draw an angry picture, play with clay, use words to express self, go outside and run around)
- For some families, mindfulness and/or yoga can be helpful coping strategies

## Screen Time

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The American Academy of Pediatrics provides information on the amount of time that children spend in front of screens (TV, smart phone, video-games) and there is some evidence that too much time (more than 1 – 2 hours per day) can lead to problems with weight gain and other symptoms. Parents may want to watch and be sure children are doing other healthy behaviors (activity, eating healthy) and decide how much screen time children should have.

## Social Media

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Adolescents may seem attached to their phone and social media (Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the top 4 sites in 2017). Social media can help teens connect with others and develop communities, but it can also have a downside. In fact, 43% of adolescent girls say they couldn't go a whole day without their phones. Unfortunately, there is some evidence that too much social media use can lead to increases in feeling down and/or anxious. Teens can sometimes walk away feeling much worse about themselves. It is important for parents to monitor children's and teen's use of social media and talk to them about how they feel after using it. Don't be worried to limit their usage if you see it causing problems.