

DROP IN ARTICLE: PARENTS

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We all remember the drama of school and how hard it could be sometimes. And that was before the internet! Raising a child today is hard, it doesn't come with a manual, and often, we feel like we are winging it.

We know kids today are dealing with some heavy stuff -- cyber-bullying, body shaming, community violence, abuse, neglect, unstable home lives, drug exposure, sexual orientation, immigration issues and more.

Kids can be moody, hard to read, and don't always want to talk. Emotions are a basic part of the human experience, but sometimes we struggle with how to deal with them effectively. Kids aren't any different.

Kids and teens are dealing with real problems and complicated emotions. Sometimes they act out in school or in other ways at home because they have yet to learn the right coping skills. So how can parents work with their child to help them process their emotions appropriately and better understand what's going on in their lives, so that misbehavior can hopefully be avoided or addressed?

While we can't completely shield our children from all the stressful or traumatic situations they may be facing, we can help them learn to manage their emotions and reactions in ways that cultivate resilience. Equipping them with appropriate coping skills for when they are struggling with emotions leads to better mental and physical health in adulthood.

Mental Health America's 2017 Back to School Toolkit aims to increase emotional intelligence and self-regulation through materials for parents, school personnel, and young people. Visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net/back-school to learn more.

It's hard as parents to know how to approach a child who is struggling with emotional or behavioral issues. If you are concerned about whether a specific behavior is doing harm, it's important not to ignore it. Encourage communication, let your child know that they can talk to you, provide them with an environment that is safe and supportive. Listen. Try not to overreact. And remember what it was like to be a kid. Oftentimes they need your help, but don't know quite how to ask for it. Be patient, but address serious issues head-on.

By providing supportive environments and teaching children and teens to recognize their emotions and address them in healthy ways, we can change lives.

If you think your child is going through emotional or behavioral issues, MHA has an online screen that parents can take to see if their child is at risk: www.mhascreening.org and tips and information to help you get started with that important conversation with your child at <http://bit.ly/talk2teens>.

There are also serious signs that someone is in crisis and needs more immediate help. These include thoughts or plans of hurting oneself or another person. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text "MHA" to 741741 or call 911.

Just like physical illnesses, treating mental health problems early-before Stage 4-can help to prevent more serious problems from developing in the future. Start the conversation. Your child will be glad you did.