



## **Dr. Miho Counseling Room**

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### **Parent Advice: 10 tips to promote children's mental health**

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#### **1. Active Listening**

Active listening is a key factor in parenting as it helps to foster children's self-esteem. When you do active listening, it is important to look into their eyes and listen to their stories seriously. It is also important to focus on their "feelings" rather than the actual content of the talk, and try not to give any advice. Validating children's feelings is not to be confused with allowing the children's feelings to dominate family decisions. When children acknowledge their feelings are heard, they are able to feel that they are accepted just the way they are and it will help them to trust and love themselves truly. As a result, it would facilitate children's positive personality development. It may be helpful to try 20 minutes of active listening a few times per week. During this time, parents are advised not to teach anything or attempt to correct irrational thoughts, but to just relax and listen to the children. When an issue to be addressed arises during the active listening time, it can be done separately after the active listening time.

#### **2. Child-centered play / creative arts activities**

A 20-minute, child-centered play time in one on one can be done as a replacement for active listening especially for younger children. Play functions as the language of children as they are developing their language skills and are not able to fully express their emotions well in language. With preadolescents/adolescents, creative arts (i.e. drawing, coloring, clay, origami, sewing, craft, cookery, music, dance) may be used as they are more age-appropriate activities. Play/creative arts activities are very important for children of this time, particularly as they live in the modern society where children and adults heavily rely on receptive means - gaining information and entertaining through television or internet. Children and adolescents' feelings are healed by expressing their complex emotions through play and creative arts as play/activity is

a creative work, not “receptive” work. In the play/activity time, it is very important not to teach or evaluate products when parents work with children. Looking at what they made and how they played, parents can say some positive, short comments such as, “beautiful!” or “well done!” Even if you have several children in your family, your effort for arranging an individual time for play/activity is important. It will show some positive changes if you continue working with them.

### 3. ”I” Message

An “I-Message” is an effective way of communicating with children and adults. The term was coined by Dr. Thomas Gordon, a clinical psychologist from the U.S. When parents attempt to address a concern with children, as they may also be overwhelmed emotionally, they may occasionally use expressions as, “Why did you do that? ” or “You should have not done that!” Instead of such expressions emphasizing “you”, Dr. T. Gordon encouraged to use an “I-Message” which focuses on “my” feelings. A formula of an “I-Message” is "I feel (emotion) when (state the behavior) because (impact on me). Next time (make a request)." When parents communicate with children through “I-Message” calmly, with a monotone voice, the children may feel that they are not judged or blamed and they may understand their parents’ intention more clearly.

### 4. Choice Theory Talk

Choice Theory Talk is a communication approach developed by U.S psychiatrist W. Glasser. One of the characteristics of this approach is to make children understand that they own their behavior through a pattern of communication emphasizing “choice”. Instead of telling children, “If you don’t study, your grades will drop!” parents can say, “If you choose not to study, you choose to have poor grades.” Consistent talking to children in this way may help them naturally feel that their own choices affect the results they face, and they learn to accept responsibility for their actions.

### 5 . Praise more than correcting

Fostering self-esteem is the foundation for building children’s motivation. When children are praised with specificity and timeliness, they come to understand how to value and love themselves truly and they become motivated in various aspects of their lives. There is a research-based formula of “14 positives to every 1 correction (14:1)”. According to the theory of play therapy, any child is tired mentally more or less because they are “taught” all the time by adults. They are taught in school by teachers and when they go home, they are taught by parents. When children are just “taught” all the time, they may think that they are criticized. Also, if they feel they are compared with other children, they may be discouraged and start blaming themselves. Accepting children just the way they are and praising them more than correcting with specificity and timely may help their self-esteem increase.

## 6. Goal setting

It is important to help your children to set big goals as well as small goals. It is beneficial if parents work with children on setting home rules, a day/weekly schedule, and then deciding rewards and consequences together. If children have an issue with working on things on time, counting numbers, using a timer, or using different background music for differentiating activities may help children to keep up on each task given within the requested time-framing.

## 7. Finding a niche

Children feel motivated with their academic work and other areas in their lives, and become more confident when they find what they can really enjoy and be proud of doing. It is important for parents to continue searching for their children's "niches" through exploring their favorite non-academic, extra-curricular activities and hobbies.

## 8. HALT

HALT stands for **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, **T**ired. When children are experiencing one of the states, we should take extra caution in working with them and it is best not to address a concern to them. If they are hungry, they should eat first, if they are tired, they should rest first, if they are angry, they should be provided with enough time and space to process their anger, if they are lonely, you should show your love and care through hugging or active listening. When children are settled and out of the HALT system, you can talk to them about your concerns.

## 9. Mindful practice

Mindful practice is the activity which allows you to have a quiet, calming time like meditation or contemplation. The idea is to shift your attention from your busy chaotic everyday matter, to your "here and now" experience and accept the reality as it is. Listening to quiet music in a dimly lit room using a candle, you can close your eyes, do breathing exercises, and have a quiet moment with your child. Doing this mindful practice regularly will help your child learn to emotionally regulate and stay focused.

## 10. Home-school communication

When you notice any behavior change with your child, or if you have any concern about your child, it is important that parents contact the school counselor or homeroom teacher right away. Open communication between school and home will help resolve various issues of children sooner. Parents coming from different cultures to a U.S. education system may hesitate and wonder how and when they can approach the school. If they have such a worry, parents can simply present their concerns, the ways things would be worked out in their cultures, and their wishes to seek the solutions cooperatively with the educational professionals from the U.S. system.