



MENTALLY UNITED

Empowering Mental Wellness and Connecting Communities

CHILDREN AND CARE-GIVERS MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

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Childhood Mental Health: Recognizing Early Signs



Early signs of mental health issues in children can be subtle but important to recognize. These signs may include changes in behavior, emotions, physical health, or social interactions.

Here are some common early signs to watch for:



Persistent sadness or mood swings: A child may seem unusually sad, upset, or angry over extended periods of time.



Excessive worry or fear: They might show signs of anxiety, like being overly worried about separation from caregivers, school, or social situations.



Low self-esteem: Expressing feelings of worthlessness or being overly critical of themselves.



Withdrawal: Avoiding friends, family, or activities they used to enjoy.



Acting out: Showing defiance, aggression, or tantrums that are unusual for the child's age or personality.



Difficulty concentrating: Trouble focusing on schoolwork or daily tasks, often leading to a drop in performance.



Regressive behavior: Acting younger than their age, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or needing excessive reassurance.



Frequent complaints of physical pain: Complaints of stomachaches, headaches, or other unexplained physical symptoms that may be tied to emotional stress.



Changes in appetite or sleep patterns: Either eating too much or too little, or having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much.



Difficulty with social interactions: Struggling to make or keep friends, or withdrawing from social activities and group play.



Fear of social situations: Avoiding school, group events, or parties due to social anxiety or fear of being judged.



Declining school performance: A drop in grades or difficulty completing tasks that were once easy.



Avoidance of school: Frequent absences, complaining about going to school, or showing fear or resistance.



Self-injury: Engaging in harmful behaviors like cutting, scratching, or other forms of self-harm.



Talk of death or suicide: Expressing thoughts about death or suicide, even in passing or as part of a conversation.



Why Early Intervention Matters?



Addressing mental health challenges early can:

- Improve academic performance and social skills.
- Build lifelong coping mechanisms and resilience.
- Reduce the risk of chronic mental health and physical health conditions.
- Enhance relationships and overall quality of life.

Untreated mental health issues in childhood can have far-reaching effects that extend well into adulthood, influencing various aspects of a person's life.

Investing in childhood mental health care not only benefits the individual but also strengthens families, communities, and society as a whole.



How Caregivers Can Support a Child's Mental Wellness:

- Listen actively and validate their feelings without judgment.
- Maintain routines to create a sense of safety and predictability.
- Model healthy coping (deep breathing, naming emotions, taking breaks).
- Check in gently with open-ended questions: "How are you feeling today?"
- Encourage play, creativity, and movement to release emotional energy.
- Limit stressors like overstimulation, negative media, or pressure.
- Teach coping tools like breathing exercises, drawing, or quiet time.
- Support positive social interactions at their pace.
- Use encouraging, non-shaming language during tough moments.
- Seek professional help early if signs persist or worsen.



Supporting Your Child's Mental Wellness: A Caregiver's Guide

Encourage Fun & Connection



- **Spend Quality Time Together:** Engage in activities they enjoy to strengthen your bond.
- **Encourage Hobbies:** Support their interests and passions.
- **Laugh Together:** Humor and playfulness can help relieve stress and strengthen relationships.

Reduce Stigma



- **Normalize Mental Health Talks:** Talk about emotions & mental health openly.
- **Teach Acceptance:** Encourage understanding of diverse experiences and emotions.
- **Reframe Mistakes:** Help them see setbacks as opportunities to learn, not failures.

Work with Professionals



- **Consult a Therapist:** Seek help if your child shows signs of MH challenges.
- **Collaborate with Teachers:** Maintain communication with educators about your child's behavior and performance.
- **Access Resources:** Use community programs, support groups, or hotlines for additional guidance.

Set Boundaries & Expectations



- **Provide Structure:** Set clear and reasonable rules to create a sense of order.
- **Avoid Over-Scheduling:** Ensure they have downtime to relax and recharge.
- **Encourage Independence:** Allow age-appropriate decision-making and problem-solving.

Be a Positive Role Model



- **Practice Self-Care:** Show them the importance of managing your own mental health.
- **Display Resilience:** Demonstrate healthy ways to cope with stress & setbacks.
- **Avoid Negative Behavior:** Minimize conflicts and stress at home that could affect your child.

The Link Between Play and Brain Development






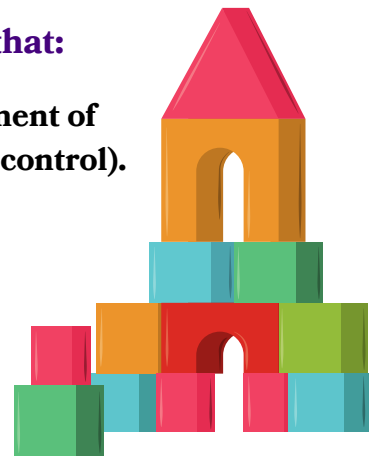
How Playing with Toys Supports Cognitive and Emotional Growth in Children

Play is more than just fun—it's a crucial part of a child's brain development. Research shows that play helps children develop cognitive, emotional, social, and motor skills that lay the foundation for future learning, emotional resilience, and overall mental health.

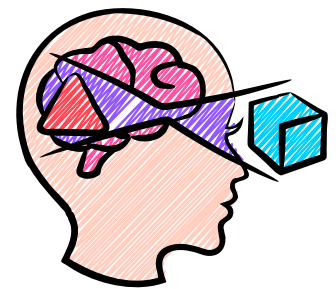
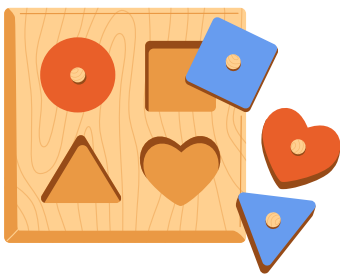
According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, play is essential for healthy brain development and helps children engage and interact with the world around them in meaningful ways.

A 2018 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics emphasized that:

-  Play enhances brain structure and function, supporting the development of executive functioning (like problem-solving, memory, and emotional control).
-  Children who engage in regular, unstructured play demonstrate higher levels of creativity and better social skills.
-  Play is linked to reduced levels of anxiety and stress and helps build emotional resilience



Why Play Matters for Brain Development



Cognitive Development

- Brain Growth and Neural Connections
- Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking
- Cause and Effect Understanding
- Executive Function

Emotional Development

- Emotional Regulation and Self-Control
- Empathy and Understanding
- Building Emotional Resilience
- Stress Reduction

Personality Development

- Enhances Self-Esteem and Confidence
- Improves Fine Motor Skills
- Build Social Skills and Teamwork
- Develops Interests

Why Play Matters for Brain Development

Play is not just about entertainment—it stimulates key areas of the brain responsible for learning, memory, and emotional regulation. The human brain is most flexible during early childhood, and play helps wire neural connections that shape future emotional and cognitive health.

Cognitive Development

Brain Growth and Neural Connections:

- Between birth and age 3, a child's brain creates more than 1 million new neural connections per second (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University).
- Play strengthens these connections by activating different regions of the brain involved in memory, learning, and problem-solving.

Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking:

- Building blocks, puzzles, and games teach children how to identify problems, test solutions, and adapt their approach when things don't work out.
- A 2020 study published in *Developmental Science* found that children who regularly engage in problem-solving games score higher in cognitive flexibility and reasoning.

Cause and Effect Understanding:

- Toys like stacking cups, shape sorters, and pull toys teach children how their actions create specific outcomes.
- This builds a foundation for logical thinking and decision-making.



Emotional and Social Development

Emotional Regulation and Self-Control:

- Dolls, stuffed animals, and imaginary play help children express feelings and practice calming techniques.
- Role-playing allows children to process complex emotions and build coping skills.

Empathy and Understanding:

- Pretend play helps children understand the perspectives and feelings of others.
- A study from the University of Cambridge (2017) found that children who engaged in role-playing games with dolls demonstrated higher levels of empathy and social understanding.

Stress Reduction:

- Play activates the brain's reward system, releasing dopamine and reducing stress hormones like cortisol.
- Engaging in creative and imaginative play is linked to lower rates of childhood anxiety and depression (American Psychological Association).

Building Emotional Resilience:

- Overcoming challenges during play—like rebuilding a fallen tower—helps children develop perseverance and emotional strength.
- Psychologists have found that children who engage in problem-solving play are better able to manage frustration and recover from setbacks.

Language and Communication Development



Vocabulary and Sentence Structure:

- Talking to dolls or using toys to narrate a story helps develop complex language skills.
- A 2019 study from the Journal of Child Language found that children who engage in pretend play develop richer vocabularies and stronger language processing abilities.

Social Communication:

- Playing with others teaches turn-taking, active listening, and non-verbal cues like body language and facial expressions.
- Games like “Simon Says” and group board games enhance social communication

Sensory and Motor Skill Development

Fine Motor Skills:

- Handling small objects like building blocks and action figures helps improve hand-eye coordination and dexterity.
- Art and craft activities like drawing or molding clay support precision and hand strength.

Gross Motor Skills:

- Toys that involve movement—such as ride-on toys, balls, and climbing sets—improve balance, strength, and overall coordination.
- Outdoor play enhances muscle development and physical confidence.

Sensory Processing:

- Toys with different textures, shapes, and colors help children develop sensory awareness.
- Exposure to diverse sensory experiences strengthens the brain's ability to process and respond to the environment.

Play and Mental Health

Reduces Anxiety and Depression:

- Engaging in imaginative play helps children work through fears and anxieties in a safe environment.
- Studies show that children who engage in daily play are less likely to develop mood disorders in adolescence (Child Development Journal, 2020).

Builds Emotional Security:

- Comfort objects like stuffed animals and familiar toys help children develop a sense of safety and trust.
- Psychologists have found that children with strong attachments to comfort objects show greater emotional stability in stressful situations.

Enhances Self-Esteem and Confidence:

- Mastering new games and solving puzzles gives children a sense of accomplishment.
- Positive reinforcement through play helps children build a growth mindset and confidence in their abilities.



WHAT IS PLAY THERAPY?

Play therapy is a form of therapy that utilizes play to help children express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Through play, children can communicate and explore difficult emotions and experiences that may be challenging to express verbally.

BENEFITS FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT:

Emotional Expression

Play provides children with a natural outlet to express their emotions. Through play, children can act out scenarios, express feelings, and process difficult experiences.

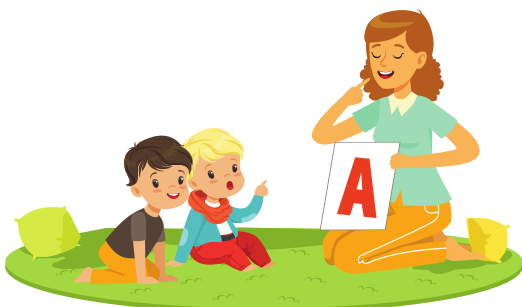


Communication Skills

Play therapy enhances communication skills by encouraging children to express themselves verbally and non-verbally and teaches them to articulate their thoughts and feelings effectively.

Problem-Solving Abilities

It supports social development by interactions with therapist and peers in a structured and supportive setting as children learn important social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and turn-taking.



Problem-Solving Abilities

Play therapy promotes problem-solving skills as children engage in imaginative play and work through various scenarios. It encourages creativity and flexibility in thinking.

How Play Can Help Children Manage Their Anger, Anxiety, Depression and other Emotional Dysregulations



Understanding Emotional Dysregulation in Children

Emotional dysregulation refers to a child's difficulty managing intense emotions like anger, anxiety, or sadness. It's common in children, especially during early developmental years when the brain's emotion regulation systems are still maturing. Children may have emotional outbursts, aggression, tantrums, or withdrawal when they're unable to express or cope with their feelings.

According to the CDC, 1 in 5 children in the U.S. struggles with a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, with anxiety and mood disorders being among the most common. Emotional dysregulation is a key feature of many of these challenges.

Why Parent-Child Playtime Is Powerful for Emotional Regulation

Play isn't just about fun—it's a way for children to process their emotions, bond with caregivers, and develop emotional control. When parents engage in regular, mindful play with their children, they help lay the groundwork for better emotional awareness, communication, and self-soothing. Neuroscience tells us that co-regulation—when a child learns to calm down with the help of a trusted adult—comes before self-regulation. Through play, children feel safe, seen, and supported, which leads to improved brain functioning in areas like the prefrontal cortex, responsible for emotional regulation.

Tips for Parents: Making Playtime Meaningful

1. Let Your Child Take the Lead

Allow your child to choose the activity, toy, or storyline. When you follow their curiosity and creativity, you send the message that their ideas matter—boosting confidence and connection.

2. Reflect Emotions, Not Just Actions

Instead of narrating what your child is doing, try reflecting how they might be feeling. Say things like, "That tower falling seemed frustrating," or "You look proud of that drawing." This helps children connect behaviors with emotions.

3. Speak in Emotionally Clear Language

Use concrete, relatable emotion words like "angry," "nervous," "excited," or "lonely." Avoid complex terms—simplicity helps children recognize and label their feelings more easily.

4. Hold Space, Don't Take Over

It's okay if the play gets messy or emotional. Let your child express big feelings through the story or game, and resist the urge to fix, redirect, or teach too quickly. Simply being present and curious makes a big difference.

5. Create a Daily Playtime Ritual

Make play part of your daily rhythm, like brushing teeth or bedtime. Just 15–20 minutes of dedicated, device-free play—even if it's quiet or repetitive—signals emotional safety and builds lasting trust.

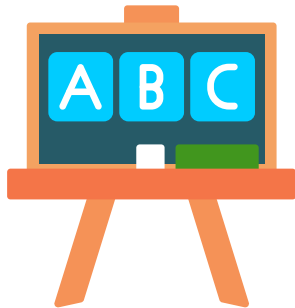


How Play Helps Regulate Emotions?



1. Builds a Safe Emotional Outlet

- Children use pretend play to act out fears, frustrations, or sad feelings in a non-threatening way.
- Dolls, action figures, or imaginary play offer emotional distance, making it easier to express feelings.
- Expressing emotions through storytelling with toys helps children process internal experiences.



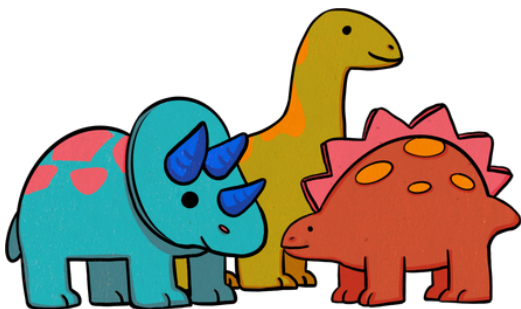
2. Strengthens Emotional Vocabulary

- Playtime is the perfect moment to name emotions: “It looks like your bear is feeling angry—what happened?”
- Labeling emotions helps children learn how to describe and understand what they feel.
- Emotional literacy leads to reduced tantrums and better communication.



3. Models Healthy Coping Strategies

- Parents can model calming strategies during play, like deep breathing, counting, or hugging a stuffed toy.
- By playing out calming scenarios with toys (e.g., “Let’s help Teddy take a deep breath”), children internalize these methods.
- Routine play-based calming rituals reduce fight-or-flight responses over time.



4. Encourages Emotional Rehearsal and Problem-Solving

- Play lets kids rehearse problem-solving: What happens when a toy feels left out? Or when characters get angry?
- Parents can gently guide children through better choices during play: “What could Dino do instead of yelling?”
- This builds conflict resolution skills and reduces impulsive behaviors.



5. Enhances Connection and Co-Regulation

- When children feel emotionally connected to a caregiver, their nervous system becomes regulated through trust and safety.
- Consistent parent-child play builds the foundation for secure attachment and emotional resilience.
- Eye contact, gentle voice, and physical closeness during play regulate a child’s emotional state.

Types of Play That Support Emotional Regulation in Children

PRETEND PLAY:



How It Helps Emotionally: Encourages children to express feelings safely and indirectly. Role-playing allows them to process fear, anger, and sadness while building empathy and understanding.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Act out stories with dolls or figures, create pretend scenarios like “going to the doctor,” or explore emotions through characters in play.

What It Builds Over Time: Empathy, emotional insight, perspective-taking, and storytelling skills

SENSORY PLAY:



How It Helps Emotionally: Regulates the nervous system and provides calming input. Especially helpful for children who are overstimulated, anxious, or struggling to stay grounded.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Offer bins with sand, water, rice, or playdough. Use calming tools like kinetic sand, textured balls, or soft fabrics. Let children explore freely with their hands.

What It Builds Over Time: Body awareness, stress management, improved focus and self-soothing

PHYSICAL (MOVEMENT) PLAY:



How It Helps Emotionally: Releases built-up stress and activates the body’s natural calming systems. Movement helps discharge frustration, anger, or hyperactivity in healthy ways.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Try dancing, animal walks, stretching, yoga for kids, or setting up indoor obstacle courses. Let your child move, jump, spin, and play freely.

What It Builds Over Time: Physical regulation, confidence, emotional reset, and impulse control

Types of Play That Support Emotional Regulation in Children

CREATIVE PLAY:



How It Helps Emotionally: Helps children externalize emotions they don't yet have words for. Art gives form to inner experiences and makes space for emotional release.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Provide crayons, markers, or clay. Let children draw their feelings, create characters, or tell stories through art. Don't focus on the result—focus on expression.

What It Builds Over Time: Self-expression, emotional processing, and resilience through creativity

STRUCTURED GAMES (WITH RULES):



How It Helps Emotionally: Teaches emotional flexibility, frustration tolerance, and coping with disappointment. Supports attention, turn-taking, and learning to stay calm under pressure.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Play simple board games, building blocks, or even cooperative games where the goal is teamwork. Use these moments to model graceful winning—and losing.

What It Builds Over Time: Frustration tolerance, emotional flexibility, social skills, and cooperation

MINDFUL PLAY:



How It Helps Emotionally: Builds awareness of breath, body, and internal states. It slows things down and teaches children how to self-soothe and focus their attention.

Simple Ways to Use It at Home: Practice breathing with a stuffed animal on the belly, slow-motion movements, blowing bubbles, or quiet storytelling with soft music. Keep the mood calm and gentle.

What It Builds Over Time: Self-awareness, emotional regulation, reduced anxiety, and improved attention

30 Parent-Child Activities to Try

1. Go on a quiet hike and talk about what's on your mind
2. Cook a meal together and share stories while preparing it
3. Practice a short guided meditation as a family
4. Do a partner yoga flow or stretches side-by-side
5. Create a calming playlist together and play it during winding-down time
6. Build a family photo timeline and share memories
7. Create a daily check-in ritual using thumbs up/side/down or a 1–10 scale
8. Take turns leading a 3-minute breathing exercise
9. Work on a shared creative project (puzzle, collage, vision board)
10. Take a slow walk and discuss highs and lows of the week
11. Sit outside and journal silently, then share something (or not)
12. Declutter and organize a space together with music in the background
13. Create a “family code word” to use during overwhelming situations
14. Paint or draw something abstract while listening to instrumental music
15. Write each other letters and exchange them at the end of the week
16. Do a "five senses scavenger hunt" indoors—one item per sense
17. Share a story from your childhood and invite them to share theirs
18. Learn something new together (recipe, language phrase, hobby)
19. Build a “coping kit” together to keep at home with sensory or calming tools
20. Practice mirror breathing—face each other and match inhales/exhales
21. Plan a mini "family retreat day" with relaxation, reflection, and movement
22. Build a values chart—list what matters most to each of you
23. Do a grounding nature activity—sit under a tree, touch the earth, stay quiet
24. Co-create a mantra or affirmation for the week and say it together daily
25. Volunteer or do a simple act of kindness together for someone else
26. Visit a local museum or gallery and share what emotions different exhibits bring up
27. Record a voice note to your future selves and play it back later in the year
28. Take turns describing each other's strengths and write them down
29. Plant seeds or care for a plant together, noticing growth over time
30. Set a shared goal for the week and check in daily with no pressure



30 Coping Strategies to Practice as a Family

1. **Tap into rhythm** with body drumming or clapping patterns
2. Take a **sensory reset walk** barefoot on grass or textured surfaces
3. Pair movement with **deep breathing** (e.g., arms up on inhale, down on exhale)
4. Do a **simple massage** or body pressure routine (hands, shoulders, back)
5. Try **dual drawing**—sit side by side and draw without speaking for 15 mins
6. Create a **calming corner** at home, where we could go when feeling stressed
7. Put on a calming or **instrumental song** and stretch in sync
8. Do a three-part **“name your state”** check-in: body, breath, emotion
9. Try a **cold water splash** or cold pack on the back of the neck together
10. Hold a **grounding object** (smooth rock, worry stone) during difficult talks
11. Do a **“movement scan”**: shake or stretch only where tension lives
12. Sit down and name **one thing you’re avoiding** or holding onto
13. Try a **“silent sit”** with a candle or lava lamp for 3–5 minutes
14. Do a **co-journal prompt** and share only what feels comfortable
15. Build a **“calm down choreography”** with a few favorite movements
16. Explore a slow-paced **sensory activity** (e.g., painting with water, sand trays)
17. Create a **family calm box** that you all contribute to and pull from
18. Do **10 slow wall push-ups** together
19. Take turns **squeezing a stress ball** and saying how your body feels after
20. Do a **10-20-30 grounding scan** (10 things you see, 20 sec of stillness, 30 steps together)
21. Use **heavy work**: carry something slightly weighted from one room to another
22. **Hum or sing** in a low tone while sitting together
23. Go for a quiet **nature walk** and take turns pointing out what feels calming
24. **Use scent intentionally** — pass around grounding oils or spices and breathe slowly
25. Say **affirming phrases** like “Right now, I’m safe” while holding hands
26. Take a **family “pause” outside** when emotions are building, with no talking, just noticing
27. **Pair chores with soothing sensory** input (soft music, calming scents, warm lighting)
28. **Walk barefoot** in the backyard or park while focusing on texture and temperature
29. **Sit under a tree** and trace the bark or leaves with your fingers
30. Make a **self affirmation jar** together



Understanding Mom's or Caregiver Guilt

You let your toddler watch cartoons so you can drink your coffee while it's still hot. But as you sit down, guilt creeps in: "I should be playing with them instead. Am I being selfish?" Even though you know you need the break, the guilt lingers.

Mom guilt refers to the feelings of doubt, anxiety, or inadequacy that many mothers experience when they believe they are not meeting societal, familial, or personal expectations of motherhood. Mom guilt is incredibly common, and it's important to remember that being a "good mom" doesn't mean being a perfect mom.

It often stems from a perception of falling short in providing enough time, attention, or care for their children, balancing work and family life, or meeting the "perfect mom" ideal portrayed in society and media.

Common Causes of Mom Guilt



Work-Life Balance

Feeling guilty about returning to work, missing milestones, or not spending enough time with children.



Social Media Comparison

Comparing oneself to idealized portrayals of motherhood online.



Self-Care

Taking time for personal needs, hobbies, or relaxation can sometimes trigger feelings of selfishness.



Work-Life Balance

Guilt over breastfeeding vs. formula feeding, or diet choices for children.



Discipline and Parenting Style

Worrying about being too strict, too lenient, or making parenting "mistakes."

Coping with Mom Guilt: Strategies for Self-Compassion



Name the Guilt, Don't Judge It

Guilt is a natural emotion—it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. Notice the thought, name the feeling, and remind yourself: "I'm doing my best."



Embrace Imperfect Moments

Cartoons so you can drink coffee? That's not failure—it's balance. Rested, emotionally available moms are better equipped to care for their kids.



Replace Unrealistic Standards

Challenge the "perfect mom" narrative. There is no such thing. What matters most is being present, responsive, and human. Your child doesn't need perfection—they need you.



Make Time for Yourself - Without Apology

Self-care isn't selfish, it's essential. Whether it's a hot shower, a walk, or pursuing a passion, caring for your own well-being models healthy boundaries for your child.



Reflect on Your Wins

End the day by asking: What did I do today that helped my child feel safe, seen, or loved? Even the small moments matter deeply.



Talk to Other Moms

You're not alone. Share your experience with trusted friends, support groups, or therapists. Mom guilt loses power when it's spoken aloud and met with compassion.



Practice Reframing

Instead of: "I'm not doing enough."

Try: "I'm doing what I can with what I have today—and that's enough."



Focus on Connection Over Perfection

Kids don't remember every meal, toy, or activity—but they do remember how they felt with you. A five-minute hug, a shared laugh, or a calm bedtime chat can mean more than an entire "perfect" day.



Mentally United Inc. is a grassroots nonprofit based in Denver, dedicated to empowering mental wellness and building stronger communities.

Mentally United empowers individuals and communities by fostering mental wellness, sharing inspiring journeys, and creating inclusive support systems.

Our mission is to destigmatize mental health, making it accessible and embraced by all. We create accessible resources, run supportive community campaigns, and share inspiring stories to ensure that no one feels alone on their mental health journey.

To receive free mental health resources, access wellness seminars, or participate in our podcast or community campaigns for your organization, company, or yourself,

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