

MENTAL HEALTH: A HEALTHY STORY

There is no health without mental health. Mental health is a part of overall health as it changes throughout our lives. One in five students struggle with mental health challenges. It is important to talk to your children about their well-being and be able to [recognize signs of poor mental health](#).

What are signs of poor mental health?

- Avoiding friends and family
- Rebelling against authority
- Not doing things previously enjoyed
- Frequent mood swings
- Getting significantly lower marks in school



How can you support and help your child manage their mental health?

- Encourage your child(ren) to talk about their feelings
- Respect your child(ren)'s feelings
- Stay positive and avoid being judgmental
- Take your child(ren) to your family doctor to explore concerns
- [Learn more about Mental Health tips and information](#)

This material is provided by York Region Public Health. For more information on mental health, please visit york.ca/healthyschools. Your child can speak with a counsellor from Kids Help Phone over the phone or chat online by calling 1-800-668-6868 or kidshelpphone.ca.

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FIVE BREATHS TO RELAX

Feeling stressed out? Deep breathing exercises help to manage emotions and cope with stress by creating a relaxation response. Taking five full breaths, 5 times a day can lead to a happier, healthier and longer life.

This free relaxation tool is beneficial for you and your child because:

- It will help calm and relax
- It can be done anywhere
- It can be done at any time



Try this 2-minute breathing exercise with your child

TAKE 5 BREATHING EXERCISE

1. Start with one hand – stretch your fingers out like a star
2. With your other hand, use your pointer finger to trace the hand that is stretched out
3. Trace your hand: slowly slide up one side and down the other side of each finger
4. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth
5. Now, put the last two steps together: breathe in through your nose as you trace up one finger and breathe out through your mouth as you trace down; keep going until you have finished tracing your hand

Adaptation: Instead of tracing their hand, draw a hand or star on paper and trace it, inhaling and exhaling as they trace the image.

You may also try [other relaxation techniques](#) with your child to help them relax and cope with stress.

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COPING WITH STRESS

Stress is a normal part of everyday life. Stress can be positive, but excessive stress can have an overwhelming and debilitating effect on our lives. The right tools in one's toolbox sets oneself up for success in life, school and relationships.

Tips for parents to help build coping skills:

- Spend time with your child and try to understand how they are feeling
- Do activities as a family; physical activity is an excellent way to burn off stress
- Give your child a chance to calm down; teach them different coping exercises to relax such as deep breathing
- Implement a bedtime routine to help your child wind down at the end of the day
- Ensure your child gets the recommended amount of sleep based on their age; tired children get stressed easier
- Try [activities at home to assist coping with stress](#) (i.e. deep breathing, gratitude)
- Work with your child to recognize the signs of excessive stress

When they feel too much stress, encourage your child to:

- Talk to a friend or trusted adult
- Practice deep breathing
- Get moving – play or do a physical activity
- Play with a pet
- Be creative! Play music, paint, draw or dance
- Stay on top of schoolwork and prioritize workloads
- Ask for help



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Resource: [Promoting resiliency by buffering the impacts of stress](#)

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EMPATHY AND ACTS OF KINDNESS



Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Empathy allows us to respond with compassion by putting ourselves in another person's shoes. Taking the time to understand someone's perspective teaches us to be openminded to the feelings and viewpoints of other individuals.

An act of kindness is an action that is performed to bring happiness to another person. Acts of kindness encourage us to understand the importance of helping others around us and in our community.

BE KIND: Acts of kindness for kids

- **B** – Buy a meal for someone in need
- **E** – Express a smile to someone who is sad
- **K** – Keep it simple: be respectful and say thank you
- **I** – Introduce yourself to a new student at school
- **N** – Notice a positive quality about a friend and give them a compliment
- **D** – Donate gently used clothing items, books, or toys you no longer play with

Why should we practice kindness and empathy?

- Develops our awareness and listening skills
- Teaches us the value of being selfless and helping others
- Fosters positive relationships with others and strengthens existing ones
- Increases our ability to deal with conflict
- Creates kinder people and communities

Resources

- [School Mental Health Ontario: Empathy](#)
- [School Mental Health Ontario: Acts of kindness](#)

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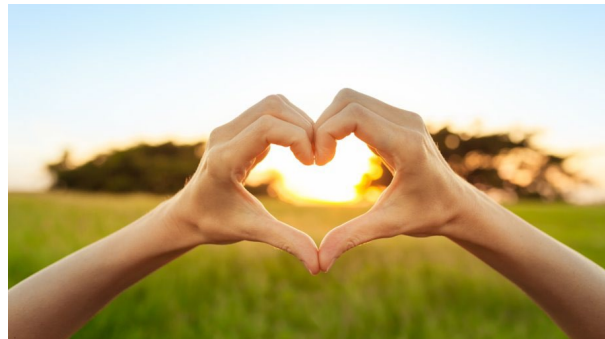
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GRATITUDE: THE BEST ATTITUDE

What is Gratitude?

Gratitude is a feeling of happiness that comes from being grateful for someone or something in your life. It allows us to view the world through a positive lens and respond with kindness, warmth and appreciation. Gratitude has a positive effect on mental health and well-being. When you share or express gratitude to other people, it benefits them, but it also benefits you!



How to practice gratitude with your child

- Set aside a few minutes each day for a daily *gratitude moment*
- Encourage child and participating household member to share 1-2 things they are grateful for
- Incorporate gratitude moments into regular parts of your day (e.g., dinner time, during a walk, bedtime)
- Be creative: Express gratitude by drawing a picture of what you're grateful for or writing it in a journal
- Gratitude jar: Encourage your child to write notes of what they're grateful for and add them to a jar

What are the benefits of practicing gratitude?

- Boosts feelings of positivity and appreciation
- Improves physical health, mental health and wellbeing
- Promotes strong and healthy relationships with others
- Increases ability to deal with challenges and stress
- Builds resiliency

Resource: [School Mental Health Ontario: Expressing Gratitude](#)

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The logo for York Region, featuring a stylized white bird or wing shape above the text "York Region" in a white serif font. The logo is set against a dark blue background that is part of a larger graphic design consisting of overlapping blue shapes.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

A positive social support system includes friendships and relationships that impact a child's mental health, including how they learn and behave. [Having healthy relationships with others](#) can have a positive, life-long impact.

Healthy relationships support children to:

- Make challenging times more manageable
- Improve resiliency
- Develop social skills and learn how to positively relate to others
- Build confidence, self-esteem and a sense of belonging
- Maintain good mental health, which contributes to overall well-being



How to help your child develop healthy relationships

- Model healthy relationships at home
- Encourage your child to participate in group activities and hobbies
- Provide opportunities for social interactions outside of school
- Encourage your child to get to know children from diverse backgrounds and abilities
- Be open and non-judgmental when talking to your child about their friendships

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LET'S TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Talking about mental health can be challenging.

The conversation about mental health can be shaped by factors such as one's cultural background and life experiences.

Talking with your child about their emotions, fears and changes in behaviour creates an environment for open communication and can help guide through life's challenges.



Starting a conversation with your child:

- Remind your child they can share anything with you and assure them you will not judge or be upset with them
- Begin by talking about any changes you have noticed in their behaviour and any comments or observations from their teachers, friends or family
- Tell them you are interested to hear about how they may be feeling
- Pause to give your child a chance to think about what was said before they answer
- Manage your own emotions and do not give up, even if your child pushes you away. Remind them you are there for them and allow them time before you bring it up again
- If your child shares something that worries you, tell them you are happy that they shared this with you and that you will help them. Reassure them you will find the appropriate professional if needed and support them through the process

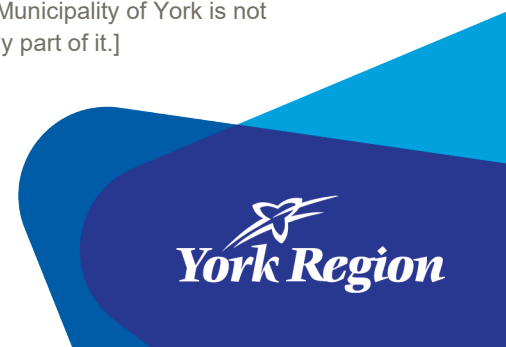
Resources

- [Noticing mental health concerns in your child](#) (School Mental Health Ontario)
- [Find mental health support | ontario.ca](#)
- [How to talk to your child about mental health](#) (School Mental Health Ontario)

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LET'S TALK ABOUT STIGMA

Stigma refers to a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something or someone. Stigma can arise due to a lack of information and fear of the unknown. Misinformation and inaccurate portrayals of people with mental illnesses (e.g., in the media), can further contribute to stigma.

Stigma can limit:

- Employment opportunities
- Safe housing
- Access to health care
- Acceptance within communities
- Relationships



Stigma can negatively impact mental health and contribute to feelings of shame, lower self-esteem, guilt, and limit access to supports and social networks needed to maintain mental health and wellbeing.

Talking about stigma

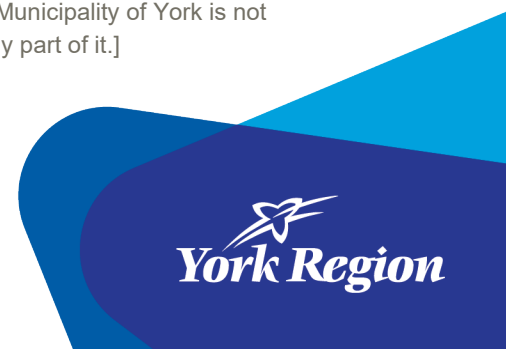
- Accept, respect, and include everyone
- Avoid negative self talk
- Listen to what your child says, step in and encourage positive talk
- Know the facts
- Focus on the positive
- [Support people in their wellness journey and encourage them to seek help when needed](#)
- Be mindful of your own words, [use sensitive and appropriate language](#)

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Resource: [Stigma - Understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination | CAMH](#)

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MENTAL HEALTH & DIGITAL WELL-BEING

Digital technology has increased, and offers opportunities to work, learn, be entertained and stay connected. This increased use can impact mental health and wellbeing.

How do I know if my child's screen time is a concern?

- Spending more time on screens than non-screen activities
- Decreased participation in school, extracurricular activities, friendships, or family life
- Symptoms of excessive use or withdrawal from devices:
 - Irritable, anxious, sad, less interested in activities previously enjoyed, headaches, decreased energy and sleep difficulties
- Overly concerned about their online presence (e.g., number of “likes” on social media posts)
- Spending money online, engaging in online gambling and gaming purchases



What can I do to manage my child's screen time?

Healthy screen use can be encouraged by following the [4 M's of Digital Wellbeing](#):

1. **Manage** screen use through plans, rules, and limits
2. **Meaningful** screen use, so that time spent online serves a purpose
3. **Model** healthy screen use, as you are their best example. Such as screen-free mealtimes to enjoy eating and connecting with one another
4. **Monitor** for signs of problematic screen use and appropriate content

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Resources

[Dear Parents - Screen Use Conversation Resource \(screentimenetwork.org\)](http://screentimenetwork.org)

[Helping Your Child Manage Digital Technology](#) School Mental Health Ontario

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RESILIENCY

Resiliency is using a mix of positive qualities and skills to cope with stressful everyday experiences, which can contribute to success in life. Resiliency allows people to bounce back from negative events, by asking for help, knowing their own strengths and weaknesses, and taking care of themselves.

Resiliency includes:

- Competence in developing problem-solving skills
- Emotional skills
- Optimism
- Relationships and knowing how to reach out for help



Tips to help raise a resilient child

- Actively listen and be present when your child is talking with you. Make time to connect with them, such as eating a meal, sharing a laugh, or doing a fun activity together
- Encourage your child to share their feelings and respect their emotions. Role model healthy ways of managing stress and help your child label and describe their feelings
- Develop confidence, skills, and self-esteem by participating in opportunities that build on your child's interests and strengths, such as: helping with chores, organized activities and setting goals
- Role model positive thinking by practicing daily gratitude. Offer positive and realistic ideas for looking at challenges

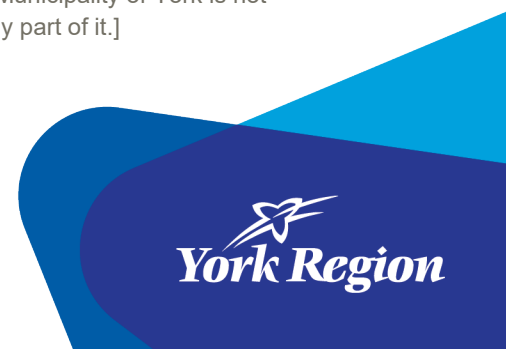
Resources

- [Psychology Foundation of Canada: Parent's Tips and Strategies](#)
- [Psychology Foundation of Canada: Kids Can Cope – Parenting Resilient Children at Home and at School](#)
- [Personal Resiliency Tips](#) School Mental Health Ontario
- [Tips and Strategies \(strongmindsstrongkids.org\)](#):
 - [Preschool and Kindergarten Toolbox Activities](#) available in [English](#), [Spanish](#), [Tamil](#) and [Chinese](#)
 - [Kids Have Stress Too!](#) Tip Sheets available in [English](#), [Arabic](#), [Spanish](#), [Gujarati](#), [Hindi](#), [Russian](#), and [Tamil](#)

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A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

The proper amount of sleep can:

- Boost the immune system
- Help to regulate appetite and metabolism
- Improve memory
- Stabilize mood and reduces anxiety
- Support faster growth and development



How much sleep do children need?

- Ages 6 to 12 years require 9 to 12 hours of sleep
- Teens require 8 to 10 hours of sleep

Signs of lack of sleep:

- Difficulty waking up in the morning
- Falling asleep in class
- Trouble with memory, concentration and motivation
- Irritable or depressed

How do you encourage your child to get the most out of sleep?

- Set up a regular routine and bedtime to prepare the mind and body for sleep
- Encourage your child to be physically active daily
- Avoid caffeine (pop, energy drinks, chocolate) especially past mid-afternoon
- Avoid napping (if needed limit naps to 30 minutes and do not nap in the evening)
- Limit the use of electronics (cellphones, TV) and turn off bright lights one hour before bedtime

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Resources

[Kids Help Phone: Get Better Sleep with These Tips](#)

[Canadian Pediatric Society: Teens and Sleep](#)

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