LIFESTYLE

I'm a child psychiatrist - my six simple ways to protect your kids' mental health

As charities call on the government to acknowledge the scale of the crisis in young people's mental health, Dr Jon Goldin, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, advises parents about what they can do to support their children



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Dr Jon Goldin

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A new study has found that more than £1trn will be lost in future earnings because of the mental health crisis in young people. The four charities behind the new research – the Centre for Mental Health, the Centre for Young Lives, the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, and YoungMinds – has launched the Future Minds mental health campaign and called on the Government to acknowledge the scale of the crisis in children's mental health. In the meantime, what can be done to help prevent that from happening?

Is there a mental health crisis among young people? Sadly, yes, and I believe it's due to several factors. It's not easy being a young person in today's society. Young people are facing a number of pressures, the most obvious one being social media.

The difficulties of social media and screens for young users include the fear of missing out, or worse, being deliberately excluded, and watching others living a life they feel they can't keep up with. They're also exposed to pictures of influencers looking flawless and blemish free, and left feeling like they don't match up.

According to figures from Ofcom, in 2024, nine in 10 children in the UK own a mobile phone by the age of 11. Phones impact other areas that affect children's mental health, such as sleep and face to face time with others, both of which are very protective for mental health.

They also expose our children to pornography at an ever increasingly young age, even if we don't like to think about it, and content around eating disorders or self harm. So much is available to our children, and big tech isn't doing nearly enough to install age verifications on their search engines so the internet knows the age of the person using it.

There are plenty of helpful sites that talk about what your child might be seeing online, including YoungMinds and Togetherall.

I often advise parents to make their child charge their phone in the kitchen overnight, so they're not tempted to stay up late on their phone. And I suggest that they model this behaviour themselves, and to think about their own behaviour around phones.

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If the grown-ups in the family are glued to their phones, the children will be more likely to follow suit. Decide as a family to put away your phones in the hour before bed, and read, listen to music, or take a bath instead, which calms the brain and leads to better sleep.

Encourage your children to have "green time" instead of screen time, and where possible to replace time spent on their phones with a half-hour walk in nature, or playing sport.

Studies show that in teenagers with depression, regular exercise is more beneficial than antidepressants. Sport in particular is very helpful, and as well as the physical benefits, it protects their mental health because it teaches them resilience and responsibility, how to win, how to lose, and gives them a sense of identity, and a community to be part of.

The basics – sleep, exercise, fresh air and a sensible diet – are very powerful in protecting our children's mental health. Ultra-processed foods and caffeinated drinks should be kept to a minimum, if possible.

Having said that, it would be remiss of me to talk about children's mental health and not mention the fact that the big gap between rich and poor is associated with mental health outcomes. For a child, financial pressures, parents not working, or living in an area of high crime, can be associated with poor mental health.

CAHMS, which stands for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and is the NHS service that assesses and treats young people with mental health difficulties, is sadly extremely stretched right now.

The resources simply aren't there to make the service accessible for all children in the UK, and I'd like to see mental health services more available to all, including via drop-in centres and more availability in schools.

However, what tends to happen in schools is that one person takes on the role of the mental health support lead, but due to inadequate resources they may well burn out and eventually leave because of the demands placed upon them.

I believe that schools need to focus more on their student's overall wellbeing and not just be places to get good grades. I'd particularly like to see younger children being tested less at school, with fewer exams, which I believe are not helpful for their mental health.

In Scandinavian countries, there is less focus on testing younger children and more practices like forest school, where children are out in the fresh air, learning through foraging and being in nature, and having lots of natural movement breaks, which boosts their mental health.

Something I'm often asked is whether talking to our children about mental health and anxiety is somehow making it worse. On the one hand, it's good that there is more awareness now about children's mental health, and when well-known people talk about their own experiences it helps reduce the stigma.

On the other hand, I don't believe that normal emotions should be labelled or medicalised. We should try to normalise everyday human feelings, like feeling anxious sometimes or feeling low such as when a child is experiencing friendship issues.

An issue only becomes a disorder when it's significantly affecting their day-to-day living or how they function at school or home. That's when I would advise talking to a mental health practitioner. It's also worth seeing how the protective basics that I've talked about above affect their mood. If those things still don't help, that's when it might be time to seek help.

Lastly, I always advise parents to try to keep the lines of communication with their children open. We can't force them to confide in us, especially as they reach their teenage years, but it helps them to know there's a trusted adult in their life they can talk to without fear or judgement, who won't dismiss their worries, but who also won't overreact and panic about them either.

And that doesn't have to be a parent – it can be a grandparent, godparent

And that doesn't have to be a parent – it can be a grandparent, godparent, trusted teacher, or family friend. And when your child does open up, learn to really listen to them. You may not have all the answers, but feeling heard will help them enormously."

Six simple ways to boost your child's mental health, according to Dr Jon Goldin

1. Less screen time
2. A good night's sleep
3. Good food
4. Fresh air
5. Exercise
6. Time spent with friends and loved ones

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