

Under pressure

How church workers can help to support children's mental health



Kate Middleton, a psychologist, church leader, and one of the directors of the Mind and Soul Foundation is passionate about well-being and what it looks like to flourish even when we face challenges and tough times. She loves to combine biblical wisdom with psychology and neuroscience to help us understand our minds better.

The pressures and experiences of recent years mean that mental health is one of the top concerns for parents and church leaders. But as awareness rises, what does it look like to practically support children's mental health without becoming drawn into narratives and actions which may not be helpful? How can we support children as they grow, and really make a difference?

Protect your mind...

Emotions – even difficult ones – are part of the healthy functioning mind, but just like physical health, some people's situation, background or experience may mean they are particularly vulnerable to becoming unwell. Too often we wait until emotional challenges have become crises before we act.

Proverbs 4:23 says that of all the things we guard, we should protect our mind, for life flows from it (Common English Bible). This is particularly important for children, whose minds are rapidly developing; processing and learning from experiences they have of the world around them.

Childhood is a season of beautiful potential, for learning about emotions, relationships, and practical skills for managing emotions healthily. However, many will experience firsthand less than positive examples of how to respond to difficult emotions. It is really important to take opportunities to teach children about emotions; from the basics of helping them name and recognise emotions, through to practical responses that model how to manage emotions well to avoid being overwhelmed.

Living WELL

The best mental health support for children aims to help them to live WELL, not just support them once they are ill. As people of God, we have a vital story to tell children and parents alongside the narratives they might hear elsewhere: a story of people loved by God, building life, identity, hopes and dreams on that foundation, and finding an anchor for our soul in the Lord whatever storms life blows up. The Bible is full of honest, powerful stories of human beings – who experience the full range of human emotions – on their journey with God. And even more powerfully, in Jesus we see God incarnate, living in the human body that God designed, experiencing highs and lows, as well as the physical limitations of being human. In Jesus we can find a model for how to manage our most challenging moments, as well as the peace and comfort of knowing God understands what it is to be human.

Top tips to support children's mental health

1 Teach about emotions. Many children never have the chance to learn what emotions are. Take time to name their emotions, explore and share what they feel like, what they can make us want to do and think about how to manage them well. Encourage children to think about how they are feeling, perhaps with a regular moment to share in each session. Each week, Roots children's sessions include a 'talk together and talk to God' section. These conversations and prayers make talking about emotions a normal part of how children develop their spiritual lives with the support of the faith community.

2 Be creative! Just as all children are different, some will find certain approaches to thinking and sharing about emotions helpful, while others will need a different approach entirely. As well as talking, think about physical approaches – acting or moving round to model how emotions make us feel; creative approaches including drawing or using colour to describe emotions; music and sounds that capture how we feel, and practical activities to help settle us or refocus in anxious or tough times.

3 Celebrate JOY! Learning how we can lift our mood when we feel down, anxious or angry is a key skill. Joy is a positive emotion that comes from outside of us and our experience – the Bible tells us we can find a constant and reliable source of joy in Jesus! Encourage children to recognise things that make them feel better, and learn to turn to these things when they want to feel more positive. Prayer and worship help us to shift our focus from life's challenges to find peace and joy in the Lord, so practice harnessing this through singing, playing instruments, dancing and quieter reflective times that encourage stillness and solace.

Suggested resources – see links on [WEB](#)

Engage worship have produced the excellent 'Jesus and Emotions' Creative Journal for Families.

Worship for everyone produce songs and musical resources for churches and schools, including several around emotional themes like hope and resilience.

For older children and teens, Headstrong is an online/ social media resource talking all about emotional and mental wellbeing, including videos, articles, tips and biblical perspectives.