

They are Our Future

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The nature of young people's health around the world is changing. There is now a 'new morbidity' occurring, with mental health conditions, self-harm and suicide taking centre stage. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, over 560,000 Australian children and young people have mental health problems. These statistics are not merely numbers on a page; they are young people who each have a name, a face, a family and a future.

The good news is as significant adults in our young people's lives, the real difference is in our hands. Almost 50 per cent of the factors that determine children and young people's psychological wellbeing and happiness come from the environments in which they are raised.

This means that there is a lot we can do to ensure they reach their own unique potential and develop their own healthy, strong psychological wellbeing that enables them to face the future with confidence. It's up to us to provide them with the knowledge and tools they need to become the best versions of themselves.

Every day we have opportunities to help young people develop habitual behaviours and ways of thinking that become encoded ways of automatically thinking and responding. We successfully did this with the 'slip, slop, slap' campaign, and the rates of skin cancer plummeted because both adults and kids became used to those habits and now don't go out in the sun without their hats, sunscreen and long-sleeved shirts. Now it's time to turn our attention inwards to their psychological wellbeing. We need to help our children and young people develop daily habits that take care of their mental health – just like they take care of their physical health. These habits need to become second nature, just like putting on their sunscreen so that we can prevent mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide occurring.

The following are three key areas that help foster young people's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Emotional intelligence

Research out of Harvard University found that 60 percent of college students in the US say they were academically prepared for college, but not emotionally prepared. The vast majority of these young adults say they wished their parents had invested more time in teaching them how to deal with uncomfortable feelings, like disappointment, anger, anxiety, and loneliness. We need to explicitly teach our kids the skills of emotional intelligence – how to recognise their feelings, understand where they come from, and how to deal with them. This will help them regulate their behaviour, develop emotional agility and navigate social complexities.

An attitude of gratitude

Robert Emmons' research for the past 30 years has identified that having an attitude of gratitude

significantly contributes to our positive mental health and wellbeing. Gratitude encourages us to notice and focus on all the good things we have in our lives and be thankful for it and where it came from, rather than constantly thinking about what we don't have. It's not difficult to practise gratitude, but it does require commitment. This is both a psychological commitment to focus on all the good in your life, as well as a time commitment to make it a habit. That's why it's great to start a family gratitude ritual or routine, which is an expected part of the day, where you all practise grateful thinking.

A life of purpose and meaning

A sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose is associated with increased psychological wellbeing and resilience, whereas a sense of isolation and a feeling of not belonging increases the risk of both psychological and physical disorders. Our sense of meaning and purpose come from a sense of connection with something bigger than yourself that you're contributing to others, or society, in a bigger way. Having a sense of meaning and purpose in life improves both mental and physical health, increases optimism, enhances resiliency and self-esteem, enables better adaptation when people face setbacks, and decreases the chances of depression. Being part of the Community of Christ enables our children and young people to feel this sense of belonging and develop their own unique meaning and purpose where their faith and actions intersect.

As parents we are leaders for our children, what we model and the tone we set is what they will absorb and internalise. We are fortunate to have this opportunity to intentionally teach our kids the skills and strategies they need to become confident, kind, loving, human beings who are living examples of Christ's message.

This is drawn from my new book *Raising a Mentally Fit Generation* which can be found at: www.mentallyfitgeneration.com

Kari is an author, researcher and speaker. She has dedicated her complete career to supporting people who care for, and work with, children.

She helps parents, grandparents, carers, early childhood educators and teachers plant the seeds of mental fitness, resilience and emotional wellbeing for future generations.

