



Breathe to THRIVE

Mindful Strategies for You and Your Child



A THRIVE Parenting Resource



THRIVE Initiative Overview

The THRIVE Initiative is designed to empower parents from the birth of their children until their children are 18 years old. THRIVE includes four age-specific programs: Take Root (0 to 3 years), Sprout (3 to 5 years), Grow (5 to 10 years), and Branch Out (10 to 18 years).

THRIVE Initiative Program Areas			
Take Root	Sprout	Grow	Branch Out
Infants & Toddlers (0 to 3 years)	Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Grades K - 5 (5 to 10 years)	Grades 6-8 (10 to 14 years)
			Grades 9-12 (14 to 18 years)

Each THRIVE program guides parents as they learn and use parenting skills that are based on science, so they can encourage positive youth development and resiliency across their child's lifespan. The Initiative focuses on three topic areas: 1) positive parenting practices, 2) parent and child stress management, and 3) strategies for promoting child physical health.



For more information, contact:
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INTRODUCTION

Parents play a major role in promoting their children's well-being. While this certainly includes caring for them physically, it also involves caring for their mental and emotional needs. In fact, these aspects of well-being are considered to be inseparable and interactive. That is, physical health influences mental and emotional health and vice versa.

One can think of well-being as a resource, and, like all resources, it has the potential to run dry if not sufficiently replenished. Parents are one of the most significant sources of support for their children's overall well-being.

This resource guide provides practical tips and suggestions for parents on how to help develop their children's mental and emotional well-being.



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STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is an unavoidable part of family life, and this is, perhaps, even more true today. Families experience stress that is related to a variety of situations or events that can be ordinary, such as getting all the children to their extracurricular activities on time or extreme, such as facing serious financial difficulties. Stress that is not well managed can lead to physical, emotional, and mental health complications in adults and children.



RECOGNIZING STRESS

Identify what's causing stress. What are the triggers that create feelings of stress? Are these feelings related to your family, health, finances, work, or other situations?

Know your signs of stress. Everyone experiences different signs of stress in different ways. Which of the following signs do you experience?

SIGNS OF STRESS

- » Headaches, neck or back pain
- » Muscle tension
- » Upset stomach
- » Dry mouth
- » Chest pains, rapid heartbeat
- » Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- » Fatigue
- » Loss of appetite
- » Overeating comfort foods
- » Increased frequency of colds
- » Lack of concentration or focus
- » Memory problems or forgetfulness
- » Jitters
- » Irritability
- » Short temper
- » Anxiety

Recognize how you deal with stress. Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, drinking alcohol and over/under eating, to cope. Is this a routine behavior, or is it specific to certain events or situations? Do you make unhealthy choices as a result of feeling rushed and overwhelmed?

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WHAT YOU CAN DO



Find healthy ways to manage stress. Consider healthy, stress-reducing activities, such as meditation, exercising or talking about your concerns with friends or family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Don't take on too much at once. Focus on changing only one behavior at a time.

Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water and engage in regular physical activity. Activities, like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym or playing sports, could enhance your physical and mental health.

Take regular vacations or other breaks from work. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself - even if it's just simple activities like reading a good book or listening to your favorite music.

Reach out for support. Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who could help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

HEALTHY WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESS

- » Go for a walk
- » Take a warm bath
- » Listen to music
- » Do something fun
- » Pray or meditate
- » Have a laugh
- » Get some rest
- » Engage in a hobby
- » Talk to someone about your feelings

Did you know that children can often tell when a parent is stressed? A 2010 survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that a majority of the youth surveyed reported being stressed when their parents were stressed. Sometimes the best thing parents can do for their children is to take care of themselves!

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RECOGNIZING STRESS IN CHILDREN: AGES 0 TO 3 YEARS OLD

As a parent, it may be difficult at times to recognize when your baby is experiencing stress. Even though your baby cannot talk, he or she can still communicate his or her feelings through movements. Parents should observe their infant and respond quickly to their baby's needs. Look at the chart below; it lists signs that could mean your baby is experiencing stress and what might be causing the stress.



What parents might notice in their infant:

- Saluting - this looks like a baby stretching out his or her hand towards you, (usually the back of the hand toward you) and up towards his or her face.
- The baby extends his or her arms and splays his or her fingers apart.
- If your baby all of the sudden start yawning, hiccupping, or sneezing multiple times.
- If your baby arches his or her back and neck and pushes away.
- If your baby cries. This is usually a last sign when all other signs have been ignored.
- The baby will become frantic and move all extremities wildly or the baby will just shut down, shut his or eyes and tune everything out.
- Trouble sleeping, irregular sleeping pattern.
- Changes in bowel movements.

What might be causing stress:

- Allowing a child to cry it out without parental attention and affection.
- Not feeding the child when hungry.
- Not offering comfort when the child is disturbed or distressed.
- Limiting body contact during feeding, throughout the day, and during stressful parts of the night.
- Low levels of human attention, stimulation, conversation and play.
- Issues with breast milk or formula.
- Overstimulation.
- Being overtired.
- Environmental stress between caregivers.

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RECOGNIZING STRESS IN CHILDREN: AGES 3 TO 5 YEARS OLD

Now that your baby is transitioning into preschool, your child will be experiencing new surroundings and will be spending less time in your care. This can create mixed emotions, such as excitement and nervousness. The way your child experiences stress will change as will the reasons why he or she may feel anxious. Listed below are some behaviors you might notice when your child is experiencing stress and what might be happening to cause your child stress.



What parents might notice in their child:

- Change in regular sleep and eating habits.
- Change in emotions (e.g., showing signs of being sad, clingy, withdrawn, angry).
- Increase in crying or tantrums.
- Nightmares and fears at bedtime.
- Physical ailments, such as headaches or stomachaches.
- Anxious tics, coughs, or body movements.
- Frequent reliance on habits such as hair chewing or thumb-sucking.
- Changes in bowel movements.

What might be causing stress:

- Separation anxiety.
- New family dynamic or big family changes.
- Potty training.
- Overwhelming schedules.
- Unexpected world events.
- Personal traumatic experiences.

RECOGNIZING STRESS IN CHILDREN: AGES 5 TO 10 YEARS OLD

As your child transitions into the elementary school years, you are now experts in knowing your child's behavior; however, sometimes, when your child experiences stress, his or her behavior may be misunderstood or unrecognizable. Listed below are some behaviors and ideas as to why your child may be experiencing stress.

What parents might notice in their child:

- » Mood swings.
- » Changes in sleeping patterns.
- » Bedwetting.
- » Physical ailments, such as headaches or stomachaches.
- » Soothing behaviors, like biting nails, hair pulling, thumb sucking.
- » Lie, bully or defy authority.
- » Nightmares.
- » Become clingy.
- » Academic challenges, trouble concentrating on schoolwork.
- » Becomes more aggressive.
- » Withdrawing, becoming more isolated.
- » Overreact to minor problems or increased irritability.
- » Hyperactivity.
- » Refusing to attend school.

What might be causing stress:

- » Academic pressure.
- » Fear of disappointing parents.
- » Forming friendships.
- » Sport performance pressure.
- » Changing schools.
- » New family dynamics.
- » Overscheduled.
- » Living in an unsafe home or neighborhood.
- » Developing specific fears or phobias.



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RECOGNIZING STRESS IN CHILDREN: AGES 10 TO 18 YEARS OLD

As your child starts to transition into the adolescent years, the type of stressors and how he or she responds to stress will begin to change. Parents should try to keep an open mind and line of communication with their teen and not assume their teenager is just moody. Think about when you were a teenager and how stressful it was and how you managed to cope with these stresses. Listed below are some behaviors you might notice in your teen and what might be happening to cause him or her stress.

What parents might notice in their

- » Lost interest in former enjoyments.
- » Poor sleeping and eating habits.
- » Wants to be alone, avoids friends and family.
- » Talks about suicide or complains that life is just too hard to live.
- » Feels guilty or not worth anything
- » Experiences a sudden drop in their grades.
- » Displays extreme anger and or sadness and overreacts to many situations.
- » Worries constantly about his or her appearance and or physical problems.
- » Is constantly afraid.
- » Constant physical ailments, like headaches or stomachaches.
- » Withdraws from social situations or becomes isolated.
- » Refuses to go to school or skips classes.
- » Can't make decisions or concentrate.
- » Consistent nightmares.
- » Consumes alcohol, cigarettes or drugs.
- » Gives little attention to his or her appearance.
- » Defies authority.
- » Increased promiscuous behavior.
- » Breaks the law and or hurts others.
- » Takes extreme risks.
- » Nervous habits, such as nail biting, pacing.

What might be causing stress:

- » Academic and sports pressure.
- » Peer pressure.
- » Low self-esteem.
- » Overscheduled.
- » Family pressure or new family dynamics.
- » Bullying.
- » Changes in bodies.
- » Fear of disappointing parents.
- » Depression.
- » Eating disorders.
- » Social pressure.
- » Discrimination.
- » Social media.
- » High personal expectations.
- » Changes in school.
- » Changes in friendships.
- » Financial stress.
- » Personal traumatic event.
- » Romantic relationship changes.

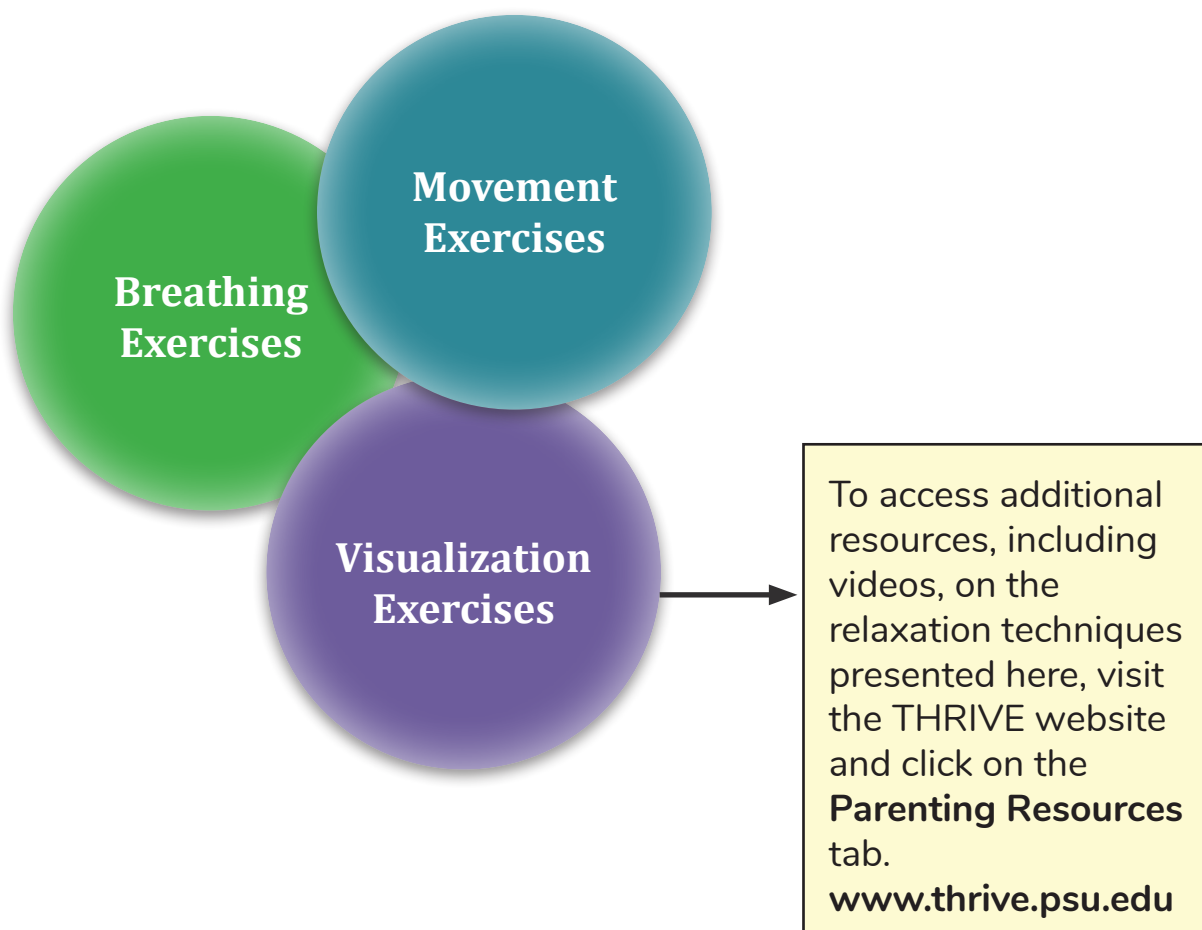


RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are many strategies you can use to calm down when experiencing stress, such as using relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques help to do the following:

- » Lower heart rate and reduce blood pressure
- » Slow breathing and alleviate tension in muscles
- » Decrease stress hormone levels
- » Diminish feelings of anger and frustration
- » Strengthen feelings of self-efficacy and self-confidence

A variety of relaxation techniques exist, but, generally, they can be grouped into three categories: breathing exercises, movement exercises, and visualization exercises.



BREATHING EXERCISES

Breathing exercises draw attention to how the body takes in and releases oxygen. Often, people engage in shallow breathing, which restricts the diaphragm and results in important blood vessels not getting enough air. This can cause shortness of breath and feelings of anxiety⁸. Deep breathing, also known as controlled breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, or belly breathing, fills the lungs with air upon breathing in and empties the lungs of carbon dioxide upon breathing out, which helps calm the body.

Deep Breathing

1. Find a quiet and comfortable spot;
2. Sit tall with your hand rested on your lower abdomen;
3. Close your eyes or glance downward;
4. Take a deep breath in through your nose;
5. Feel your diaphragm fully inflate with air;
6. Slowly release the air through your nose or mouth; and
7. Repeat as many times as you desire.

MOVEMENT EXERCISES

Movement exercises focus attention on the body and help individuals become more attuned to their bodily sensations and the connection that exists between the mind and body. Often, these exercises are practiced in conjunction with some type of deep breathing. Specific examples are listed in the table below and on the next page.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The objective of progressive muscle relaxation is to tighten and relax every muscle group in the body in a sequential order. Try the following steps:

1. Sit tall and comfortably place your hands on your lap;
2. Close your eyes or glance downward;
3. Tense the muscles in your feet for 5 seconds and then relax for 30 seconds;
4. Work your way up to your head tensing your muscles for 5 seconds and relaxing for 30 seconds;
5. Work your way from your head back to your feet; and
6. Repeat as many times as you desire.

Yoga

* Like with any exercise program, you should consult your doctor prior to beginning. Also, the best way to avoid injuries and benefit the most from yoga is to do it with an experienced instructor.

Yoga is an activity that combines body movements with deep breathing and meditation. In addition to its calming effects, yoga also provides physical benefits, such as enhanced balance, flexibility, strength and stamina. If you are interested in trying yoga, here are a few basic poses:

1. Mountain Pose

- Stand up as straight as you can with your legs together (or slightly parted) and your hands at your sides.
- Relax your shoulders and distribute your weight evenly throughout your body.
- As you breathe in deeply, raise your arms out to the side until your hands are above your head with palms facing each other.
- Stretch your fingertips up toward the sky.



2. Seated twist with leg bent

- Sit up straight with your legs stretched out in front of you.
- Bend your left leg so that your left foot is next to your right knee.
- Bend your right arm so that your right elbow is against your left leg.
- Pushing against your leg, try to touch your right leg near the knee.
- Place your left hand on the floor behind you for support.
- Twist your backbone to the left and turn your head as you twist.



3. Upward facing dog

- Lie face down on the floor using your forearms and feet to prop your body up off the floor.
- Bend your arms upward until they are straight while also lowering your pelvis and thighs toward the ground.
- Arch your back and look up making sure to keep your arms and legs straight.
- Do not let your knees touch the ground.
- Place the tops of your feet on the ground.



Rhythmic Exercise

*These types of exercises can be very effective at reducing stress.

When engaging in these exercises, focus your attention on your movements and breathing.

You should check with your doctor before starting any rhythmic exercise program.

Rhythmic exercise includes activities, like running, walking, swimming, or cycling.

VISUALIZATION EXERCISES

Visualization exercises, known as guided imagery, direct one's mind away from stressful thoughts by shifting one's focus to positive, calming circumstances; experiences; or aspirations. These exercises work well when done in a quiet location and when multiple senses (i.e., sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) are used. The example included in the table below is one way to engage in visualization.

Visualization Example

1. Imagine you are hiking in the woods;
2. See the sun setting behind the mountains in the distance;
3. Listen to the sound of the wildlife around you;
4. Feel the cool breeze against your skin;
5. Savor the smell of the evergreen trees around you; and
6. Enjoy the refreshing taste of cold water.

**Visualization exercises can also help children cope!
Try these relaxation techniques with your child!**

Movement exercises will need to be modified, so they are appropriate and safe for children, and visualization exercises will need to be modified, so they are relevant and engaging. The table below lists two examples of visualization exercises that parents can try with their children.

Instant Vacation

1. Help your children identify their favorite family vacation spot;
2. Have them close their eyes and practice deep breathing;
3. Have them verbally describe what they see, hear, feel, smell and taste;
4. Guide their thoughts and images as necessary to help them stay focused and calm.

Breathing Smiles

1. Have your children sit or lie in a comfortable position;
2. Work with them to practice deep breathing for a minute or two;
3. Transition into the visualization exercise by having them imagine that the next breath they breathe in is in the shape of a smile;
4. Instruct them to send the smile up to their head and to feel their whole head smiling;
5. Continue to do this for the neck, shoulders, arms, back, chest, stomach, and legs.

MINDFUL PARENTING

Mindfulness means to focus on and be aware of what is happening in the present in a nonjudgmental fashion. Mindful parenting can help reduce stress and help you to be less emotionally reactive, which can allow you to interact more lovingly and enrich your relationship with your child. Mindful parenting encompasses the following five elements:



Listening with Full Attention. Give your complete attention to what your child is saying and doing. Pay attention to your child's words, tone of voice, body language and facial expressions. Doing this can help you identify your child's needs more accurately.

Nonjudgmental Acceptance. Openly accepting your child's attributes, abilities, attitudes and actions can help you achieve a more realistic understanding of your child and abandon preconceptions. Nonjudgmental acceptance, however, does not mean excusing misbehavior. Parents can still provide their child with clear and developmentally appropriate rules and expectations but can do so without judgment and with greater compassion.

Emotional Awareness. This involves deliberately focusing your attention on your child's emotions, both positive and negative. When parents experience strong emotions, there is a tendency to engage in parenting that is reactive. Maintaining awareness of your emotions helps you interact thoughtfully with your child.

Self-regulation. This entails exercising self-control over words and actions when interacting with children. Practicing self-control allows you to remain calm, cool and collected, and to engage in parenting behaviors that bring out the best in your child.

Compassion. This involves displaying empathy and concern for your child. Children can face many challenges as they mature, and parents should be a valuable source of comfort and support for them during trying times. Additionally, parents should not be too critical of their parenting efforts. Parents should set high standards for themselves but should also forgive themselves when certain goals are not attained.

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TIPS FOR MINDFUL PARENTING

Mindful parenting can be helpful during challenging and stressful situations, such as being pressed for time or disciplining. It can help keep your emotions in check and your mind focused on the present. Try the following tips when faced with challenging or stressful parenting situations:

Pause & Breathe. Pause and focus on breathing. Breathing is a very effective way of calming the body and refocusing thoughts and attention.

Remember to Show Love & Support. In the moment when emotions begin to flare, it can be challenging to remember to show love and support. Taking a moment to pause and breathe, however, could provide one with an opportunity to think about how to respond to the demands of the current situation in an appropriately loving and supportive fashion. For example, if you are running late to an appointment and your child has not gotten her shoes on yet, pause what you are doing and breathe. As you are breathing, think about how you can resolve the shoe issue with your child lovingly.

Plan Ahead for Next Time. After the challenging situation has passed, you could devote a bit of time to thinking about how that situation could be avoided or improved in the future. Go back to the shoe example. Perhaps the problem was that the child did not remember where her shoes were. Initiate a new routine that involves everyone putting their shoes in the same spot every night. Sometimes planning ahead makes a big difference.

Give Yourself a Break. No parent is perfect. Everyone is human, and everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes can provide opportunities for parents to learn, improve and help their children understand that no one is perfect. Mistakes also provide opportunities for parents to show their children positive ways to correct them. Acknowledge mistakes, and endeavor to correct them in the future.



MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

Mindful Smelling

Gather some household items for your children to smell, such as citrus fruit, a candle, flowers or fresh herbs. Encourage them to think about how they feel as they breathe in each scent.



The Happiness Board

Print family photos, sketch pictures of warm memories, or cut out happy scenes from magazines. Combine them into a collage, and place it somewhere your children can see it often, such as near the dinner table or within sight of their beds. When they're eating a meal or you're tucking them in at night, invite them to look at the board and reminisce with you.



Active Listening

On your walks, encourage your kids to be silent for several moments and identify every sound they can hear.

Breathing Buddies

Lie down on your backs with a favorite stuffed animal in your arms. Encourage the kids to watch the stuffed animal rise and fall as they slowly inhale and exhale. Learning to focus on breathing is a great life skill, but it can be hard for children to really understand

what this means. A visible cue, like a stuffed animal rising and falling, can help them better understand what we mean when we say, "Take a deep breath."

Press Flowers

Go outside and find some fresh flowers to press. Put each flower in a book, and spread the flowers out so there are spaces in between. Close the book and place something heavy on top. Every few days, move the flowers to different pages so they can continue absorbing the moisture. After 2 or 3 weeks, the flowers should be dry and you can gently move them. Your flowers can be framed, used in art projects,

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or preserved in a scrap book. Creative projects like these are great for cultivating mindfulness as they help us focus our attention on what we're doing and express ourselves creatively!

Yoga

Find out if your local yoga studio offers child-friendly classes, or look up an easy tutorial online to try at home. Encourage your child to listen to his body and tune in to his breath, and make sure you try, too!



Meditate

Try attending a class together, using a meditation app, or downloading a simple meditation script and reading it to your child.

Journaling

Journaling is another mindfulness practice that we can easily incorporate in everyday life, and it can be a fun and meaningful way to spend time with your child. Here are a few ways to try journaling:

- » Buy journals for you and your child and dedicate ten minutes each evening to sitting down and writing about your favorite memories from your day.
- » Create a gratitude journal by passing a journal back and forth between you and writing down three things for which you are grateful.

Memory Box

At night, write down with your child a favorite memory to place in the box. Before the start of the New Year, read through all the memories you kept from that year.

No matter which exercises you try, keep in mind that mindfulness is the practice of being present in the moment, letting go of the past and future, and being open to your experience.



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Over the last several decades, psychologists have focused their attention on understanding how to enhance individuals' mental and emotional well-being through the promotion of positive attitudes and behaviors. This emphasis reflects the recognition that improving people's lives, especially the lives of children, has to involve recognizing, nurturing and reinforcing positive emotions, qualities and actions. A variety of exercises have been developed to boost mental and emotional well-being, and research suggests that these exercises can be effective at increasing mental and emotional well-being and decreasing depressive symptoms. These initial research results are encouraging as enhanced well-being can help adults and children adapt more positively to life's opportunities and challenges.

The following pages contain a series of exercises that parents can complete with their children to nurture their own and their children's well-being.



Signature Strengths

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify five traits that best characterize him or her. Examples of traits you may come up with include the following: kind, loving, friendly, forgiving and grateful. After the traits have been identified, brainstorm ways that you and your child could promote those strengths daily for at least a week. Remember to avoid personal attributes, and focus on character qualities you wish to encourage!

My strengths include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

I will put these strengths into practice this week by doing the following:

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Counting Your Blessings

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify five experiences, big or small, that occurred to him or her since yesterday for which he or she is grateful or thankful. Have your child write them down on the lines provided below.

I am grateful for the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Acts of Kindness

Instructions: For this activity, help your child identify three kind acts that he or she can perform throughout the week. These acts can be big or small, and they can be for anyone. To get the most out of this activity, try to do it for several weeks in a row.

Three kind things I can do this week include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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Three Good Things

Instructions: In this activity, you will help your child identify three good occurrences that happened to him or her throughout the day. As you identify each good item, help your child go one step further by figuring out why that good experience happened.

Three things that went well today include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

These things went well because of the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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**Access additional resources online:
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CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

