



Family Guide to Supporting Young People's Mental Health and Well-Being

INFORMATION, TIPS,
AND RESOURCES

*Promoting the mental health awareness
and wellness of our K-12 families*





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This guide was developed to provide general mental health information only. This guide is not intended as psychological intervention or as a substitute for any form of treatment. If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out to the [988 Lifeline](#) at 988 or text HOME to 741741 at the [Crisis Text Line](#); or refer to the *Resources for Families* section of this document for mental health resources for families.

How to Use This Guide

To find specific information when reading this online, you can use the [Table of Contents](#) to jump to a section by clicking on its name.

While each section of this guide is important, time and attention can be hard for families to find, so it might also be helpful to explore the guide in more targeted ways. Here are some ideas:


Find Your Child

Focus in on unique characteristics of your child or concerns you may have for them. For example, if you have a teenager, you may want to explore the sections detailing adolescent well-being and social media use.


Tap Into Your Feelings

Some sections may be more useful based on your mood or feelings. For example, if you're feeling stressed, the sections on self-care and mental wellness strategies could be helpful in those moments.

Try the Tips

The guide has targeted tips (denoted with this mark ) inserted throughout, often in callout boxes or simplified lists. If you're short on time, these specific practices can be a great place to start.

Read Together

Explore the guide with your child! Conversation starters (denoted with this mark ) and tips for talking with your child are located throughout the guide and can help make difficult conversations a bit more simple.

NOTE: This guide is for adult family members to get ideas about how to support the mental health and well-being of the children and teens in their lives. The authors recognize that these adults may be in many roles, from birth parent or foster parent to grandparent, aunt/uncle, mentor, or other caring adult. This guide uses the terms "caregiver" and "parent" to represent all adults who care for a young person.

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Introduction

Over the last few years, the mental health crisis impacting young people has steadily intensified.¹ However, families, schools, and community partners can work together to support young people’s mental health and well-being. Schools and other education organizations can provide personal support, resources, and information to students—and their parents or other caregivers—to help with at-home strategies to support their children.



The purpose of this guide is to provide parents and other caregivers with information and easy-to-use strategies to support their children’s overall well-being and mental health. The guide also includes warning signs to look for in children and teens, tips for talking to them about their mental health, and resources for getting help.

“This guide provides insight for parents regarding mental health and what it is, how they can help, and what resources are available.”

— California high school student

“Mental health is an important topic for youth today because of how much it affects their development, lifestyle, and overall well-being.”

— California high school student



Parents and caregivers— *you are not alone!*

This guide is to help you support the children and youth in your life. But if you are struggling with your own well-being, please reach out for help. ***We all need support—and we can be better caregivers when we get it.*** Here are some ideas:

- Talk to a friend you trust.
- Ask your child’s school counselor or social worker for referrals to professional individual or family counseling or parent support groups.
- Contact your county’s behavioral or mental health department for resources.
- Connect with Cal-HOPE by calling 833.317.HOPE (4673) or text chat with someone live online at calhopeconnect.org.
- If you care for a child with disabilities, contact your regional Parent Center (www.parentcenterhub.org).
- Call 211 for help with basic needs and to connect with a range of local resources.
- See the many free resources available online and in your community at the end of this guide.

If you are **worried about your child** harming themselves:

- **DO** let them know you’re concerned.
- **DO** remain calm for both of you (so they don’t worry about you and so they feel comfortable sharing).
- **DO** ask them if they are thinking about suicide or hurting themselves (this won’t give them any new ideas).
 - » **Try:** “I’m worried about you. Are you thinking about hurting yourself? Many people have these thoughts. You won’t be in trouble if you are—I just want to help you feel better. I love you.”
- **DO** call or text 988 (national suicide and crisis lifeline, available 24 hours a day)
 - » Also see other crisis support services in the Resources section at the end of this guide.
- **DON’T** leave them alone.
- **DON’T** wait to ask for or get help—it’s a common problem, and people make it through hard times.



UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

What is mental health?

Mental health is an important aspect of *everyone's* overall health and well-being.

Mental health is “the way your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affect your life.”²

There are many terms related to mental health:



Positive mental health involves both high levels of well-being and low levels of distress.³



Well-Being

Sense of belonging, social and emotional skills, happiness, etc.

Distress

Anxiety, depression, negative emotions and thoughts after a loss or trauma, etc.

Have a family conversation!

We all have different ideas about mental health.

How might our culture, beliefs, identities, values, experiences, and language influence how we:

Think and talk about mental health?

Socialize and support each other?

Experience happiness?

Manage stress?

Seek out help or treatment?



No matter what language you use, the most important thing is to create a family culture of safety for young people and their caregivers to talk and share openly about their mental health experiences—both in what to celebrate and what might need more support.

Don't let concerns about the stigma of mental health issues get in the way of seeking help! Also, if you are more open, you can be part of the solution for everyone!

“This is a really important topic, and as a young person I value how impactful it is to have parents in my life who care about my mental health and are doing everything they can to support it.”

—California high school student

Many things impact our health and well-being

Where and how young people and families live, work, play, and learn can influence their health, including their mental health.

Providing safe and supportive environments can help children foster:

A sense of belonging

High self-esteem

Feeling and being safe

Mental health can be positively impacted when caregivers and schools work together to make sure young people have what they need to be healthy, happy, and ready to learn, such as:

- Supportive, nurturing relationships with family, friends, and others
- A positive school climate
- Stable and safe housing and nutritious food
- Meaningful and engaging academic instruction
- Support in developing social and emotional skills
- Access to:
 - » Green spaces
 - » Activities of interest
 - » Health care, including mental and behavioral health care



Mental health can be negatively impacted by stressors, such as:

- Community, school, and family violence
- Inequalities, racism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, and discrimination
- Physically and/or emotionally unsafe schools
- Isolation and a lack of community and social support
- Financial insecurity, housing instability, and hunger
- Limited access to health care and other basic services
- Substance use by the person or family members
- Natural disasters, including pandemics

Traumatic experiences and ongoing stress are common and can negatively impact the health and well-being of children and teens both in the short term and over a lifetime.⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people experienced increased stressors, resulting in a greater need for mental health supports and services.⁵



Myths about mental health

Myths (false beliefs) about mental health can be confusing and make it hard for young people and families to get the help they need. The following are some common myths⁶ that can create stigmas, along with the **actual facts behind those myths**.



Myth: Children can't experience mental health challenges.



Fact: Half of mental health challenges show their first signs before age 14.



Myth: People with mental health challenges are weak and not working hard enough to change.



Fact: Many factors can cause mental health challenges, including genetics, brain chemistry, life events, and family history.



Myth: Nothing can be done to help someone with mental health challenges.



Fact: People with mental health challenges can get better and even recover completely. Therapy, medication, and a strong support system can all help.



Myth: If a child needs to see a counselor/mental health professional, it reflects poorly on their family.



Fact: Many children benefit from mental health supports. The need for assistance is NOT because of parenting style or skills.

As they grow up, it is not unusual for children and teenagers to experience a range of social, emotional, and behavioral struggles. With support from family, they can often learn the coping skills to get through these challenges. However, these struggles may sometimes involve more serious mental health issues, which can generally be improved through professional support and treatment.

Remember: *It's OK to ask for help!* And keep in mind that the earlier supports and interventions are provided, the better.

Parents can help children and youth understand that we all feel sad, anxious, self-consciousness, and frustrated at times. Sometimes just knowing that these emotions are shared by others and knowing that they are being listened to can bring some relief.

The most common emotion that can feel difficult is **anxiety.**



Other words for “anxiety” are **worry, stress, nervousness**.

What are young people often anxious about?

- ⚠️ How they are doing in school and other activities
- ⚠️ What peers and adults are thinking about them
- ⚠️ Their changing bodies
- ⚠️ Their future (e.g., school, career, money, happiness)
- ⚠️ Their safety (e.g., bullying, neighborhood violence, school shootings)
- ⚠️ The world (e.g., the environment, their rights, war)

Another common struggle for youth (and adults) is feeling depressed.



Depression can involve some of the following characteristics:

- ⚠️ Sadness
- ⚠️ Low energy
- ⚠️ No motivation
- ⚠️ Lack of interest in doing things
- ⚠️ Hopelessness

Many young people also experience other negative emotions, like irritability, frustration, sadness, embarrassment, and a feeling of being overwhelmed.

When to seek support

Although temporary anxiety, sadness, and mood changes are common, it's important to be aware when a young person may be experiencing something deeper and more serious. Some behaviors that might indicate that a child or teenager may need extra support include:



- Long periods of negativity or sadness
- Recurring worries about routine parts of everyday life
- New or unusual fears
- Irritability or temper tantrums
- Trouble concentrating
- A drop in grades or skipping school
- Withdrawal from family or social activities
- Avoidance of difficult or new situations
- Chronic complaints about stomachaches or headaches
- Repeated reassurance-seeking
- Sleep problems
- Not being able to get out of bed
- Restlessness or hyperactivity
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Substance use (alcohol, medication prescribed to someone else, street drugs)

If caregivers notice some of these behavioral changes or notice that their children's emotions or behaviors are getting in the way of having satisfying relationships, they should consider getting professional help from:

- A mental health specialist at school (social worker, psychologist, counselor)
- A therapist or psychiatrist in the community
- The family doctor

Mental health problems are not easy to “fix,” nor might improvements happen right away. This is a process, and there may be setbacks, so patience and trying different things can help. Just like physical health, mental health can benefit from an evaluation, supports that are matched to the needs, and time to reflect and heal.

Most people will benefit from mental health support at different times in their lives. It is also important for adults to address their own mental health struggles and trauma in order to better care for the youth in their lives.



ADVOCATE! If your child or family needs help:

Let your school and/or doctor know why you are concerned about your child. Share what you are seeking as a family member.

Ask your school and/or doctor whether they recommend assessing your child’s behavior, learning, or mental health to determine the supports and services they may need.

Ask a lot of questions when seeking help (counselors and therapists will share information about things like confidentiality and their approach to treatment).

Let counselors and therapists know when something is not working—and know that it can take several tries to find the right mental health professional for you or your child.

A note for payment: Medi-Cal and private insurance cover some behavioral and mental health treatments. See more information about Medi-Cal in the [Resource section](#).

How common are mental health issues among youth today?

Mental health problems and emotional struggles are common and increasing.



In 2019, **more than a third** of adolescents in the United States had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (even though fewer than 10% were ever diagnosed with depression or anxiety).⁷

The most common mental health disorders diagnosed among young people are:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder)

Something to know: *There are also a lot of young people who have autism, but do not get diagnosed at a very early age. While autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is not a mental illness but rather a developmental disorder or disability, people on the autism spectrum can learn, communicate, and behave in ways that are different from those who are considered “neurotypical.”⁸ Understanding how your child may be different can help you support them in ways that are tailored to their unique needs and can help them build self-confidence.*

“The more students learn about taking care of their mental health, the more they are able to enjoy the things that make childhood unique and special.”

—California high school student

“Poor mental health not only impacts academic performance but physical health, relationships, and overall happiness.”

—California high school student

What are students saying about their mental health needs and supports?⁹

2021–22 survey results from California 5th graders:

1 in 5 felt very lonely, **1 in 5** felt sad, **1 in 3** felt stressed

2021–22 survey results from California middle and high school students:



1 out of 4 students reported they would not know what to do if they felt very sad, stressed, lonely, or depressed

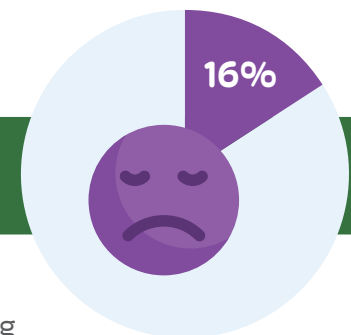


1 out of 3 secondary students felt so sad or hopeless for 2+ weeks that they stopped doing usual activities in the past year



1 out of 3 secondary students experienced social–emotional distress in the past month

16% of secondary students had seriously considered suicide in the past year.



Students reported that the most common barriers to their seeking mental health care if they were feeling very sad, stressed, lonely or depressed were:

28% – Counselor/therapists wouldn't understand

27% – Parent/guardian might find out

22% – People would think there's something wrong with me

19% – Other students might find out

The importance of a caring adult:

About 70% of students said they think it would help someone their age feel better to talk to an adult, but 40% said they did not have an adult they could talk to about their problems.¹⁰



So, what can family caregivers do?

- Let your children know **that they can talk to you and ask questions**, any time about anything.
- If they feel more comfortable, you will help connect them to someone else, such as another family member, a mental health professional, a religious counselor, a medical doctor, or a school social worker. Consider trying to find an adult that matches or understands your child’s cultural, ethnic, or other relevant identities.

For more about what you can do to directly support your child, see page 16: [What Can Parents And Caregivers Do To Support Their Children’s Mental Wellness?](#)

How do young people change socially and emotionally as they grow older?

As your child develops, you will see changes in how they manage their emotions and relationships with others. Some examples of common behaviors at different ages are displayed on page 14.

Positive social and emotional development helps youth succeed in school and life. This development includes being able to:

- express and manage emotions;
- form positive and rewarding relationships;
- set goals and plan ahead;
- problem-solve and make good decisions;
- build self-awareness and confidence; and
- understand the emotions and viewpoints of others.

Social and emotional development by age

Age group	Developing behaviors and skills
3–4 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separates more easily from parents or caregivers • Shows care or affection for family and friends • Shows a range of emotions
5–8 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows what is real versus make-believe • Seeks to be liked and accepted • Shows care or concern for the feelings of others
9–12 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controls and expresses emotions • Forms strong, important friendships • Starts to understand own strengths and weaknesses • May still focus thinking on themselves
13–18 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses problem-solving skills but does not always make the best choices • Seeks independence from family • Tries out and builds unique identities and interests • Can show big emotions and have frequent mood swings

How schools can help

Schools play a key role in supporting students' well-being. They provide safe and supportive environments where students learn, grow, and develop relationships. School is also where students and their families are likely to receive—or be connected to—mental health supports.

- There are a lot of ways that schools and family caregivers can work together.
- Schools provide many different types of mental and behavioral health supports and services to students and families. The table on page 15 lists some of these supports and highlights some ways that parents and other caregivers can build on these services to support their children.



How schools and families can support youth well-being

How schools can help	How families can collaborate with schools
Create a positive learning environment	Ask what their child likes about their school and what is missing
Celebrate families in different ways	Let teachers and other school staff know they are appreciated
Find out what caregivers value and want for their children at school	Inform their child's school about what their child needs in order to be successful
Teach social and emotional skills and let families know what these skills are so they can practice them at home	Use these social and emotional strategies at home
Make everyone aware of why mental health is important	Ask their child what they are learning about mental health in school
Connect students and families directly to mental health providers or counselors at school or in the community	Contact their school to request services for their child
Work with community partners to help connect families to services such as food, housing, and after-school care	Let their school know if they need help and services



ADVOCATE!

If you have concerns about your child, contact your school for help. Schools work with parents to develop a plan of support, which may include school-based mental health supports, learning accommodations at school (through an individualized education plan [IEP] or a 504 plan), and/or mental health treatment or other services in the community. Developing this plan of support may involve some assessments to better understand what is going on with your child.

If you don't get a response right away, try again or contact someone else at the school, like the principal, counselor, or social worker—or even reach out to the district Student Services Director. You have the right to ask for information and support for your child. You may also want to reach out to helpers outside the school, such as county social services or a community-based mental health agency.



WHAT CAN PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS DO TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN'S MENTAL WELLNESS?

Understanding a child's mental health needs is not as simple as knowing their physical needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care. Yet a child's mental health is just as important as their physical health.¹¹ Caregivers can help provide a foundation for mental wellness by giving children:

- Love, security, and acceptance
- A safe and secure environment
- Encouragement to build self-confidence and strong self-esteem
- Chances to spend time with friends and family
- Caring guidance and realistic rules

If your child is moving back and forth between households, do your best to bring everyone together to communicate and support them in a collaborative way; a family counselor can help facilitate conversations, which can be difficult when two families are raising one child.

Family well-being practices

There are many things parents and other family members can do on a day-to-day basis to help support their children's well-being, such as model self-care; communicate about feelings, strengths, and needs; create family routines; develop social and emotional skills; and support mental health through physical health.



1

Model Self-Care

2

Communicate About Feelings, Strengths, and Needs

3

Create Family Routines

4

Develop Mental Wellness Skills

5

Support Mental Health Through Physical Health




1

Model Self-Care

Children watch what their older family members do and learn from them. And just like adults, children need time to care for themselves but may not know how. So it's important for parents and other adults to model self-care—which is anything you do to help yourself feel physically, mentally, and emotionally well. These are some easy ways adults can help themselves so they will be healthy examples for their children:

- Plan for quiet time each day.
- Make time for things you enjoy.
- Talk about the things you (and your child) appreciate and value.
- Exhibit grace—show that it is OK to make mistakes, that you are compassionate with yourself when wrong, and that you apologize when appropriate.
- Share with your child when something is scary for you and you are being courageous.
- Show resilience (the ability to persevere or bounce back) by acknowledging that something is hard and showing how you are getting through it or trying again.
- Manage stress by taking a break, going for a walk, or breathing slowly and deeply.
- Take care of your health—get enough rest, eat well, and exercise.
- Name your emotions to help you communicate about feelings.
- Seek professional help if you're struggling. This also shows your children that it is OK to ask for help outside the family.

Plus, if you do these kinds of things to take care of yourself, you will also find that you are more likely to be present with your child.



2

Communicate About Feelings, Strengths, and Needs¹²

Be Ready to Listen! 

Let your child know they can safely share or ask you about anything. Create space for listening. Then be patient. Check back over time. They may not want to talk *now*, but it is important for them to know that they can come to you.

“Oftentimes youth need grace and space to navigate what they are experiencing and decide for themselves what they need. Youth do not always need to be told what they need or how to be teenagers.”

—California high school student

Certain communication practices can help build children’s self-esteem and self-efficacy (the belief that they are capable and can persevere).

- Emphasize and recognize your child’s strengths.
- Use open-ended questions (those that can’t be answered with just “yes” or “no”).
- Listen with full attention, without interruption (and pause for 3 seconds before responding).

• When your child makes a mistake, see it as an opportunity for growth. Ask what your child has learned from the mistake.

- Talk about values—theirs and yours.
- Ask about their hopes and dreams for the future.
- When your child has a problem, don’t jump to “fixing”—instead, ask them what they would like help with.
- Avoid labels with your children (jock, nerd, popular, etc.).
- Encourage self-expression through journaling, talking, and engaging in hobbies/interests.

Also encourage a growth mindset by asking your child: What have you gotten better at with practice?

Practice talking about emotions and mental health.

- When your child is upset, acknowledge that and help them name their feelings.
- Help your children check in and learn how to describe their feelings (helpful tools for this include the [Feelings Thermometer](#) and [Emotion Wheel](#)).
- Assure your child that mental health challenges are similar to other medical conditions and are not their fault. Remind them that we can get care to help us improve.
- Start conversations with your child, using questions like these:¹³
 - » What can each of us do when we feel [mad, sad, angry, scared]?
 - » How can we calm down?
 - » When did you feel scared or anxious but went forward anyway?
 - » When you want to give up, what’s one thing you can tell yourself?

Laugh at your own small mistakes or goofs with kindness!

Key Parenting Communication Skill!



Validation lets your child know that you hear them and accept their thoughts and feelings (even if inside you don't yet understand or agree). Providing validation will make your child will feel safe and valued.



How? **Listen without judgment**, pause, try to understand, and ask what they are feeling if they haven't named it yet. When your child is done sharing, make statements like, "It makes sense that you feel _____. That sounds like a tough situation."

3 Create Family Routines¹⁴

Parents can also help with their children's mental wellness by making routines part of each day. Children often feel safe and benefit from knowing what to expect by taking part in activities that occur regularly. Have your child create schedules with you to build their skills and buy-in.

Four key steps for creating family routines

Identify	Explain	Follow	Praise
List important daily activities and the order or times they should happen	<p>Make sure children know what to do and when</p> <p>Use simple charts or pictures as reminders</p>	<p>Make sure all family members follow the routines</p> <p>Remind children of the routines</p>	Praise children when they follow the routines

- 👁️ **TIP:** For both physical and mental wellness, a regular sleep schedule with enough hours of sleep is important for children and youth. Going to sleep and waking up around the same time each day can improve mood, physical health, and readiness to learn. To help with falling asleep, turn off screens at least one hour before bedtime!

Teens still benefit from **organization** and **routines**, but can better manage their priorities and time on their own.

Family Routines to Help With Connection and Well-Being:

- Plan family dinners. At these meals, create a tradition of going around the table and having everyone share something they learned that day. Or share “a rose and a thorn”—something good and something hard from the day or week.
- Block out time for family activities that each person takes turns choosing.
- Take walks outside and notice nature (even leaves on a tree on a city street).
- Have a weekly family game night.
- Keep up with family traditions.
- Listen together and sing along with joyful music!



4 Develop Mental Wellness Skills

You can teach the young people in your family skills to improve mental health and well-being—and you can practice with them! Below are some examples of simple mindfulness, gratitude, and relaxation practices. For more information on supporting your child’s mental wellness, watch [these short videos](#) together that explain different skills kids can use (from the California Healthy Minds, Thriving Kids Project).

Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness practices include being aware of the present moment and noticing thoughts, sensations, and the environment—without judgment. These practices can improve

self-awareness of thoughts and feelings, which in turn can affect one's actions. They can also increase calmness and attention.¹⁵

- Ask your child to take a moment to simply notice how their body feels before they start their homework or if they seem to be getting upset.
- To help them become present in the moment, ask your child to name something using each of their senses: What do they see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Feel?



Gratitude Practices

Expressing gratitude can help increase positive feelings.

- Create a habit of family members sharing at the dinner table about something they are grateful for.
- Ask your child to start a gratitude journal and write down each night at bedtime something very small and something bigger they are grateful for.

Relaxation and Breathing Practices

Relaxation and breathing techniques can help calm the body and mind.

- Ask your child to do a progressive muscle relaxation activity with you—squeeze and hold the muscles in one part of your body (e.g., foot, fist, arm, belly, face) for a count of 5, then fully relax them and notice the difference; then do different muscles until all body parts are done.
- Breathe with your child, especially to help them calm down or focus on the present. Here are some breathing practices:
 - » Belly breaths: Put your hand on your belly and feel it move in and out.
 - » Focus on the exhale: Breathe out slowly and for longer than you breathe in.
 - » Box breath: Breathe in for a count of 4, hold for 4, out for 4, pause for 4.
 - » Lion breath: Do a strong, long exhale with mouth wide open and tongue out.

To help practice these skills as a family, check out the many other ideas, activities, videos, and games here:

- [Virtual Be Well Space](#) (from the California Center for School Climate)
- [Virtual Wellness Center](#) (from the San Diego County Office of Education)
- [Discover New Practices](#) (from the Greater Good Science Center)

5

Support Mental Health Through Physical Health

- **Support healthy sleep habits** (which are helpful for learning, mood, and physical and emotional health).
 - » **Encourage a consistent bedtime** throughout the week, with 8–10 hours of sleep.
 - » **Limit screen time** in the hour before bed (blue light from screens activates the brain, making it more difficult to fall asleep and get quality sleep).
 - » **Keep personal electronic devices** (e.g., phone, laptop, tablet) **outside the bedroom overnight**.

It is natural for **teens** not to get tired and fall asleep until later, and they have a harder time waking up early in the morning!

- **Encourage exercise:** Sports, walking, and other movement activities improve mental health, quality of sleep, and the ability to focus.
- **Help with healthy eating habits:** Emphasize whole foods (e.g., proteins, including nuts, chicken, dairy products; fruits; vegetables) and encourage less sugar, chips, and caffeine.
- **Discourage use of harmful substances**, such as alcohol and tobacco, including e-cigarettes/vapes. Learn more about the [harms of vaping](#) from the California Department of Public Health and [how to quit](#) yourself or help young people quit vaping.



Encourage exploration of interests and **participation** in healthy, affirming after-school activities.

What is different for teenagers?

Adolescence (pre-teen and teen years) is a time of great physical, intellectual, emotional, and social maturation.

You can expect your child to:¹⁶


- Have stronger opinions (early teens may still have black-and-white thinking)
- Exhibit improved people and planning skills (related to social and emotional development):
 - » More empathy
 - » Better organization
- Have new and changing interests
- Assign a high level of importance to peers' opinions (i.e., care more about what friends think than what family thinks)
- Have an increased desire and need for privacy
- Begin to see their future, including seeing themselves as adults with a career
- Develop romantic/sexual interests
- Explore personal values and identities

Although navigating these changes can be difficult for parents, they are typical and important for your child's development. If your child's or your family's functioning is being significantly impacted, then you may want to seek help. Here are some resources for understanding typical developmental changes:

- [Adolescent Development](#) (Cleveland Clinic)
- [Stages and Changes of Adolescence](#) (American Academy of Pediatrics) (also in Spanish)
- [What Parents Need to Know: Growth and Development, Ages 13–17](#) (Advocates for Youth) (handouts in five languages)

“Before students, we are people; young people who are going through multiple changes at once as we try to figure out who we are. Teens and the communities who support them need to be made aware about the importance of youth mental health to help aid them through this process.”

—California high school student

 **As a parent/caregiver, you can nurture your adolescent child's growth and mental health by:**

Learning what to expect in this stage of development

Connecting with your child whenever they are ready

Listening without judgment

Supporting your child's new interests and newly developing skills

Allowing more independence and privacy while still providing structure and boundaries

Staying involved in their academics, but in a support role

Leading with trust and empowering them to make more decisions for themselves

Encouraging independent social connections, including in real life (i.e., offline)

Being open to changes in your child, such as their trying on new identities (fashion, friends, music, gender expression)

For more ideas about how to keep your parent-teen relationship strong, see [these communication tips](#) from the Child Mind Institute.



Preventing and addressing bullying

For additional information about bullying and what you can do, visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Stop Bullying website at stopbullying.gov.

What is bullying?¹⁷

- **Unwanted aggressive behavior** by another youth or group of youths
- Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, damaging property), verbal (e.g., name calling), and social (e.g., excluding, spreading rumors)
- Actual or perceived **power imbalance**
- Repeated confrontational **actions**
- *Cyberbullying* is a term used when the bullying occurs through technology or online¹⁸

Impacts of bullying

Bullying should be taken very seriously. It impacts those being bullied, those witnessing the bullying, and those doing the bullying. Bullying has been linked to many negative outcomes, including having a serious negative impact on a young person's mental health.

How to help prevent or stop bullying

Unfortunately, many children face bullying. But there are many things that parents, school communities, and young people themselves can do to prevent bullying and create safe spaces.

Home–school communication

Ongoing communication between schools and families about bullying is important for preventing and addressing bullying. If you have concerns, contact your school.

Communicate with your children

Having ongoing conversations about bullying can help your child identify when bullying is occurring and feel empowered to seek help for themselves and other students. Support your child by talking about:

- What bullying is
- What their experiences with bullying have been

- How to be welcoming and inclusive, especially of other kids who may be targets of bullying
- How to intervene when bullying is occurring, such as speaking up for the victim or getting help (sometimes called being an “upstander” instead of a “bystander”)
- 👁️ **Look for warning signs of bullying.** Often children and youth do not ask for help.

Warning signs that your child may be involved in bullying

Type of warning sign	Characteristics
Signs a child is bullying others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets into physical or verbal fights • Has friends who bully others • Is increasingly aggressive • Gets sent to the principal’s office or to detention frequently • Has unexplained extra money or new belongings • Blames others for their problems • Doesn’t accept responsibility for their actions • Is competitive and worries about their reputation or popularity
Signs a child is being bullied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplainable injuries • Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry • Frequent headaches or stomach aches, <u>feeling sick or faking illness</u> • Changes in eating habits (kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch) • Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares • Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school • Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations • Feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem • Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide

Source: stopbullying.gov

What caregivers can do to help

When a child **witnesses** bullying:

- Reassure them that telling an adult is a positive first step and is not tattling
- Share that they can make a positive impact on others
- Work together to make a plan that they are comfortable with for responding to bullying incidents in the future
- Reinforce that they should never participate in or support bullying
- Encourage them to be supportive and kind to the student being bullied

When a child is **being bullied**:

- Be supportive and listen to them without judgment
- Let them know that you are there for them and want to help
- Discuss their ideas on how they want to handle the situation
- Identify others who may be able to help, such as a teacher or counselor
- Make a plan for next steps to feel safe and get help to stop the bullying

When a child is **doing** the bullying:

- Know that bullying is a behavior, and behavior can be changed
- Recognize that children bully for many different reasons
- Have a calm conversation to explore the reasons for their behavior
- Help them understand how their behavior affects others
- Make your expectations of appropriate behavior clear and consistent
- Let them know bullying is not OK under any circumstances
- Provide appropriate and meaningful consequences that fit the situation
- Help them think through how they can handle situations more positively
- Give positive feedback for good choices
- Reach out to a counselor for support

Adapted from *Bullying Prevention 101: A quick guide for adults*, from PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, Inc., www.pacer.org/bullying

Mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth

Parents and caregivers can play a huge role in improving mental health outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth! Simple things, such as having their gender expression and pronouns (i.e., whether they want to be referred to as she, he, or they) respected, can have a positive impact on the mental health of youth in the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ youth report lower rates of suicidal thoughts when they felt more supported by their friends and family.

 **Many LGBTQ youth feel supported when their parents and caregivers:¹⁹**

make them feel loved with no exceptions.

“I’m here for you whenever you need me.”

“I love you and I will always be your biggest supporter.”

“I accept you just as you are.”

are open to talking.

Ask questions about their friends and daily life.

Model open communication by regularly sharing your feelings with them.

Join a local parent support group to explore your own feelings.

learn about and embrace the LGBTQ community.

Understand that it’s not just a phase.

Learn about LGBTQ history.

Advocate for LGBTQ rights or participate in local organizations that support LGBTQ youth.

LGBTQ youth reported feeling most supported when their parents or caregivers

Were welcoming to their LGBTQ friends or partners



Talked with them respectfully about their LGBTQ identity



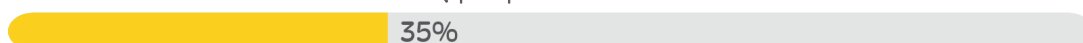
Used their name and pronouns correctly



Supported their gender expression



Educated themselves about LGBTQ people and issues



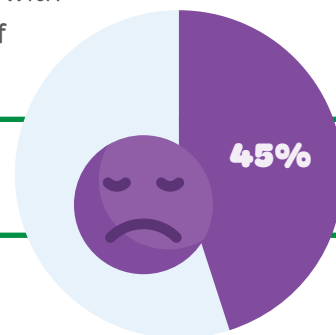
Source: *The Trevor Project 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health*²⁰

Why is it so important to be supportive of LGBTQ youth?

- Only 35% of youth who think their families are not accepting of their gender or sexual identity believe they can be a happy LGBTQ adult, whereas 92% of youth with extremely accepting families believe they can be happy when they grow up (Ryan Family Acceptance Project, 2009).
- Transgender youth are at a higher risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide than their peers who are cisgender (have a gender identity that matches their sex assigned at birth). Transgender youth with supportive parents report greater life satisfaction and better mental health and self-esteem.²¹ On the other hand, those with parents they consider unsupportive report three times the rate of depression and much higher rates of attempted suicide.²²

45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year

- LGBTQ youth are more likely to consider suicide than their peers who are heterosexual (straight) and cisgender. This is not simply because of their sexuality or gender identity—LGBTQ youth are at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized.



To learn more about how to support LGBTQ youth, [read about how caregivers can support their own children](#) and see an extensive list of [LGBTQ+ Resources](#) at the end of this guide.

Understanding terms

There are a variety of terms that youth may be using about their identities. The most important thing you can do is be curious and respectful—listen and learn from your own family members! One way to do this is to ask them what terms they identify with and would like you to use. Also, keep in mind that these may change over time.

Here are some common terms and what they mean:

LGBTQ+: The plus sign represents those who are part of the community but for whom LGBTQ does not accurately capture or reflect their identity.

Sex: PFLAG explains this as the sex assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics. Generally, we assign a newborn's sex as either male or female; then once a sex is assigned, we presume the child's gender.

Gender identity: This refers to how a person feels—the deeply held sense of their own gender. Terms used to convey someone's gender identity include male, female, non-binary, genderqueer, or many other identities. *Cisgender* is a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth. *Transgender* is a word to describe someone whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. One's *gender expression* refers to how they present themselves, such as through clothing, hairstyle, etc. Calling someone by the name and pronoun (e.g., he, she, they) they prefer is an important way to show respect and acceptance.

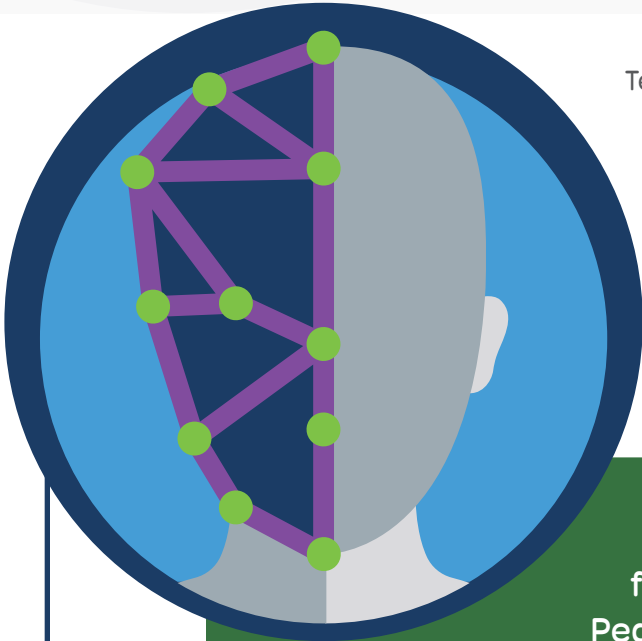
Sexual orientation: This refers to who someone is attracted to romantically or sexually. Everyone has a sexual orientation. Some of the many terms used to describe sexual orientation are *heterosexual/straight* (preferring someone of the opposite gender), *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual* (being attracted to both genders), and *asexual* (not feeling romantic or sexual feelings for anyone).

Every person has a gender identity and a sexual orientation. These aspects of identity are separate, so distinguishing between them is important. Most important for a caregiver, though, is supporting your child regardless of whether you understand all aspects of queer identity. Simply treat them the way they want to be treated (including names and pronouns) and let them know you love them unconditionally.

To have a conversation with your family about identities related to sexual orientation and gender, consider looking at this friendly introduction cartoon, the [Gender Unicorn!](#)



Safe Use of Technology and Social Media



Technology plays a big role in all of our lives—at home, school, and work. Children and teens engage in digital learning at school, play video games with social components, create and watch videos on their phones for entertainment, and connect with friends and others through social media. Although there are many benefits to technology, we also need to create boundaries and give children the skills to be online safely and manage screen time.

On average, in 2022, **teens were online almost nine hours a day**, not including time for homework. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends less than two hours of entertainment screen time per day for children.²³

For more information on media usage and effects, see:

- [Media, Technology, and Adolescent Mental Health](#) from the California Partners Project
- [The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens \(2021\)](#)
- [Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence](#), from the American Psychological Association

Pros and cons of Internet use by youth

A review of studies found that youth who self-harm or are suicidal often make use of the Internet. It is most commonly used for constructive reasons, such as seeking support and learning about coping strategies, but the Internet may also have a negative influence, including normalizing self-harm and potentially discouraging someone from seeking professional help. The Internet has resulted in channels of communication that can be misused and that are inappropriate. Both cyberbullying and general Internet use have been found to correlate with increased risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and depression.²⁴

While research on the effects of social media use by young people is new, there is enough concern about the risks to their emotions, well-being, self-image, and safety that the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [Advisory About Effects Social Media Use Has on Youth Mental Health](#)²⁵ in 2023.

Create your own family media plan based on your own priorities using a free online tool in English or Spanish from the American Academy of Pediatrics: healthychildren.org/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx



Have an open-door policy

so your child knows they can come to you for support when an interaction online feels unsafe, confusing, or disappointing. Consider saying, “Even if you’ve done something you’re embarrassed about, please come to me to figure out your next steps. You won’t be in trouble. We can learn together and stop things from going further. The most important thing to me is your safety.”

Educate yourself and your children!

Before allowing your children to use social media, it’s important to learn about the platforms they are using. Read up on the different features and settings, so you can understand the potential risks and benefits. Share your knowledge with your children and encourage them to ask questions. Then:

- **Ensure that your children are using age-appropriate platforms.** For information and guidance on technology and social media at different ages, see [Screen Time and Technology](#) from the Child Mind Institute.
- **Set restrictions on their usage.** For example, you could limit their usage to a certain number of hours per day or restrict certain features, such as direct messaging.
- **Use privacy settings.** Ensure that younger children’s social media accounts are set to “private” so that only their approved friends and followers can see their posts. Encourage them not to “friend” strangers.

Turn off screens an hour before bedtime! The blue light from screens activates the brain and makes it take longer for your child to wind down and fall asleep. Screens right before bed can also lead to poor quality sleep. It's best to have your children keep their devices outside the bedroom overnight so they aren't tempted to look at or be disturbed by incoming communication.



Talk about social media often as a family and with your child

Talk about positive uses of social media and potential negative effects.

Regularly ask your child about their experiences with the technology they use.

Acknowledge that young people connect, communicate, and make plans through social media.

Discuss which apps are most commonly used by their peers so you can approve their use (if your children are young) or simply know where they are spending their time (if they are older).

Develop limits in collaboration with your child.

What is a reasonable amount of time to be online? Should homework be completed before screen time? Can they limit their own screen time? Does a timer need to automatically shut down some phone functions and apps at a specified time?

Talk to your child about how they feel when using social media and encourage them to make choices that make them feel better.

Social media can help youth feel more connected with peers, but it can also lead to self-esteem problems, a feeling of being left out if they see others having fun without them, and unhelpful comparisons.

Check in regularly about online bullying.

Ask them if anyone is bothering them or if they have witnessed others being mean to their friends. Then, talk through how to react, support others, or step away from the interactions.

Be transparent with your child.

Let your child know if you are monitoring their online activity—you want to model honesty. And they may be more likely to stay within limits if they know you can check up on them!

Teach your child to identify risks.

Young people aren't as good at assessing risk as adults. Also, at puberty children begin to crave social rewards, such as visibility, attention, and positive feedback from peers. Remind your child that people can take screen shots of their comments and can save their photos and, if posted publicly, these images can be online forever. Suggest they ask themselves, "Would I be OK with other people seeing this?" Or even, "What if grandma saw this?"

Encourage your children to think critically about what they see and read online.

Help them learn to identify trustworthy sources of information. Find out what their school is teaching them about this so you can reinforce relevant messages. Also help them understand that people tend to post about their most positive aspects—it is not a realistic or holistic version of their lives.

Help your child be respectful of others online.

Ask them to put themselves in the other person's shoes (take their perspective) when reading what they have posted or shared.

Lead by example.

Model positive behavior. Be mindful of what you post and share online. Avoid engaging in harmful online behavior. Spend more time offline, and invite your child to play board games and go for walks!

Overall, the key to helping young people use social media safely is to be proactive and involved in their online activity while allowing reasonable and **growing privacy and independence**. By staying informed, setting boundaries, and fostering open communication, you can help your children develop healthy habits and stay safe online.



Resources for Families

Mental health crisis and suicide prevention

Crisis lines/live support

- Dial or text 988–National Suicide Prevention and Crisis Lifeline–24 hours a day; they can talk with you live and connect you with local resources.
 - » [The Lifeline website](#) also has a live chat feature and specialized resources, including in Spanish, for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, Native populations, and more.
- NAMI HelpLine (1-800-950-NAMI) is a free, peer-support service providing information, referrals, and support to people living with a mental health conditions, and their family members.
- The National Parent Helpline (1-855-427-2736) offers emotional support in English and Spanish from a trained advocate (Monday–Friday 10 a.m.–7 p.m. PST).
- The ChildHelp Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD) is a confidential hotline with resources in English and Spanish to help 24/7 with all forms of child abuse.
- Dial 211 to access a free and confidential hotline that can connect you with local resources for food, employment, crisis support, health, and housing assistance.
- [The Trevor Project](#) provides information & confidential support to LGBTQ young people 24/7. Call the Trevor Lifeline at 1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678678 to chat with a Trevor Counselor.
- [The Trans Lifeline](#) provides a crisis intervention hotline (1-877-565-8860), staffed by transgender individuals, for trans and questioning callers.

Other resources on suicide prevention

- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)—resources for adolescents
- [Our Young Children & Suicide Prevention: A Resource for Parents and Caregivers](#)

- [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide – Parent Section](#) includes how to talk with your teens about suicide or the death of a friend by suicide and a video, *Not My Kid: What Every Parent Should Know*, featuring parents from culturally diverse backgrounds asking experts common questions about youth suicide.

General mental health information

- [Mental Health Resources recommended by CDE](#)
- [Together for Wellness website](#) from CalHOPE, with tips on building resilience and wellness, coping with loss, soothing anxiety/stress, and social justice.
- [Mental Health Info](#)—for parents and caregivers from SAMHSA.gov
- [Adolescent and School Mental Health](#)—from the CDC
- [Resources for Families](#)—from the National Association of School Psychologists
- [Mentalhealthliteracy.org](#) is committed to creating inclusive mental health resources, with sections geared to parents, educators, and friends (teens).
- [HealthyChildren.org](#) from the American Academy of Pediatric’s Healthy Children website, with information on nutrition and fitness, [mental health conditions](#), [learning disabilities](#), [emotional wellness](#) and other health and development concerns.

Tools and strategies for parents

- [The California Healthy Minds, Thriving Kids Project](#) offers a series of evidence-based video and print resources (in English and Spanish) that caregivers and educators can use to teach their kids critical mental health and coping skills.
- [A Parent’s Guide to Childhood Mental Health](#)—from Chapman University
- [A Parent’s Guide to Teen Mental Health](#)—from Children’s Hospital Colorado
- [Mental Health: Part of the Bigger Wellness Picture](#)—from California PTA
- [Tips for Parents](#)—from Mental Health America
- [The Child Mind Institute](#) provides resources to support children with mental health and learning challenges, including a [Family Resource Center](#) with definitions, tips, symptom checker, and videos.
- [Tools for Young Children and Their Parents](#)—from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Watch or read with your children

- [Let's Talk About It: A Graphic Guide to Mental Health](#) (comics written for students addressing mental health, suicide, and addiction; including strategies and tips to deal with stress, promote resilience, and offer hope.)
- Animated video: [Why Do We Lose Control of Our Emotions?](#) (kids and youth)
- Animated video: [Ellie's Depression](#) (youth)
- Website and videos: [Seize the Awkward](#) (to help youth talk with peers about mental health)

Development/Maturation

- [Physical and Psychosocial Development Resources for Parents of Adolescents](#)—from the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine
- [Positive Parenting Tips](#) by age group—from the CDC
- [Parent's Guide to Developmental Milestones](#)—from Child Mind Institute

Social and emotional learning and resilience

- [InspirED activities](#) for young people to build skills in SEL, relationship building, self-awareness, self-management, and decision-making
- [Resilience](#)—resources describing what resilience is and how we can support its development, from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
- [A Parent's Guide to Raising Resilient Kids](#)—from the Partnership to End Addiction, includes how to be a supportive caregiver and strength young people's mental and physical health, family bonds, and school performance and engagement
- [Fostering Resilience in Young Children](#)—from NAEYC
- [GreaterGood.berkeley.edu](#)—resources on well-being, parent burnout, and more

Mindfulness and calming practices

- [Here for You for Them](#)—website with free mindful activities and animations
- [Mindfulness for Kids in Elementary School](#)—video from [The California Healthy Minds, Thriving Kids Project](#)
- [Mindfulness for Kids](#)—from Aetna
- [Virtual Calming Room](#)—from Sacramento Unified School District, contains smartphone apps, a self-care toolkit, creative and mindful activities, video feeds of animals, relaxing music, guided meditations and yoga

LGBTQ+ resources

- [LGBTQ Youth & Family Resources To Decrease Mental Health Risks & Promote Well-Being](#) from the [Family Acceptance Project](#) at San Francisco State University, shares ways caregivers can support their LGBTQ family members in the context of their families, cultures and faith communities, and includes a searchable map of local resources.
- [Gender Spectrum](#)—resources and support groups for gender-diverse young people and their family members and professionals who work with them
- [Supporting LGBTQ youth of color](#)—from GLSEN
- [The Trevor Project](#): Their mission is to end suicide among LGBTQ young people.
- [imi](#)—a digital mental health tool for queer teens to learn coping skills, hear stories from real LGBTQ+ teens, and explore resources that will affirm their identities and boost mental health, created by CenterLink, Hopelab, It Gets Better Project, and other partners
- [PFLAG](#)—dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for LGBTQ+ people and those who love them
- [Getting Down to Basics](#)—toolkit from Lambda Legal with guidance on issues affecting LGBTQ youth and organizations who provide them with out-of-home care (foster care, child welfare, justice systems)

Anti-bullying resources

- [Stop Bullying](#)—from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- [PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center](#) contains a section on [how parents can help their children](#).
- [TeensAgainstBullying.org](#)—created by and for teens, from PACER Center
- [KidsAgainstBullying.org](#)—information for elementary school-aged children, from PACER Center
- [What Is Identity-Based Bullying?](#)—video from the International Bullying Prevention Association (IBPA)

Online and social media safety

- [Common Sense Media](#)—parent tips and FAQs by age, topic, and platform; reviews of various media; and advice on protecting your child from cyberbullying
- [Good Digital Parenting](#)—from the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI)
- [Keeping Children Safe Online](#)—from the U.S. Department of Justice
- [Media, Technology, and Adolescent Mental Health](#)—from the California Partners Project, including a 2023 report, [Shared Experiences: How Social Media Affects the Well-Being and Empowerment of Girls and Young Women](#)
- [Screen Time and Technology](#)—from the Child Mind Institute
- [Be Internet Awesome](#)—educational curriculum to teach kids how to be safe and responsible explorers of the online world, and includes a fun and free web-based game
- [Screen Time Action Network at Fairplay](#)

Home–school connections and learning

- [How to Support Student Learning at Home](#)—from the PTA
- [Helping Your Child Feel Connected to School: Information for Parents and Families](#)—from the U.S. Department of Education and the CDC
- [2022 Back to School Toolkit](#)—from Mental Health America, offering ideas for how care-givers can understand current issues young people face and how to help them

Medi-Cal info

Data show that 1.3 million children are on Medi-Cal.

If you are a Medi-Cal member and need help with mental health or substance use services, **call CalOptima Behavioral Health at 1-855-877-3885**, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. TDD/TTY users can call toll-free at 1-800-735-2929 or call the Medi-Cal Mental Health Care Ombudsman at 1-800-896-4042 and ask for an assessment or needed services.

Search for a behavioral health provider through [CalOptima Health](#).

Endnotes

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