

THE P.E.N.

PARENT EMPOWERMENT NEWSLETTER

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Starting the Conversation: Helping Youth Make Healthy Choices

By Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Talking with children and teens about alcohol and other drugs can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Parents and caregivers may worry that bringing up the subject will make children curious, encourage questions they are not ready to answer, or lead to an argument. However, SAMHSA emphasizes that talking early and often can help children make healthier decisions.

Research highlighted by SAMHSA suggests that one of the most important factors in healthy child development is having a strong, open relationship with a

parent. Children are more likely to listen to their parents' concerns when they feel supported and know that their parents care about their health, wellness, and success.

Start Early and Keep the Conversation Going

It is never too early to begin age-appropriate conversations about alcohol and other drugs. SAMHSA notes that children can begin developing more positive attitudes toward alcohol at a young age, which is one reason it is *(continued on page 2)*

OCTOBER YOUTH ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

Register Today!
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CHILDREN'S HEALTH MONTH

Early Mental Wellness.
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DEPRESSION AWARENESS MONTH

Recognize, Support, Connect.
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Starting the Conversation: Helping Youth Make Healthy Choices *(Cont'd from page 1)*

important to start talking before they are exposed to these substances.

As children grow, the conversation should grow with them. What you discuss with a 9-year-old will naturally be different from what you discuss with a teenager. Older children may face increased peer pressure and more opportunities to encounter alcohol and other drugs. Continuing the conversation gives parents and caregivers opportunities to provide information, reinforce expectations, and help youth think through difficult situations.

Lots of Little Talks Can Make a Big Difference

You don't have to sit down for one serious “big talk.” In fact, SAMHSA encourages parents and caregivers to have many short conversations.

Everyday moments can create natural opportunities to talk—while driving in the car, eating dinner, watching television, or spending time together. Short conversations can feel less intimidating and may make it easier for children to ask questions or share what they are thinking.

Most importantly, these conversations help build a relationship where children know they can come to a trusted adult when they need guidance.

Five Ways Parents and Caregivers Can Help

1. Make your expectations clear. Let your child know that you do not approve of underage drinking or the misuse of drugs. A clear and consistent message helps children understand what you expect and why. SAMHSA reports that parents are an important influence on young people's decisions about drinking and emphasizes the importance of communicating a strong message about drinking and drug use.

2. Show your child that you care. Children are more likely to listen when they know that you are on their side. Explain that your concerns come from wanting your child to be healthy, safe, and successful. Approaching the conversation with openness and genuine concern can help make it more productive.

3. Be a trustworthy source of information. Children and teens may have questions about alcohol and other drugs. Encourage them to come to you for reliable information rather than relying solely on friends or other sources. Being willing to answer questions honestly can help establish you as someone your child can trust.

4. Pay attention without prying. Knowing what is happening in your child's life can help discourage risky behaviors. SAMHSA recommends being aware of what your child is doing while avoiding an approach that feels like constant prying or surveillance. Staying connected and involved can help children know that someone is paying attention and cares about what happens to them.

5. Help your child develop a plan. Even when a young person does not intend to drink or use drugs, peer pressure can be powerful. Parents and caregivers can help youth think ahead about what they might do if they are offered alcohol or drugs. SAMHSA suggests practicing ways to say “no” and even establishing a family code word that a child can use to ask for help when they need to leave an uncomfortable situation.

Keep the Door Open. There is no need to cover everything in one conversation. Start early, keep talking, listen, and make sure your child knows they can come to you. A few minutes of conversation today may help your child feel more prepared to make healthy choices tomorrow.





San Luis Obispo
**BOTANICAL
GARDEN**

Halloween at the Gardens

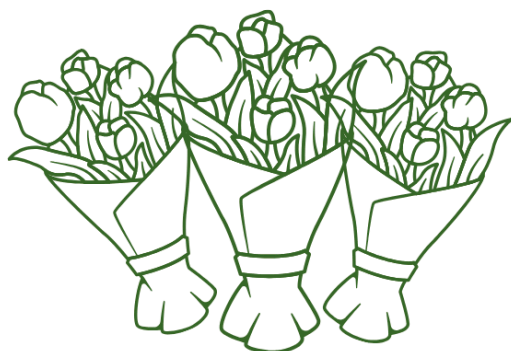
Enjoy a special tour of the San Luis Obispo Botanical Garden, which will be beautifully decorated for Halloween.

A knowledgeable and welcoming docent will guide your group through the gardens and share information about the plants, flowers, and seasonal decorations.

Date: Saturday, October 10

Time: 10:30–12:00 PM

Food and drinks will not be provided. Please bring a light sweater, water, and comfortable walking shoes.



Saturday, October 10th 2026
10:30 AM - 12 PM.

3450 Dairy Creek Road
San Luis Obispo (across the
street from Cuesta College)

[HTTPS://BOTANICALGARDENS2026.EVENTBRITE.COM](https://botanicalgardens2026.eventbrite.com)



Children’s Health Month: The Importance of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

By Lindsey Burghardt, M.D., Chief Science Officer *Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University*

In recognition of Children’s Health Month, the Center on the Developing Child spoke with Chief Science Officer Lindsey Burghardt, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, about the importance of understanding and supporting mental health in babies and young children. The following interview explores infant mental health, the importance of responsive relationships, routines, supportive environments, and caregiver well-being.

Q: When it comes to infant health, we often focus on physical development – how much a baby is growing, when they start crawling, etc. What does it mean to expand our thinking to include mental health for babies and toddlers?

A: When we think about infant mental health, we’re thinking about a young child’s capacity to express and navigate emotions; form close, secure relationships; and explore and learn about the world around them. Just like adults, babies and young children are experiencing emotions and environments that impact their mental health, and they are particularly sensitive to those influences in the prenatal period and first 2-3 years.

During this period, the interaction between genetic predispositions and positive or potentially harmful influences in a child’s environment can lay either a strong or an unstable foundation for mental health. Positive influences include things like stable, responsive relationships with caregivers at home and in early care settings, a home free of heavy metals like lead, and an abundance of green space to play in. Conversely, the presence of negative environmental influences such as polluted air or water, a lack of green space or lack of access to nutritious foods, can create a more unstable foundation for mental health.

These foundations endure well into the adult years, so expanding our view of infant health to include good mental health is essential, including providing the necessary resources for caregivers to support their children’s development with that holistic perspective.

Q: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to tremendous challenges for both children and caregivers, including an increase in mental health issues and a lack of access to providers who can help. As a pediatrician, what are some of the issues you have been seeing in your own practice on this front?

A: There have been so many strains on caregivers during the pandemic. In particular, many working families have struggled to maintain access to consistent, high-quality childcare, which puts incredible stress on both caregivers and young children. The childcare environment is so important for children’s healthy development—their relationships with immediate caregivers matter a great deal, but so do their relationships with providers in early care and education, as well as with other adults in their communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant stress on an already strained system, with a shortage of providers and limited options for parents to balance caring for their children and working to maintain their income. I’ve heard from many caregivers that they are experiencing significant stress, and in some cases job insecurity, due to the lack of consistent childcare. For caregivers who work nontraditional hours such as overnight shiftwork, or for those who care for multiple children, the stresses can be even greater. I’ve also observed increases in behavioral challenges and anxiety, including among young children.

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Children’s Health Month (Cont’d from page 4)

Q: Amidst all these challenges, how can caregivers and providers help create environments that foster strong mental health for babies and toddlers in a post-COVID world?

A: The role of caregivers and providers is critical in fostering good mental health, so we must support the needs of the adults who care for children, through both individual and systems level approaches. When we support adults directly and tackle the systemic inequities that challenge families and providers, we help ensure that children can develop in health-promoting environments.

Beginning in early infancy, establishing routines at home is a simple and impactful way to promote mental health. Children, even infants, feel secure and thrive when they know what to expect. Mini routines like the 3 B’s (bath, brush teeth, & book) before bed let a child know that it’s time to unwind. Around mealtimes, this can look like singing a song while washing your hands or sitting down together and talking about your day—even babies can participate in dinnertime, and mealtime routines with caregivers are a great way to foster connection and a sense of security.

For providers, fostering mental health for babies also means taking care of the adults who care for them. Checking in on the mental health of caregivers, including conversations around postpartum depression and anxiety and referrals to resources when appropriate, is one way to approach this. Providers can also discuss the value of routines and the benefits of a positive parenting approach during regular appointments. By creating environments with an abundance of positive factors—from access to healthy nutrition to greenspace to play—and including support that meets the needs of caregivers, we can support the healthy emotional development of infants and young children and lay a strong foundation for good physical and mental health.

“By creating environments with an abundance of positive factors—from access to healthy nutrition to greenspace to play—and including support that meets the needs of caregivers, we can support the healthy emotional development of infants and young children and lay a strong foundation for good physical and mental health.”

- Dr. Lindsey Burghardt

Chief Science Officer, Center on the Developing Child

Did You Know?

Babies and young children experience emotions and are especially sensitive to the influences around them during the prenatal period and first 2–3 years of life.



Depression Awareness Month: Recognizing Signs & Knowing Where to Turn

By Tina Lehman, LMFT Program Director Seneca

Depression is more than just feeling sad or having a difficult day, and it can affect people of all ages. Common signs may include persistent sadness or hopelessness, irritability, low energy, and changes in sleep or appetite. These symptoms should not be taken lightly, especially with our youth. Among kids ages 12-17, nearly 20% have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year. ([SAMHSA, 2021](#))

Recognizing the signs is an important first step – but knowing where to turn for support can be equally important. As October is Depression Awareness Month, we want to take this opportunity to increase understanding, reduce stigma, and remind our community that support is always available.

Here in San Luis Obispo (SLO) County, Seneca provides behavioral health and family-support services designed to respond to each family's unique needs. Our local programs include:

Outpatient Clinic: Supports young people experiencing depression, anxiety, trauma, and other mental health challenges through evidence-based approaches. Services focus on helping youth build practical skills and move toward greater stability.

High-Fidelity Wraparound: Provides intensive, team-based support for those navigating more complex challenges. Wraparound brings together caregivers, professionals, and community support to create a single coordinated plan tailored to the family. Services are flexible and can take place in the home, out in the community, and during times of crisis.

Across each of these programs, our goal remains the same: to provide Unconditional Care to youth and families, no matter what.

Along with professional support, everyday habits and deliberate lifestyle changes can also make an important difference in your mental health. Things like regular sleep, movement, time outdoors, and making time for meaningful connection can all help support your emotional well-being. While these habits can be helpful, it is also important to recognize when professional support may be needed.

If symptoms last for several weeks, become more intense, or begin interfering with school, work, or everyday responsibilities, connecting with a mental health professional can be an important next step. If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, take it seriously and seek help right away. Call or text **988** for free 24/7 crisis support or call the Central Coast Hotline 800-783-0607.

To learn more about Seneca and the services available in SLO, visit senecafoa.org



Central Coast Zoo

Join us on Saturday, November 14th, at
10:00 AM for a fun morning at the
Central Coast Zoo in Atascadero!

Enjoy a morning of animal encounters,
exploration, and family fun!

Food will not be provided, but families are
encouraged to bring a sack lunch and enjoy a
picnic at beautiful Atascadero Lake Park nearby.

The fun doesn't have to end after the zoo!
Wristbands are valid all day, so feel free to take
your time exploring the zoo and make a whole day
of it with your family!

What to Bring:
Comfortable walking shoes, a water bottle, a sack
lunch or snacks, and a light jacket.

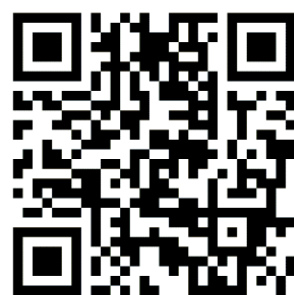
Date: Saturday, November 14th

Time: 10:00 AM

Location: Central Coast Zoo, Atascadero

Register Today!

<https://centralcoastzoo.eventbrite.com>





YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF FOSTER YOUTH

BY LGW

Growing up in foster care can be a difficult experience for children and teenagers. Many foster youth have experienced situations such as separation from their families, abuse, neglect, loss, or frequent changes in where they live. These experiences can affect not only their daily lives but also their mental and emotional well-being. Providing foster youth with safety and stability is important, but they also need understanding, support, and people they can trust.

One major challenge for foster youth is dealing with trauma. Children may enter foster care after experiencing situations that were confusing, frightening, or painful. These experiences can lead to feelings of sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, or confusion. Some youth may have difficulty expressing their emotions because they have never had a safe environment where they could talk about what they are feeling.

Another important issue is trust. Foster youth may have experienced adults coming in and out of their lives, which can make it difficult to trust new people. A child may become attached to a foster parent, only to eventually move to another home. After experiencing repeated separations, some youth may protect themselves by avoiding close relationships. They may worry that if they allow themselves to care about someone, they will eventually lose that person.

Loneliness can also have a major effect on emotional well-being. Moving between foster homes or schools can mean leaving behind friends, teachers, pets, and familiar surroundings. Having to repeatedly start over can make a young person feel isolated. Even when surrounded by other people, foster youth may feel that nobody truly understands what they are going through.

Mental health support can make a significant difference. Counseling and therapy can give foster youth a safe place to discuss their experiences and learn healthy ways to cope with difficult emotions. However, emotional support does not only come from professionals. Foster parents, teachers, mentors, social workers, relatives, and other trusted adults can all play an important role. Sometimes simply having an adult who listens without judging can help a young person feel heard and valued.

Stability is another important part of mental and emotional well-being. Foster youth benefit from having consistent routines, supportive relationships, and adults who follow through on their promises. Allowing young people to maintain connections with important people in their lives can also help them feel less alone. When children know that someone will continue to be there for them, it can become easier for them to trust and build healthy relationships.

It is also important to remember that foster youth are more than the difficult experiences they have faced. Many develop incredible strength, determination, and resilience. With the right support, they can succeed in school, build healthy relationships, pursue careers, and create positive futures for themselves.

Foster youth deserve to have their mental and emotional needs taken seriously. They need more than food, clothing, and a safe place to live. They need people who listen to them, respect their feelings, encourage them, and remind them that their past does not determine their future. By giving foster youth stability, compassion, and access to mental health support, we can help them heal, grow, and feel hopeful about the lives they are building.

Credit Reports for Foster Youth: What You Need to Know

By Tammy Brown, CWS Program Review Specialist

Your credit history can affect your future, even if you have never had a credit card or loan. California requires credit information to be reviewed for eligible foster youth beginning at age 14 to help identify errors, protect against identity theft, and make sure youth receive help addressing problems.

Why Your Credit Report Matters

A credit report contains information about your credit history. As you get older, your credit information may affect your ability to:

- Rent an apartment
- Get a car loan
- Apply for a credit card
- Get a loan or other services

For foster youth, checking your credit is also about protecting your identity. An account, loan, or debt that appears in your name but does not belong to you could be an error or a sign that someone has used your personal information.

Annual Credit Checks for Foster Youth

For foster youth age 14 and older, the County requests credit reports annually from the three major credit reporting companies:

- **Equifax / Experian / TransUnion**

The County also provides assistance with understanding the reports and addressing inaccuracies or other problems that are identified.

What to Look for on Your Credit Report

When reviewing a credit report, look for information you do not recognize, such as:

- Credit cards or accounts you did not open
- Loans you did not apply for
- Collections or debts that are not yours
- Incorrect names or addresses
- Other personal information that is incorrect
- Other activity you do not recognize

Something unfamiliar does not automatically mean identity theft. It could simply be an error. The important thing is to ask questions and have it reviewed.

If Something Does Not Look Right

You do not have to solve the problem on your own.

Your Social Worker can help you understand your credit information and make sure you receive assistance with correcting inaccuracies or addressing possible identity theft.

After You Turn 18

If you remain in Extended Foster Care as a Non-Minor Dependent (NMD), annual credit-reporting assistance continues.

Your Social Worker will assist you in requesting your own credit reports from [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com) each year and will help you understand the results and address inaccuracies or other problems.

This is also an opportunity to learn how to manage your own credit information as you prepare for greater independence.

Protect Your Credit

Protecting your personal information can help prevent identity theft. **(continued on page 10)**

Credit Reports for Foster Youth: What You Need to Know (Cont'd from page 9)

- Do not share personal information such as your Social Security number, date of birth, passwords or accounts with people you do not know.
- Be cautious with unexpected calls, texts, emails, or messages asking for personal information.

A security freeze can provide additional protection by restricting access to your credit report and making it more difficult for someone to open new credit using your information.

Beginning January 1, 2025, an authorized representative of the county child welfare or probation department may request a security freeze for a minor youth in foster care.

Talk with your Social Worker if you have questions about protecting your credit or requesting a security freeze.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a credit report?

A credit report is a record of information about your credit history maintained by a credit reporting company.

2. What if I don't have credit or credit cards?

That is okay. Some youth may have little or no credit history. You can still have information associated with your identity.

3. Why are there three credit reports?

There are three major nationwide credit reporting companies: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. Information may be different from one report to another, so all three are reviewed.

4. What if I find an account or debt that is not mine?

Do not ignore it. Tell your Social Worker. You can receive assistance reviewing the information and addressing inaccuracies or possible identity theft.

5. What if I think someone stole my identity?

Talk to your Social Worker and ask for help. You can also visit [IdentityTheft.gov](https://www.identitytheft.gov) for information about reporting identity theft and taking steps to recover.

6. Do I have to request my own credit reports?

For youth under 18, the County requests the credit reports as required. For NMDs age 18 and older who remain in Extended Foster Care, the Social Worker assists the youth in requesting their own reports annually.

The purpose of the foster youth credit-reporting process is to review your credit information and identify problems. It is not an application for credit.

7. Where can I get free credit reports?

[AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com) is the official website for obtaining free credit reports from Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion.

8. Where can I learn more?

- **California Department of Social Services – Credit Reporting for Foster Youth**
Visit cdss.ca.gov for information about foster youth credit reporting and related resources.
- [IdentityTheft.gov](https://www.identitytheft.gov)
Learn what to do if you believe someone has used your identity.

PROTECT YOUR CREDIT

A CREDIT REPORT GUIDE FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Your credit matters - even if you have never had a credit card.

ARE YOU 14 OR OLDER AND IN FOSTER CARE?

Your credit is reviewed every year to help protect your identity and catch problems early.

WHY DO WE CHECK?

- Accounts or credit cards you did not open
- Loans, collections, or debts that are not yours
- Incorrect names, addresses, or personal information
- Other signs that someone may have used your identity

WHAT HAPPENS EACH YEAR?

AGES 14-17

The County requests your credit information each year and helps you understand the results.

18+ IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

Your Social Worker helps you request reports from Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion each year and review what they mean.

SEE SOMETHING WRONG?

You do not have to figure it out by yourself.

Your Social Worker can help you understand the report and get help correcting errors or identity theft.

LEARN MORE & GET HELP



CDSS - Understanding Money & Credit

Credit reports, identity theft, building credit, and money tips for foster youth.

Scan the QR code to visit the CDSS Financial Wellness page.

AnnualCreditReport.com

Official site for free credit reports

IdentityTheft.gov

Help if you think someone used your identity

CHECK IT. UNDERSTAND IT. PROTECT IT.

Questions? Talk to your Social Worker.



**Interested in becoming a foster family, or know
someone who might be?**

We are actively recruiting new resource homes for children of all ages. If you know someone who lives in San Luis Obispo County and is interested in becoming a resource family, please encourage them to call us at 805-781-1705 for more information about the process.

SLO FOSTER CARE 

SPECIAL RECOGNITION

We would like to take a moment to express our sincere appreciation to resource parent, **Ana Chavez**, for her excellent communication, flexibility, and continued willingness to meet the children’s needs. Your commitment to supporting the children has made a tremendous difference for them and their family. We especially appreciate your willingness and ability to transport the children to their school of origin and to weekend visits. Your flexibility and dedication have helped provide consistency, stability, and meaningful connections for the children during an important time in their lives.

Thank you, Ana, for going above and beyond to support the children and their family.

We would like to take a moment to recognize and sincerely appreciate social worker, **Gwen Garcia**, for her thoughtful communication, dedication, and continued support of resource parents and the children they serve. She consistently does an excellent job of keeping resource parents informed about decisions, updates, and changes that may affect their schedules and the children in their care. Her clear and timely communication helps families feel informed, prepared, and supported.

Thank you, Gwen, for all that you do to support resource parents, children, and families. Your dedication and thoughtful approach are truly valued and appreciated!



UPCOMING TRAININGS

02 OCT	CWA – Understanding ADHD Pt. 1 9:00 am to 1:00 pm via Zoom	15 OCT	TBRI for Caregivers Part 2 – Connecting Principles 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm via Zoom
08 OCT	TBRI for Caregivers – Intro & Overview 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm via Zoom	22 OCT	Sexual and Reproductive Wellness (SB89) & Human Trafficking 5:30 pm to 8:30pm via Zoom
10 OCT	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE Training) 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm via Zoom	TBD	Upcoming Trainings



NEED CHILDCARE?

We can help ! If you are working, going to school, or participating in training we may be able to help with child care cost

**CONTACT US TO LEARN
MORE AT:**

📞 805-541-2272

✉️ nmadrigal@capslo.org



For more information on available trainings, see our event calendar at www.slofostercare.com
To register for a training, call (805) 781-1705

