



WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

This is an informational fact sheet. The purpose of the publication is to provide basic information. It is not intended to be used for assessment or treatment of mental health. If you suspect your child or teen needs help in the emotional wellness and mental health areas, please contact a mental health professional immediately.

An online directory of mental health services in South Dakota, searchable by town, is available at www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org. Other mental health resources are at this site as well. Information can also be obtained by calling 211 in Rapid City or Sioux Falls or calling toll-free 1-877-377-0941 from other areas of South Dakota.

We would appreciate your feedback on this “Wing For Life” newsletter. Please take three minutes to complete the on-line survey: www.seuw.org/wings.aspx

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The Internet – the New Social Network

Teens and young adults have flocked to social-networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Tagged.com. In fact, it seems that kids who do not have an online profile are the exception, not the rule. Cheaper, more accessible technologies have not only broken down barriers to multi-media production, but also psychological barriers to self-expression on the Internet. Social networking sites give children the opportunity to share stories, pictures, videos, and other files with friends and acquaintances. The majority of the activities on these sites is legal and can be posi-



tive. Young people who are curious can connect with friends and seek like-minded individuals. However, many teens are not aware they are putting themselves in danger by giving out too much personal information and communicating with people they have “met” only online.

The amount of personal information kids provide to social networking sites makes them a perfect place for people to exploit children. Predators are able to identify their victims and gain their trust. This trust can be used to lure teens into a false sense of security, making them vulnerable to “grooming” and enticing them to meet in person, which could have very serious consequences.

Consider some of these risks related to social networking sites

- Sites and services may ask users to post a profile with their age, gender, hobbies, and interests. While individual profiles help kids connect and share common interests, potential exploiters can and do use these profiles to search for victims. Help your child decide how much and what kind of information to post.
- Sometimes, kids compete to see who has the greatest number of contacts and will add new members to their contact lists even if they don’t know them in real life.
- Users may pose as someone else, usually as a younger person. There is no way to know the background of an online “friend.” Such users take advantage of being anonymous and use social networking profiles to entice or sexually exploit kids.
- Kids can’t take back the online text and images they have entered. Once online, “chat” as well as other web postings become public information. Many web sites are stored by search engines. Photos and text can be retrieved long after the site has been deleted.
- Kids have been punished by their families, denied entry into schools, and even not been hired because of dangerous, demeaning, or harmful information found on their personal web sites or blogs.

These parenting guides are a gift to you from the Sioux Empire United Way. They were adapted and written by the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service. We hope the information is helpful and gives you additional resources to assist in your efforts to raise healthy and successful children.

For additional resources on children’s mental health, visit www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org.

This is a United Way partner program that connects you to all available services for your family.



You can't watch your child every minute, but you should use strategies to help your child benefit from the Internet and avoid its risks. By exploring the Internet with your teen, you greatly expand her ability to use it as an educational tool. By providing guidance and discussion along the way, you can increase your teen's online skills and confidence about her ability to avoid the risks. You might be surprised by what your child can teach you at the same time.

- Urge your child to restrict access to her profile so only those on her contact list are able to view it. Explain to her that unrestricted posting of profiles can place her personal information in a public forum. She could put herself at risk from those who wish to take advantage of such information.
- Encourage your child to choose a gender-neutral screen name or nickname, such as initials or a word. Make sure the name doesn't include information that reveals identity or location.
- Visit social networking sites with your child and exchange ideas about what you think is safe and unsafe; ask about the people she is communicating with online.
- Insist that your child never give out personal information or arrange to meet in person with someone she met online without first checking with you.
- Encourage your child to think before typing. Ask "Is this message hurtful or rude?" Also urge her not to respond to any rude or annoying messages or ones that make her feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused. If she receives such messages, encourage her to show them to you.

Being Cool! How to Resist Peer Pressure

Peer pressure may be one of the most powerful influences in your child's life. Peer pressure may be a positive influence and help to challenge or motivate your child to do his

BUILDING CHARACTER:

Courage!

It takes a lot of courage for a teenager to stand up for what's right when he is the only one who wants to do the right thing. To do what's right despite disapproval or negative peer pressure is very difficult. It also takes courage to take risks that are for his own good. It takes courage to stand up for what one believes is right. Your child needs to develop courage in order to make the right decision when it comes to critical issues such as drugs, violence, and other unethical or illegal activities. Showing courage helps to build a strong sense of personal conviction which will ultimately help your child find success in life.

Life requires physical, mental, and moral courage. Physical courage is doing something that is physically possible in rare circumstances, such as swimming to shore after your boat capsizes. Mental courage is putting your mind to something that is challenging, such as thinking through a complex problem when the easy solutions are not the right solutions. Moral courage is what enables a teen to stand up for what he believes in, that is staying true to himself. During the teenage years, it is especially important for you to help your child build his moral courage. Building courage develops strong character.

Talk with your teen about courage. Begin with uncomplicated situations to get your child to start thinking about different ways to respond or react:

- Following school rules.
- Applying for a job.
- Learning to play a new musical instrument.
- Telling the truth.
- Trying to learn something new that he has always wanted to do.
- Choosing not to wear a style of clothing that is popular but not modest.

There will be many more challenging situations and dilemmas in your teenager's life as he moves toward adulthood. In facing these challenges successfully, your teen is beginning to reflect the values he has learned at home. If he has started to show courage in most situations, now you can begin to tackle some of the more complicated adolescent issues:

- Following your rules even when they are different from his friends.
- Asking someone for a date.
- Admitting his mistakes.
- Meeting new people.
- Accepting differences – his own and those of others.
- Being friends with someone that very few people like.
- Standing up to peer pressure.
- Correcting a teacher, parent, or friend when he knows they are wrong.
- Sticking up for someone else.
- Facing the unknown.

best. Unfortunately, negative peer pressure may influence your child to do things that do not fit with his sense of what is right and wrong. Peer pressure may influence your teenager's fashion choices, alcohol and other drug use, dating, friend selection, and school performance.

What's considered cool and uncool can vary widely from year to year and from school to school. Cool behavior can range from dressing in trendy styles to being good at a certain sport or being rude and sarcastic toward parents. Especially during the middle school and junior high years, many things may be considered uncool behavior, such as displaying affection and obedience toward parents, being nice to an unpopular classmate, or expressing interest in school. While not all teenagers follow the cool/uncool code in their social settings, they certainly know about it.

In a larger sense, peer pressure may be present in the workplace or within the general community. It can affect people of all ages and backgrounds and it affects people in different ways. For teens who are still forming and shaping their own identity, peer pressure is a very powerful force. Some of the ways it can affect teens include:

- Directly. Peer pressure may be experienced by someone telling your teen what he should be doing or daring him to do something he normally wouldn't do.
- Indirectly. Peer pressure may not always be obvious to your teen. It's not uncommon for a group of friends to have particular habits or activities that they do together; however, your child may behave differently when he is with a different group of friends. Media, such as TV, music, or Internet sites, also exert influence over teens.
- Individual. Sometimes the peer pressure comes from your teen himself. Feeling different from the group can be hard. To avoid this, your teen may do things to make sure he

feels like the rest of the group and may put an undue pressure or burden on himself to fit in.

It is human nature for kids to worry about making friends and being liked, but during adolescence, these fears intensify. This is a time of awkwardness and uncertainty for teens, as their bodies, interests, and priorities are changing all at once. Belonging to a group of friends affirms a sense of self-worth and supports your teen as he works toward adulthood. All teens will be affected by peer pressure in varying degrees. In order to make sure that your child can resist the negative influences of peer pressure, talk to your teen about your family values, model the values, role play ways to get out of uncomfortable situations, and let him know that you are always available. Taking excessive risks or engaging in hurtful or harmful behavior because of negative peer pressure can lead to more serious problems and it may take some convincing to get your teen to understand this.

We want our children to use restraint and good judgment when they are tempted to do inappropriate or illegal things, but this is difficult for a teenager craving acceptance. Although it is normal for teens to want more independence, it is important for you to take an active role in helping your teen develop a thick skin toward peer pressure. You can't be there for your child all the time, so you help prepare him for making his own decisions. If you have discussed the risks, instilled a sense of pride, and raised him with a solid set of values, he will be more likely to withstand the pressures. Your child will be stronger for the experience of resisting negative influences. Ultimately, your guidance will help him choose friends who exert positive peer influences and he can take these lessons learned with him for the rest of his life.

TODAY'S ISSUE

Talking About Traumatic Times

Children experience many changes as they grow and move through the different stages of childhood. This can often be challenging for children. It can be confusing for some children in learning how to take on growing responsibilities and roles. Often, youth will face these challenges with skill and confidence. However, some events may be more traumatic and require additional guidance and assistance to help youth address the more difficult events in life.

Adults and children alike sometimes respond to traumatic events with shock and denial. These are normal reactions to significant events. During the process of healing and understanding, no two people will deal with issues and heal in exactly the same way. Some individuals need or appreciate time alone on occasion, while others need sup-

port throughout the healing process. Some individuals require more time to heal than others. The healing time and process may be affected by other events preceding, during, or after the traumatic event. A person's natural ability to adjust to stressful situations affects the amount of healing time, as does the seriousness of the situation.

The American Psychological Association (2004) and the University of Minnesota Extension Service (2003, GTTT-15) have suggestions on how parents can help children deal with traumatic events. To help your child heal, first you need to be aware of how the event has affected you. It is important to acknowledge your feelings associated with trauma.

Parents should consider the following steps in coping with the trauma.

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- Give yourself as well as your child time to heal.
- Ask for support from people.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you, such as talking or writing in a diary.
- Find out about local support groups.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well and get plenty of rest and exercise.
- Establish or reestablish routines, including hobbies and enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions.
- Meet challenges head-on.
- Remember, the crisis is not insurmountable.

You will need to address your child's emotional needs at the same time that you are coping with your own emotional health.

- Be aware of behavior regression. Your child may demonstrate behaviors that were common when he was younger, such as nightmares, fear of sleeping alone, and withdrawal.
- Although you may not be able to spend a great deal of

time with your child during this period, be aware of his needs and allow him to be more dependent on you as time allows during the trauma and healing period.

- Provide social experiences to help relieve tension. Let your child know that it is still OK to laugh and have fun.
- Encourage your child to speak to you or others about his thoughts and feelings.
- If your child struggles talking about feelings, keep art supplies available for other ways of expression than talking.
- Keep regular schedules for activities to help create a sense of normalcy and security.
- Help your child eat a healthy diet and get adequate rest and exercise.
- Focus on the positive!

If you are worried about your child during this time or feel your child is overly anxious or depressed, please contact your physician, school counselor, or local mental health professional.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <http://www.allmentalhealth.samhsa.gov/thefacts.html#ocd>

For information on children's mental health services in South Dakota, www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org.

The term "parent" is used throughout this newsletter. It is intended to encompass guardians and primary caregivers as well.

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