



# WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

**ESS406.4S | Fourth Grade** **Series II**

*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](http://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](http://www.seuw.org/wings.aspx)*

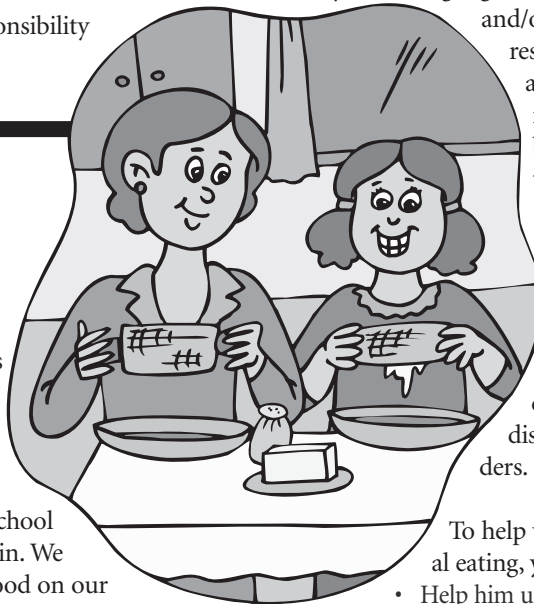
There are an estimated 2.7 million children in the U.S. that are reported (according to their parents) to suffer from emotional or behavioral difficulties. Such difficulties interrupt normal family routines, a child’s education, social opportunities, or even the child’s ability to make friends. Youth obesity, which is at an all-time high in the nation and in South Dakota, can also be a factor in a child’s self esteem and emotional wellness. During childhood, it is very important that children get the proper nutrition daily to be physically and emotionally healthy. The healthy habits that children learn will carry them into adulthood.

But how does food relate to a child’s mood? Research shows that when individuals are sad or feeling down, food is often a way to seek comfort. A child who is coping with a variety of stressors in his life, such as trouble in school, difficulty making friends, new siblings, moving, divorce, or chronic health problems, may do “emotional eating.” Often this leads to eating too much or choosing foods that are unhealthy, including high calorie foods, sugary, salty and/or high fat foods. As a

result, the child gains weight and the child’s self-esteem is impacted. Food can also be a “quick fix” or distraction when a child wants to forget his worries or guilt, but the effect is not long lasting. In its extremes, youth obesity can lead to increasing rates of major depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety or panic disorders, and other disorders.

To help your child avoid emotional eating, you can

- Help him understand what hunger feels like and discourage eating when he is not hungry.



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## Good Nutrition and Emotional Wellness

We all know that food plays a very important part in our daily lives. It nourishes us when we are hungry, provides an opportunity for families to share the day’s events during mealtimes, and is often the centerpiece of social family gatherings such as holidays and reunions. Food is also a central part of children’s social get-togethers, whether it is having pizza with friends, a school party with snacks, or celebrating a team win. We probably think about the importance of food on our physical wellness; however, we often underestimate the importance of our food choices on our mental or emotional wellness.

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](http://www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org).

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



- Teach him what triggers his eating, such as loneliness, boredom, or sadness.
- Help your child find alternatives, such as listening to music or engaging in a physical activity.
- Focus on healthy choices and limit your child's exposure to unhealthy foods.
- Provide a balanced diet for your child. Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains should be a main focus. Breakfast is very important also.
- Encourage your child to exercise for stress relief, physical fitness, and emotional wellness.

It is important for you to communicate with your child and recognize when he is sad, lonely, or depressed or when he is showing signs of unhealthy behaviors. By encouraging regular physical activity and healthy foods, you can help your child be strong, both physically and emotionally.

If you are worried about your child or feel your child is overly anxious, depressed, or struggling with being underweight or overweight, please contact your physician, school counselor, or local mental health professional.

## BUILDING CHARACTER:

### Make Room for Responsibility

"I don't know where my lunch money went."

"I forgot my homework."

"I don't know how the lamp broke."

Do these comments sound familiar? As a parent you want your child to grow up to be responsible. Most parents want their child to:

- think before he acts,
- consider the consequences of his actions on all people affected,
- accept responsibility for the consequences of his choices,
- be reliable and accountable,
- not make excuses,
- not blame others for his mistakes, and
- not take credit for others' achievements.

At times the task of instilling responsibility can be frustrating. Nevertheless, with parental guidance you can encourage responsibility in your child and get real results. The key is to make room for responsibility.

As an infant, your child initially depended on you to care for all his needs. As he grew, you cheered on his first steps and his first words. Then you likely encouraged him to feed himself, become toilet trained, and dress himself. As he progressed through each step you gradually let go and gave him room to learn the new skill. This same concept is true for each phase of growth and development in your child's life.

It is important for your older child or preteen to be given opportunities to do things for himself too. By gradually giving him opportunities to make decisions, solve his own problems, and experience consequences of his choices, you are preparing him to stand on his own two feet as an adult. However, developing responsibility is a gradual process that needs your continual guidance.

Consider these ideas to foster responsibility in your child.

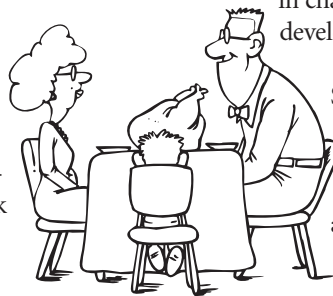
- Model responsibility yourself. Your child is constantly watching, listening, and learning from your example. Try to be the type of person you hope your child will want to become. When you make a mistake or do not act responsibly, admit your mistake and apologize for it.
- Teach responsibility through chores. Give your child chores to do at home. Try to line up the chores with the interests and maturity level of your child. Chores can give him a sense of satisfaction for good work and a feeling of contributing to the family. Notice and support his efforts in this area.
- Allow your child to make decisions. Give your child the freedom to make choices in areas he shows interest in. Of course, this does not mean your child has free rein of his life, limits still need to be in place. For example, your child may decide what shirt to wear, but you still decide when bedtime is.
- Assist him in solving his own problems. First, help him identify the problem. Encourage him to brainstorm possible solutions and then think of consequences to each solution. Ask your child which solution he thinks is best and if it is safe, let him use it. If you think he will have trouble implementing the solution, encourage him to practice what he will say or do to help him carry out his solution.
- As long as your child is safe, don't be afraid to let your child make mistakes. Children often need to be allowed to make mistakes. Mistakes can be some of the best teachers instead of parent lectures.
- Let your child experience the consequences of his choices when the consequences are natural, such as a toy getting broken because he did not care for it properly. Let your child experience the consequence (as long as it is safe) and encourage him to see how it is tied to his behavior.

## Making Time for Family Time

Does it seem like your family never has time to do family activities together? Is it hard to get everyone together at one place and at one time? Parents need to look for creative ways to find time for family togetherness. One place to start is by expanding an existing event, for example, family mealtime or family chores.

Make family meal time a priority. Challenge your family to eat at least one additional meal together each week. Show your child that family meals are important by turning off the TV and not answering the phone while you are eating. Eat your meals around the table. It is easier to talk and listen when you are facing each other. Allow each family member a chance to participate in the conversation. Family mealtime has other benefits as well. Research shows that when children eat family meals they will consume more fruits and vegetables, eat less fried food, and drink significantly fewer sodas than their peers.

Doing household chores, such as cleaning the house or yard, together as a family provides for development of teamwork and helps teach responsibility. Doing



chores with the children also fosters good communication skills.

Plan a family meeting to help the family come to a decision as to what they would like to do together. Family meetings involve all members of the family and encourage effective communication. A family meeting is planned ahead; it is not spontaneous. Each person is listened to with respect, no matter age or verbal ability. Each member of the family has a chance to discuss and have a voice in coming to a decision as to what the family will do together.

Create a family calendar with activities the family would like to do for family time. Post a calendar on the refrigerator and have each member of the family add and plan an event for the family time. The event may be as simple as making snow angels in the snow or going for a walk. Being in charge of planning for family time helps children develop responsibility for each family member.

Spending quality family time is important not only when children are young but also as they get older. There are endless activities to share with children. It is important to take advantage of quality time with your children. Take time to enjoy your family.

## TODAY'S ISSUE

### Helping Children Cope with Disaster

Children are exposed to many negative images and disturbing stories through the media. Natural disasters and man-made tragedies contribute to feelings of fear, confusion, and insecurity in children of all ages. In a disaster, your child will look to you and other adults for help in understanding what happened.

The way your child sees and understands your response to disturbing information is very important. A child is often aware of his parents' worries, but he may be particularly sensitive during a crisis. Explain the event in words he can understand while acknowledging the frightening parts. In spite of the occurring crisis, assure your child you will do everything you can to keep him safe.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, and then begin to show worrisome behavior. As a parent, you know your child better than most people, so keep a careful watch and look for patterns of new behavior that do not normally occur with your child.

Parents should be alert to changes in their child's behavior:

- Refusal to return to school and "clinging" behavior, including shadowing mother or father around the house.
- Persistent fears related to the catastrophe (such as fear of being permanently separated from parents).
- Sleep disturbances, such as nightmares, screaming during sleep, and bedwetting, persisting more than several days after the event.
- Irritability and loss of concentration.
- Jumpiness or "fidgets."
- Behavior problems, such as misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical of the child.
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found.
- Withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, listlessness, decreased activity, and preoccupation with the events of the disaster.

Reassurance and a predictable routine to promote security are the keys to helping your child through a traumatic time. However, 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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For information on children's mental health services in South Dakota, [www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org](http://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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