



# WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

ESS1503.4F | Fourth Grade

Series III

*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 “Wings for Life” newsletter. Please take three minutes to complete the on-line survey: [www.seuw.org/wings.aspx](http://www.seuw.org/wings.aspx)*

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

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## What is Emotional Wellness?

As you read the heading on this newsletter, you may have asked yourself, “What is emotional wellness, and how does it relate to my child’s development?” Emotional wellness, or social-emotional wellness, is a developmental process. In the same manner that your child develops physically and intellectually, he or she also develops emotionally. Children need to develop emotional and social competencies in order to do such things as

- recognize and manage emotions;
- develop caring and concern for others;
- establish positive relationships;
- make responsible decisions; and
- handle changing situations.

As a parent, you have an active role in contributing to your child’s emotional wellness. According to researchers, in order for children to best develop these abilities, children need to “experience safe, nurturing and well-managed environments where they feel valued and respected; they need meaningful interactions with socially and emotionally competent people; and they need positive and specific guidance” ([www.caselorg/basics/definition.php](http://www.caselorg/basics/definition.php)).

The articles in the Wings for Life series pertain to your children’s experiences with other children, competition, the use of free time, daily schedules, money, family togetherness, and many more challenges. The information in each article is intended to help you help your child’s social-emotional learning. Key skills that are addressed in the Wings for Life series include:

- Self-awareness—recognizing feelings and managing anger.
- Understanding others—developing empathy and taking the perspective of others.
- Making responsible decisions and following through—this includes considering the long-term consequences of one’s actions for oneself and others.
- Understanding oneself—handling emotions, setting goals, and dealing with obstacles.
- Building healthy relationships—saying “no” to negative peer pressure and working to resolve conflicts.

Nurturing your child’s emotional wellness will lead to life-long emotional health:

- If a child is able to calm himself when he is angry, he can avoid damaging important personal relationships with others.
- If a child is able to initiate and maintain friendships, she develops both socially and emotionally.
- If a child is able to resolve relationship conflicts respectfully, he will sustain positive personal and professional relationships throughout life.
- If a child is able to make ethical choices, she builds character and her commitment to fairness grows stronger.
- If a child is able to maintain a positive attitude, he handles adversity and challenges in a good way and commits to making the world a better place for himself and others.

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.



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## Exaggeration or Lying?

Tall tale or exaggeration? From a young age, we thrill and delight children with imaginative stories about the fantastic adventures of Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, or Tom Sawyer. Do we ever caution our children that these adventures stories are not true? If they aren't true, are they lies?

Children, much like some adults, embellish their stories, and sometimes even lie. Some children may find it difficult to discern the difference between reality and fantasy. Or a younger child may feel compelled to exaggerate or make things up, just to keep up with the interesting things that his older sisters and brothers are doing.

Children may lie or exaggerate because they have observed adults telling lies. For example: You are tired and don't want to help at the church fundraiser. You feel you are probably justified in thinking that you have helped for many years and it is someone else's turn, so you tell "a white lie." Your child hears you tell the caller over the phone that you are sick and can't help this year.

If parents want to help their child be truthful, it is important to understand the underlying causes of his behavior. Let's examine some of the reasons that children tell lies. Your child may not be truthful because your child

- feels intimidated or feels excessive pressure from a parent or other adult, for example, to get good grades in school;
- is afraid of a harsh punishment for doing something he was told not to do;
- seeks approval from his friends (by embellishing a story or lying, your child thinks he is gaining the friend's approval or will be accepted by his peer group);
- lacks positive self-esteem and exaggerates or lies to conceal his low self-confidence;
- lacks appropriate social skills;
- imitates the behavior of adults that he has observed lying or telling white lies;
- conceals information from parents or other adults when a friend has confided in him (i.e., misguided loyalty to a friend);
- may be trying to get your attention.

First, it is important not to label your child as a liar. Names or labels tend to last in a child's mind long beyond the comment. Try to use other phrases to replace the word "lie." If you suspect your child is not being truthful, say, "You need to be honest with me." If your child is reluctant, embarrassed, or sensitive about telling the truth, be willing to give your child some time and space. Acknowledge your child's feelings, but be insistent about knowing the truth.

If you know what has happened, avoid setting up your child to tell a lie. In an even voice and without blaming, disclose the information you already have. Allow your child to add information that clarifies his point of view about the incident. If you know that the child is being deceptive, both state your view without attacking your

child and determine a reasonable or logical consequence for his untruthfulness.

If you make lying the focus of your conversation with a child, it will be more difficult to determine the underlying cause for your child's behavior. Model honest and open communication with your child. Lying is purposeful behavior; discover the purpose and you can engage with your child in a meaningful dialog about his real fears, misunderstandings, or problems.

## Handling Emotion

As your child gets older it is normal for him to feel and show stronger emotions that you may not have noticed before. As your child adjusts to his world and moves closer towards independence, this can be a very typical aspect in development. There are many things that you can do to help your child deal with these emotions:

- Tell your child when you notice something he might be feeling. Do not accuse him or put him on the spot, but casually mention that you noticed something. For example: "You seemed angry when Jamie told you no."
- Listen to your child when he tells you what is going on. Do not judge or blame your child for what is happening. Take your time to hear the whole story. Model positive emotions by active listening. A child will be more willing to talk to you again if he doesn't feel as though he is going to be criticized.
- Comment briefly on the feelings you think your child was feeling. This shows your child that you care and understand why your child felt that way. One way to do this is to reflect back what you thought you heard. For example: "You were hurt when Bob said you couldn't draw."
- Put a label on the feeling. This will help develop your child's emotional awareness. Sometimes children don't understand their feelings. By helping him label a feeling, he is better equipped to handle that emotion.
- Help your child think of things to do. Help him think of relaxing activities that could take his mind off what is bothering him. Examples include counting to ten, thinking of things that make him happy, or drawing a picture.
- Just be there. Some children do not like talking about their feelings. Make sure your child knows that you are there if he wants to talk, but give him the space he needs. Instead of talking, you could do activities together such as taking a walk, shooting hoops, or going out for ice cream.
- Be patient. Do not rush to fix all of your child's problems. Focus on helping your child solve his own



problems. Teaching healthy coping skills will help your child deal with future stressful situations.

Children learn by watching what their parents do. They are expert observers. If you can effectively manage your own emotions, this will help your child learn how to handle his. Make a point to deal with your own emotions in positive ways. Attitudes are often “caught” by our children. Model appropriate emotion handling so that your child can see how to handle his emotions appropriately.

If you are worried that your child has a difficult time handling his emotions, or if you feel your child is overly anxious or depressed, please contact your physician, school counselor, or local mental health professional.

## Do I Overindulge My Child?

After a long day at work, you walk into the house to find your daughter’s toys scattered everywhere. Her shoes are in the middle of the floor, and her juice cup is tipped over beside her. You can either ask your child to clean up her things or you can clean them up yourself.



As a parent, you know you need to teach your children. But you also realize that sometimes children get frustrated when a task seems too big. Thus, it is important to give your children manageable tasks to help them feel a sense of responsibility.

Overindulging children or doing too much for them does not give them a chance to develop a real sense of responsibility and independence. When you give your children opportunities to develop their sense of responsibility, they learn to feel good about themselves. Children who feel good about themselves become confident and independent teens and adults.

You can help your children learn about responsibilities. Overindulgence can occur when a parent does things for a child that the child is capable of doing or when a parent says “yes” every time a child asks for something. Overindulgence can also occur when parents don’t set enough limits for their children and let them do whatever they want.

Some key points about overindulgence:

- Overindulging is different than spoiling—the words are not interchangeable.
- Overindulgence can happen at any income level.
- It is not just about “bad families” or dysfunctional families—all families can be affected.
- It is not just about “stuff” but also about parent-child interactions and expectations.

Overindulgence can take many forms. There are three types of overindulgence. They include 1) giving too much, 2) overnurturing, and 3) being soft or offering too little structure.

Some parents feel guilty about not spending enough time with their children, so they buy them things to make up for it. This kind of overindulgence often happens with divorced parents or parents who work long hours away from home. Some parents are so stressed that they don’t have the energy to handle conflicts, so they give in to a whining child’s whims to keep the peace. Although this stops the whining, it creates a bigger problem.

Parents teach responsibility by having clear and consistent expectations. Children do not need every toy or video game they want. In fact, teaching them to handle small disappointments now can help them handle larger disappointments in the future.

Give children manageable chores and tasks to do at home. If each child has a chance to do this chore, she or he will develop a sense of competence and responsibility for the task. Giving children responsibilities around the house helps them feel like valuable members of the family who contribute to the family’s well-being.

Remind children over and over, about completing a task or help them do it. Either of these approaches helps to show children what you expect. Meeting your expectations helps them develop a sense of accomplishment. This will help your children become responsible, competent, and independent adults.

## Child’s Transition Time Between Parents

The time following a separation and/or divorce is a challenging time for children and parents. Your child will probably be dividing her time between the homes of her mother and father, and one of the new challenges is the exchange of the child between the two households.



New routines will need to be established, and parents should do the best they can to facilitate the transition from one parent to another.

During the transition time from one parent to another, it is important to be positive. Consider these guidelines to make the transition a positive experience for your child:

- Prepare your child for the separation by talking to her about the upcoming visit.
- Give your child enough time to say goodbye to you and to get comfortable with her other parent.
- Reassure your child that you will return to pick her up.
- Acknowledge your child’s feelings, but also be positive about the time your child will spend with the other parent.
- Allow your child to take along comfortable objects such as a favorite blanket, a stuffed animal, or a picture of you.
- If possible, come to an agreement with the other parent that your child can always telephone either parent.
- Keep routines as similar as possible at both homes to help your child adjust.

- Be as flexible as possible with schedules.
- Treat the other parent with respect.
- Help your child feel safe and comfortable in both homes.
- Discuss rules and discipline with the other parent so you are consistent.

When you are with your child, work at building a strong relationship:

- Find activities that you enjoy doing together—time and task are important elements of spending time together.
- Set aside some time without planned activities just to hang out.
- Make sure your child has her own place in each home, even if it is just part of a room, so she will feel it is also her home.
- Help your child meet other kids in the new neighborhood so she will have friends at both homes.

Some separated/divorced parents want to make the visitation unpleasant so that the child does not want to visit the other parent. This creates a difficult situation for the child, who feels caught between the two. Consider these suggestions to avoid making the situation unpleasant:

- Do not use your child to pass on divorce-related messages.
- Do not fight with the other parent during drop-off and pick-up times.
- Do not make your child feel guilty about spending time with the other parent.
- Do not tell your child that you will feel lonely and sad while she visits her other parent.
- Do not withhold visitation to punish the other parent for problems such as missed child support payments. Withholding visitation punishes your child (who is not guilty).
- Do not withhold phone calls to your child from her other parent.
- Do not hurt your child by failing to show up for visitation or by being late.

Remember to do what is in the best interest of your child (your interests and the interests of the other parent are secondary).

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

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#### Resources

Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org).

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. [www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel).

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For information on children's mental health services in South Dakota, [www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org](http://www.sdkidsmentalhealth.org).

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