



# WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

ESS1503.KF | Kindergarten

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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## Discussing Feelings

By the time your child is ready to enter kindergarten, you are well aware of your child's emotional disposition and can usually tell how she is feeling by her facial expressions, body language, or behaviors. You may not always know why your child is experiencing an emotion, but you know something is on her mind. It is important to communicate with your child about her feelings at every stage in life, but especially as she enters school. Your child is entering a new world and may not understand some of the new feelings that she is having.



Open communication with your child is essential to helping her understand new feelings and emotions. You can assist your child in channeling her feelings in a positive manner, and she is more likely to accept your suggestions, if you really listen to and communicate with her.

As outside influences grow and new relationships are formed through your child's school experience, it is important to give special attention to maintaining and strengthening communication with your child:

- Communicate at your child's level. Don't only use words that she will understand, but also put yourself at eye level with your child—sitting down together is the easiest way.
- Find time to talk with your child when you will not be interrupted. Set aside time everyday to discuss events of the day, even if the only time is during a car ride home from school or after a sports activity.
- Be ready to listen if your child initiates a conversation. If your child is asking for time to talk, it is probably important. Be prepared to listen without interrupting and give her your full attention. Her problem or concern may not seem very important to you, but the concern is very real to your child.
- If your child has trouble describing her feelings, use "I" messages to state your understanding of the problem and give her time to respond. Avoid jumping to conclusions about what she is feeling.
- Your child looks to you for validation. The feelings you reflect back to your child influences how she sees herself. Make your child feel valued by accepting her feelings as real and sincere.

If you observe that your child is frustrated, angry, or upset, but she does not seem to know the cause, use a simple question/answer exercise to reveal possible causes of her emotions. Ask your child to list a few things that make her feel angry, sad, happy, hurt, or proud of herself. After discussing each feeling, ask

your child what she does when she is angry, or sad, or happy. By exploring different feelings, your child may discover the reason for her emotions and be better prepared to cope with her feelings.

## Positive Reinforcement: Praise and Encouragement

*Good job Ben! Way to go Laura!* Do you find yourself frequently using phrases like these with children? They are great positive reinforcing phrases; however, parents and other adults need to be aware of the difference between words of praise and words of encouragement.



Praise may be defined as verbal reinforcement that focuses on evaluation or approval. Praise tends to place emphasis on the outcome over the effort. In the extreme, it may lead children to equate their worth with the praise that they receive.

When children are praised for exhibiting appropriate behavior or for excellence, the result can be a positive self-concept; however, unrestrained use of praise may result in children believing that they are only ok if someone tells them that they are ok.

Inappropriate use of praise can have negative consequences for children. Children may begin to doubt the sincerity of the speaker when praise is overused. Children will realize that not everything they do is deserving of praise.

- Sometimes a child will deny or contradict a compliment, placing the speaker in a difficult situation (i.e., the speaker having to come up with a reason why the praise is valid).
- Sometimes a child may interpret praise as threatening (i.e., the child feels that the praise was a fluke, and the child could not possibly repeat the accomplishment in the future).
- Sometimes a child might feel manipulated by the speaker (i.e., the child feels he or she is being complimented because the adult wants to control the child's behavior).

Encouragement focuses on action rather than the person. It demonstrates understanding and appreciation of one's individuality, rather than establishing an expectation of conformity.

There are three steps in giving a child encouragement.

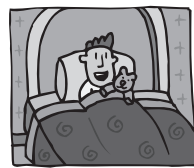
- 1) First, describe what you see or feel. This is called "descriptive praise." For example: "Tell me about this interesting drawing." Or "How did you get everyone involved in the game?"

- 2) Next, allow time for a response. Watch and listen for verbalizations and/or body gestures. This gives a child an opportunity to identify his skills and may cause the child to praise himself in the process.
- 3) Finally, reinforce the child's perceptions. If the child is particularly pleased with her use of color, you can reinforce that by saying that the colors are a striking aspect of the picture. Or, if a child says that she did a good job of explaining the game, you can compliment her enthusiasm or powers of persuasion.

Positive reinforcement helps children develop a positive self-concept. Adults should use both praise and encouragement appropriately to help children realize their potential.

## Nightmares and Night Terrors

When your child goes to bed at night, you expect that he will sleep through the night without any problems. However, some nights he may have bad dreams and wake up crying and yelling your name. When you go to him, he seems totally out of it and pushes you away. He may be experiencing a night terror.



Children experience two types of bad dreams. The first is a nightmare, which consists of a scary dream followed by an awakening. The second is a night terror, which happens during a phase of partial arousal from deep sleep into light sleep.

Signs and symptoms of nightmares:

- Wake your child completely.
- Your child may be fearful and may cry.
- He may have a hard time falling back asleep because he is scared.
- He may continue to dream about it.
- Often he will remember it the next day and want to talk about it.

Signs and symptoms of night terrors:

- Your child is still asleep; however, he is making rash movements and may be crying, screaming, and sweating.
- He is unaware that you are trying to console him.
- He may push you away.
- He returns to sleep rapidly without ever waking up completely.
- The next day he has no recollection of the incident.
- His night terrors may continue for consecutive nights.

Ways to reduce night terrors:

- Avoid overtiredness, a change in your child's schedule, and stress.
- When your child experiences night terrors, don't panic. Stay calm and soothe your child.
- If it continues to happen for several nights in a row at the same time, wake him 15 minutes before it happens. Have him get up for a drink and bathroom break, then help him return to bed and tuck him in. This gives him a complete break from the normal sleeping routine.
- If that seems to confuse him more, then just let him sleep through it.
- Make sure he is safe. Move all breakables away from his bed and keep the floor around his bed clear. He may be throwing his arms about and wandering around.

Night terrors and nightmares are something that occur naturally and most children go through them. If it seems your child has an overabundance of nightmares or night terrors, you may want to check with your pediatrician.

## Talking to Your Child's Doctor

One way to reduce stress when your child is sick is to have a positive relationship with your child's doctor. You should be able to feel comfortable talking to the doctor about your child's medical past, present, and future. For this important communication to happen, parents need to try to control their stress by being prepared for their child's visit to the doctor. For example, keep a medical journal of your child's last visits, any past medical issues, and progress on typical developmental milestones.

Other strategies for positive communication with your child's doctor include the following:

- Make a list of your concerns about your child. Always bring up the greatest concern first. Although you should never hesitate to ask questions, set aside non-urgent questions for your child's yearly physical exam.
- Be specific. Explain your concerns by telling the doctor what happened or what the symptoms are, how long the illness lasted, when it happened or began, and what you have done to alleviate the symptoms.
- Don't be afraid or ashamed to talk about your child's mental health. Appropriate treatment for mental health is extremely important for all ages, including children!
- Be aware of time constraints. Take time to explain your child's distress, but allow time for the doctor to examine your child thoroughly and ask further questions.

- Be focused! Avoid distractions. You have limited time with the doctor; therefore, it is important to turn off your cell phone and, if possible, leave your other children with a babysitter.
- Be informed about your child's health, but understand that not everything you read or see on the Internet or other media is true or even applicable to your child. Talk to your doctor about appropriate sources of information. Remember, your doctor or other health professionals should be your primary resource.
- Be on time for appointments, follow all doctor and medication directions, and complete all follow-up instructions.

Have appropriate expectations of the doctor and express those expectations to the doctor. According to the website Kidshealth.org, you can expect your child's doctor to do the following:

- monitor your child's health
- explain your child's growth and development
- diagnose and treat your child's minor or moderately serious illnesses
- explain your child's illnesses and treatment
- provide referrals
- work with specialists, if needed

Positive communication can help you and the doctor become more effective at meeting your child's medical needs.

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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).

Jellinek, M., B.P. Patel, and M.C. Froehle. 2002. *Bright futures in practice: Mental health, vol. 1 practice guide*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

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

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