



WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

ESS1503.2F | Second 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. 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

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.casel.org/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.

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



South Dakota
Cooperative Extension Service



Helping Your Child Cope With Divorce

Divorce can turn everything a child has known upside down. Some parents try to shield their children from the anguish of divorce, while others expose the destruction of the relationship in front of the children.



How children react to divorce can be related to how parents inform them of their decision. Divorce is a confusing time for children, so the first time you talk to your child, limit your explanation to the most important and immediate issues. Your child needs to be reassured that just because parents divorce each other, mom and dad are not divorcing their children.

Helpguide.org offers a few suggestions for talking with your child about divorce:

- Make plans to talk with your child before there are any changes in the living arrangements.
- Plan to talk when your spouse is present, if possible.
- Remind your child that you love her.
- Be respectful of your spouse when giving the reasons for the divorce.
- Tell your child your marriage problems are not her fault. Let her know she is not responsible for fixing them.
- Tell your child about changes in living arrangements, school, or activities. Let her know when changes will happen, but do not overwhelm your child with details.
- Be emotionally available to comfort your child. Even if there has been much conflict in the home, your child may grieve over the loss of the parent leaving the home or the loss of hope for reconciliation.

Emotional reactions to the news may range from anger or fear to indifference to relief. You may be surprised by the intensity of your child's feelings about the divorce, but try not to discount them. Divorce is a loss—even if it is only the loss of a dream of a happy home. Early elementary age children begin to understand that divorce means their parents will no longer be married and live together, and that they may not love each other anymore.

Thoughts and feelings your child may experience:

- Blaming herself for the divorce.
- Worry or anxiety about the changes in her daily life.
- Nightmares.
- Sadness and grief because of the absence of one parent.
- Longing to recreate “what was.”
- Loss of appetite, diarrhea, frequent urination, headaches, or stomach aches.

What parents can do for their child:

- Repeatedly tell your child that she is not responsible for the divorce.
- Reassure your child that her needs will be met, and let her know who will take care of the children in the family
- Talk with your child about her thoughts and feelings; be sensitive to her fears.
- Schedule time for your child to spend with her other parent. Be supportive of her ongoing relationship with the other parent.
- Read books together about children and divorce.
- Gently, and matter-of-factly, remind your child that the divorce is final and that parents will not get back together again.

Think about your child's needs from his/her point of view:

- **I need both of you to stay involved in my life.** Even if you don't live close by, write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions about whom I spend time with and what I like and don't like to do. When you don't stay involved in my life, I feel like I'm not important and that you don't really love me.
- **Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other.** Try to agree on matters related to my needs and me. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty. I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you.
- **Please support me and the time that I spend with each of you.** If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.
- **Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don't have to send messages back and forth.** I want you to talk with each other so that the messages are communicated the right way and so that I don't feel like I am going to mess up.
- **When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things or don't say anything at all.** When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are putting me down and expecting me to take your side.
- **Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life.** I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

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.

Respecting the Opinions of Others

Treating each other with respect makes our homes, schools, and communities a better place to live. Respect means treating others the way you want to be treated:



- Being considerate and polite.
- Not insulting or making fun of people.
- Not judging someone before you get to know him.
- Listening to what others have to say.

Respecting the opinions of other individuals is also important. For example, Sam thinks pepperoni pizza is the best, but Abby prefers cheese pizza. Is one of them wrong and the other right? Of course not—there is just a difference in opinion.

Respecting the opinion of another person does not mean you agree with the opinion, and it doesn't mean that you will change your opinion. Respect for another opinion means that you accept that it is okay for another person to feel the way he does.

Although a pizza preference may seem trivial, it demonstrates that we all like different things and have different ideas, which makes each of us unique.

Children are quick to notice both the differences and similarities in other people. It is important for you to guide their thoughts and feelings about the differences. Help your child gain an appreciation of each person's uniqueness. Our differences add variety to our world. Even though people are all different, each person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. What a bland land we would live in if everyone's opinions were the same.

Your child needs to know that other people have feelings, beliefs, and hopes, just as he does. Each person has valuable ideas, thoughts, and opinions, and we can learn a lot from others. Show your child through your actions that you are open to and interested in learning about other people:

- First, let your child know you care about your family by sharing things such as your opinions, likes and/or dislikes, and interests.
- Let your child see you being friendly to people from all walks of life (e.g., store clerks, community workers, teachers, and others).
- Interact with people from different backgrounds.
- Let your child see you reading books or newspapers or watching TV shows about people in different

countries or cultures. Talk with your child about interesting things you have learned from your reading or viewing.

- Listen to your child when he tells you about things he has learned about people in the community or in different parts of the world.
- Although it is important to teach your child to respect differences of opinion, also make it clear that some opinions should not be tolerated (e.g., hatred and intolerance toward others).

Conduct Disorder

Children may try the patience of adults, often doing things to see if they can frustrate or anger them. They may also be aggressive toward other children, trying to establish their place amongst their peers. When these behaviors go beyond "sometimes" or "on occasion," there may be a greater cause for concern. These behaviors might indicate that a child has a conduct disorder.

A conduct disorder is a condition in which children are more frequently aggressive than is common among their peers. Children who have been diagnosed with conduct disorder often violate the personal or property rights of others. These harmful behaviors include physical aggression toward people, animals, and/or property; disregard for rules or laws; and problems with academics and school attendance. A conduct disorder is diagnosed when symptoms occur for a period of at least six months and occurs due to both biological and environmental factors. Early detection is beneficial in the treatment of the condition.

Parental support and commitment to working with the child is necessary in the success of addressing conduct disorders. Jellinek, Patel, and Froehle (2002) identified actions helpful in addressing children with conduct disorder diagnosis:

- Seek assistance from mental health professionals. Counseling, parent education, and/or medication may be utilized during the course of action. Family members may also participate in this step of the intervention process.
- Begin interventions as soon as a diagnosis is made.
- Participate in the intervention process with the child.
- Implement consistent responses, consequences, and expectations that are appropriate to the child's developmental level.
- Identify community agencies that could lend support. Also, visit with parents who are addressing the same issue to gain support and knowledge from them.

- Instead of using physical punishment, identify other forms of consequences for negative behaviors.
- Look for the positive in the child's behaviors and encourage those behaviors.
- Establish positive family time together.

If you are worried about your child during this time or feel your child is overly anxious, depressed, or is suffering from a conduct disorder, 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.

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel.

University of Missouri-Columbia. *The effects of divorce on children #GH6600. Coping with divorce: Helping your child cope with separation or divorce.* www.helpguide.org.

US Department of Education. 2003. *Helping your child become a responsible citizen [electronic version]*. Retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.ed.gov/>.

Josephson Institute of Ethics. 2007. *Six pillars of character [Electronic version]*. Retrieved January 2008 from <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/>.

Jellinek, M., B.P. Patel, and M.C. Froehle, eds. 2002. *Bright future in practice: Mental health*. National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

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

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Advocating for our children ... healthy, educated, safe.