



WINGS FOR LIFE

Emotional Wellness for Families

ESS1503.6S | Sixth Grade

Series III

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. If you need additional resources for your family, you can call the HELP!Line by dialing 211 or 334-6646. This is a United Way partner program that connects you to all available services for your family.

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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).

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.

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



South Dakota
Cooperative Extension Service



Raising Tomorrow's Leaders

There is little doubt that children grow up quickly. One day, you bring them home from the hospital, and the next time you blink, they are entering middle school. Even though time passes by quickly and there is so much going on in your family life, you strive to help your children learn critical life skills—including positive leadership skills.

Leadership skills? What could a pre-teen possibly know about being a leader? Plenty! Youth at this age can begin to develop the most basic of leadership skills. Your child may not necessarily want to be the “leader” at the front of the room, but her ability to make a contribution as a member of a group is just as important as standing in front, leading the charge; in fact, it may be more important. It is critical at this point in your child's development that he or she acquires fundamental leadership skills. Your child can

- learn how to interact positively with others,
- develop communication skills,
- strengthen decision-making skills,
- learn how to make a proactive contribution to a group process.

As a parent, you can play a critical role in fostering leadership development skills with your pre-teen. Try the following:

- Responsibility for an activity. In school, at camp, at church or other group setting, allow your pre-teen to be responsible for leading an activity or project that others will participate in. At first, work side by side with your pre-teen, providing mentorship for the various details of organizing. As your child begins to demonstrate her desire to do more, turn over the planning and details to her.
- Community projects. Encourage your pre-teen to lead or to become part of a community project with a peer group. Pre-teens can effectively advocate for a cause such as cleaning up a vacant lot or reducing graffiti in the community. An adult mentor can provide guidance for decision making, problem solving, seeking information, and formulating a plan.
- Sports. Many pre-teens are involved in athletics. Encourage your pre-teen to demonstrate her leadership by encouraging the other team members to cooperate and do their best. Good sportsmanship, including others, and a focus on fun are all leadership characteristics that can be developed on the field or court.

Parents can cultivate positive leadership by discussing the various traits of leadership:

- Responsibility
- Listening to the ideas of others
- Setting a positive example
- Including everyone
- Trying to help everyone do his/her best
- Sharing responsibility and power
- Keeping everyone moving toward the goal
- Providing service to others

Most importantly, allow your child space to learn through her own actions...and mistakes. Bailing your child out or protecting her from making a mistake does not help a child become a stronger leader. Demonstrate good leadership by treating your pre-teen with respect. Acknowledge your child's strengths while providing a safe environment for her to learn and grow her new-found skills.

Family Resilience and Strength



With the pressures of time, money, and emotions, life can be a challenge for your family. Sometimes the home becomes the place where everyone is exhausted or grouchy. Still, there are ways for your family to be strong and happy and make your home a haven. Together, you can identify the traits that are already strong in your family. Once your family's traits are identified, choose one or more of them to work on as a family. The following are common traits identified in resilient families (those families that deal positively with life stressors).

Caring and Appreciation

Using good manners and everyday courtesy toward your child or spouse goes a long way toward letting them know you care about them. Complimenting good behavior and thanking them for their efforts is important. A quick pat on the back, a hug, or a handclasp can also mean a lot to people of all ages. Avoid saying things that are unkind or sarcastic. Angry words can never be taken back.

Time Together

While quality time gets a lot of attention, quantity time is just as important. The more time you spend together, the better chances are that you will share quality experiences. Do everyday things (such as eating meals, chores, talking about the events of the day, popping some popcorn, or playing a game) together. Your child learns how much she is valued and loved when you give her the precious resource of your time.

Encouragement

In resilient families, members feel accepted for who they are. Help your child find and build her own unique talents and interests. Don't try to make her into something she's not. Believing in your child and her abilities will teach her to believe in herself. While time together is crucial, it is also important to encourage individual involvement in activities outside the family. These experiences help to develop self-sufficiency and an individual identity. Celebrate each family member's successes within and outside the family, and help each other learn from mistakes.

Commitment

Build commitment in your family by valuing things that make your family special. One way to build commitment is to practice family traditions. Traditions could include stories and prayers before bedtime, Saturday morning pancakes, making cookies for the holidays, or an annual camping trip to a favorite spot. A family tradition is any activity or event that occurs regularly and holds special meaning for your family.

Communication

Talk and listen to each other. Share feelings, hopes, dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, experiences, and needs while driving in the car, or while sharing household chores. You can encourage talk by saying or asking such things as "Tell me more."; "Wow. That must have been exciting."; or "What was the best part of the day for you?" Or play a talking game; write questions that range from silly to serious, draw out of a box, and respond.

Adaptive Ability

Routines and patterns give stability to the family; however, adaptability is also a signature of strong families. Oftentimes the change or event itself is not stressful, but the way you react to or perceive the event causes stress. There are a number of common changes most families face: children get older; adults switch jobs or retire; families are reshaped by birth, adoption, marriage, divorce, sickness and death; and families move to different communities.

Understanding that change is a common and healthy part of life can give you a more adaptable perspective.

Spirituality

The belief in something greater than you can build family resiliency. Shared beliefs provide your family with purpose, meaning, and guidelines to live by. Being a member of a religious community, having faith in humanity, behaving morally, feeling unity with living things, praying, meditating, studying scripture, taking walks in a natural setting, stargazing, and having fam-

ily devotionals are all ideas that can enrich your family's spirituality.

Is Competition Good or Bad?

Physical exercise is a great way for children and adults alike to stay healthy both physically and emotionally. At this age, a lot of children get their exercise through a youth sports program. Parents should be aware of issues related to youth sports and competition. Experts do not agree on whether competition helps children develop essential social skills, or if it does nothing more than cause conflict and discrimination. Some scholars feel that competition is part of human nature and that competition helps children learn skills that will be important throughout their lives. Other scholars feel that the cooperation experienced during a positive youth sports experience, not the competition, is most valuable in promoting healthy emotional development. They believe that cooperative games encourage children to work together instead of against each other.

Others believe that it is likely a combination of competition and cooperation that promotes healthy development for youth. Competition itself is not bad; it can serve as a means of social comparison, which is necessary for individual youth to see how they are unique. Competition also helps youth understand the difference between extrinsic rewards (i.e., winning, adult approval, social status) and intrinsic rewards (i.e., skill improvement, mastery of skills, and enjoyment of the game). Research has shown that youth who are motivated by intrinsic rewards understand that practice and effort are often just as important as skill. These youth tend to stay in sports longer than youth who are motivated only by extrinsic rewards. Youth who are motivated by intrinsic rewards often persevere longer in a crisis situation and have higher self-esteem. They are also more willing to try new things and see that, while you can't always be the best, doing your individual best is important.

There are several reasons for gradually introducing competition during childhood. First, competition restricts participation. Youth sports should be about learning and developing skills and promoting intrinsic motivation, which cannot happen if a child is sitting on the bench. Second, competition tends to emphasize the winning instead of the skill learning, creativity, and fun. If youth are going to enjoy sports and improve skills, they need to focus on playing and learning the sport, not on the outcome of winning. Third, competition can create a high level of anxiety, which makes it quite difficult for youth to learn and have fun. Anxiety brought on by competition increases the likelihood that children will drop out of the sport. By introducing competition

gradually, children are able to enjoy themselves while learning.

The top 5 reasons that youth quit sports:

1. Too much pressure/competition.
2. Lack of playing time.
3. Youth doesn't like the coach.
4. Too many other activities.
5. NOT FUN ANYMORE.

There are four things you can do as a parent to evaluate if there is an appropriate balance between the level of competition and cooperation. 1) Attend some practices and games/matches to observe how competition and cooperation are exhibited. Does the environment help youth understand the importance of self-motivation, or is it all about winning? 2) Informally interview the parents of children already participating to see what they think (do this individually). 3) Talk to the sport's organizers to get a sense of their philosophy and the training provided for coaches. 4) This is perhaps the most important step: talk to your child! Ask your child these important questions:

- Do you WANT to play?
- What makes it fun to play sports?
- What causes pressure for you?
- How can I (as a parent) support you while playing sports?

Remember, youth sports can be used to promote both physical health and mental health. But to foster higher self-esteem and positive social skills, parents, coaches, and sports administrators all have to be willing to create an environment that promotes intrinsic goals. In other words, it is not all about winning, but rather it is be all about the child!

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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.

The Community Tool Box. Chapter 13, Section 7.
Encouraging Leadership Development Across the Lifespan.
<http://ctb.ku.edu>.

Daniels, A.M., & Perkins, D.F. (2003). *Putting youth back into sports*. Brookings, SD: South Dakota State University.

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