

Supporting Children’s Mental Health: Tips for Parents (adapted from www.nasponline.org)

Create a sense of belonging. Feeling connected and welcomed is essential to children’s positive adjustment, self-identification, and sense of trust in others and themselves. Building strong, positive relationships among students, school staff, and parents is important to promoting mental wellness.

Promote resilience. Adversity is a natural part of life and being resilient is important to overcoming challenges and good mental health. Connectedness, competency, helping others, and successfully facing difficult situations can foster resilience.

Develop competencies. Children need to know that they can overcome challenges and accomplish goals through their actions. Achieving academic success and developing individual talents and interests helps children feel competent and more able to deal with stress positively. Social competency is also important. Having friends and staying connected to friends and loved ones can enhance mental wellness.

Ensure a positive, safe school environment. Feeling safe is critical to students’ learning and mental health. Promote positive behaviors such as respect, responsibility, and kindness. Prevent negative behaviors such as bullying and harassment. Provide easily understood rules of conduct and fair discipline practices and ensure an adult presence in common areas, such as hallways, cafeterias, locker rooms, and playgrounds.

Teach and reinforce positive behaviors and decision making. Provide consistent expectations and support. Teaching children social skills, problem solving, and conflict resolution supports good mental health. “Catch” them being successful. Positive feedback validates and reinforces behaviors or accomplishments that are valued by others.

Encourage helping others. Children need to know that they can make a difference. Pro-social behaviors build self-esteem, foster connectedness, reinforce personal responsibility, and present opportunities for positive recognition. Helping others and getting involved in reinforces being part of the community.

Encourage good physical health. Good physical health supports good mental health. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise and adequate sleep protect kids against the stress of tough situations. Regular exercise also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.

Communicate with school staff or your pediatrician when you have concerns. Professionals can provide useful information on symptoms of problems like depression or anxiety. These can include a change in habits, withdrawal, decreased social and academic functioning, erratic or changed behavior, and increased physical complaints.

Ensure access to school-based mental health supports. School psychologists, counselors, and social workers can provide a continuum of mental health services for students ranging from universal mental wellness promotion and behavior supports to staff and parent training, identification and assessment, early interventions, individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, and referral for community services.

Building Resiliency: Helping Children Learn to Weather Tough Times

(adapted from www.nasponline.org)

Adversity is a natural part of life. At some point, we all face difficulties, such as family problems, serious illness, a personal crisis, or a painful loss. Being resilient is important to dealing with adversities like these. While most parents hope that their children never face extreme adversity, successfully facing tough situations can actually foster growth and give children the skills to be more resilient in the future.

Most people have a natural tendency to adapt and bounce back from adversity. However, parents can help their children learn to face challenges successfully, whether it is the stresses of everyday life, such as academic difficulties or problems with friends, or severe adversity, such as losing a home and being displaced from normal routines for months. Following are five ways to promote resiliency in your children and help protect them from long-term ill effects of difficult experiences.

- 1. Think positive!!** Modeling positive attitudes and positive emotions is very important. Children need to hear parents thinking out loud positively and being determined to persist until a goal is achieved. Using a “can do” problem-solving approach to problems teaches children a sense of power and promise.
- 2. Express love and gratitude!** Emotions such as love and gratitude increase resiliency. Praise should always occur much more often than criticism. Children and adolescents who are cared for, loved, and supported learn to express positive emotions to others. Positive emotions buffer kids against depression and other negative reactions to adversity.
- 3. Express yourself!** Resilient people appropriately express all emotions, even negative ones. Parents who help kids become more aware of emotions, label emotions appropriately, and help children deal with upsetting events are giving them useful life skills.
- 4. Get fit!** Good physical health prepares the body and mind to be more resilient. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise and adequate sleep protect kids against the stress of tough situations. Regular exercise also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.
- 5. Foster competency!** Making sure that children and adolescents achieve academically is great protection against adversity. Children who achieve academic success and who develop individual talents, such as playing sports, drawing, making things, playing musical instruments or playing games are much more likely to feel competent and be able to deal with stress positively. Social competency is also important. Having friends and staying connected to friends and loved ones can increase resiliency. Social competency can even be created by helping others.

Protecting our children against all of life’s unexpected painful events is not possible. Giving them a sense of competency and the skills to face adverse circumstances can be a valuable legacy of all parents. Resiliency can be built by understanding these important foundations. The more we practice these approaches; the better able our children will be to weather whatever life brings.

Adapted from: “Resiliency: Strategies for Parents and Educators,” Virginia Smith Harvey, Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, NASP, 2004

Tips for Parents Following School and Community Violence *(from www.nasponline.org)*

When a national tragedy occurs, people will be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents and school personnel should help children cope by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

General Tips for All Adults

- Model calm and controlled behaviors
- Limit exposure to media – television, computer, etc. Overexposure to coverage of the event can be traumatic
- Reassure children that they are safe and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives
- Let children know that it is okay to feel upset or not feel upset
- Observe children’s emotional state
- Tell children the truth and answer the questions they may have honestly.
- Stick to the facts
- Keep you explanations developmentally appropriate.
- For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!
- You may need extra help for those children with special needs.
- Monitor your own stress level.
- Review safety procedures.

What Parents Can Do:

- Focus on your child over the week following the event and offer extra reassurance about their safety.
- Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games before bed.
- Make time to talk with your children each day in a routine way.
- Let children express their emotions.
- Give plenty of hugs! Many children will want actual physical contact.
- Safeguard your child’s physical health
- Maintain a “normal” routine – but don’t be inflexible
- Consider thinking and expressing hopeful thoughts
- Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope
- Limit or stop TV viewing of these events, particularly if they impact your child or you; be aware if the tv or internet is on in the background.
- Monitor internet and social media, texts.

Suggested talking points to emphasize when talking to children:

- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand
- Sometimes people do terrible things that hurt others.
- Stay away from guns and other weapons
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems.
- Tell an adult if you or someone else hear or see someone threaten you or your classmates.