



SCHOOL SUCCESS and MENTAL HEALTH

We all know we perform better when we feel better; physically or mentally. Now research is supporting our natural instinct with studies documenting children/youth success in school with positive mental health. But what does that mean? What is positive mental health for children?

Based on definitions by the leading mental health organizations positive mental health occurs when a child feels loved, safe, secure, supported, belonging, confident in their capabilities, able to maintain self control and comfortable trying new tasks and activities. Children with these attributes do well in school.

However, many children do not have these attributes. They feel the opposite; unloved, unsafe, insecure, not supported, not belonging, lacking confidence in the capabilities, unable to maintain self-control and not comfortable trying new tasks or activities. These children struggle in school and in all aspects of their lives. We find these children every day in classrooms across the world. Yet their ability to be successful in school is necessary for them and our world. They need to be self-sufficient adults and we need them to become contributing members of our society. What do we all need to do to support these children, assist them in school and ensure that they become fulfilled adults positively contributing to their communities?

1) We need to recognize the children most likely to struggle with positive mental health. These include: a) children experiencing loss in their life through death, divorce, moves, parental incarceration, deportation or deployment. b) children in foster or kinship care and living with grandparents c) children who experience a life change or illness, d) children who struggle with consistent basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, consistent caregivers. e) children experience heightened trauma

2) We need to recognize ‘Normal’ changes which may negatively impact children’s mental health. These include: a) annual changes in classrooms and teachers, b) transitional school changes such as elementary to middle school; middle school to high school c) changes in school districts due to family changes, d) change in friendships e) changes in schedules and routines at home and/or at school.

3) We need to educate ourselves on the ways that children communicate their losses, grieving and needs. Many times the behaviors they use to communicate their needs are misunderstood by those in a position to assist and support. (parents, foster parents teachers, school counselors, social workers) This results in further negative interactions impacting the child’s mental health.

4) We need to build systems of support in our homes, schools and communities which provide a safety net for children. This includes; taking time to listen to children, staying engaged with children and their schools/friends, providing ways for children to express their frustration, fears and needs through conversations with trusted adults, physical outlets, art, music, sports, involvement with faith communities, age appropriate clubs and activities.

5) We need to create caring and welcoming environments throughout our communities where children and families can feel that they belong. This includes local school sites, faith communities, local libraries, park and recreation facilities/ activities and community agencies.

6) We need to support Fathers in their involvement with their children whether they live in or out of the home. The impact fathers have on the lives and mental health of their children has long been underestimated. Their impact can be positive or negative based on the support and education they receive. Families, schools and communities must provide an avenue for fathers to become involved and stay involved in their children's lives. Men must make a commitment to being strong positive role models for their children from birth through adolescence.

Together we can ensure that all children have the safety net and support to maintain positive mental health allowing them to feel secure and safe so that they may concentrate on their school achievements and obtain a stable and productive future.

What will YOU do this year to support children in sustaining positive mental health and success in school?