



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA  
SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

# Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf

300 East Swissvale Avenue - Pittsburgh, PA 15218-1469 - [www.wpsd.org](http://www.wpsd.org)

## MENTAL HEALTH

Children come to school each day with more than their lunch and backpack. They bring a myriad of life factors that shape their learning and development. These influences range from family issues, health, and culture to behavior, learning style, and abilities. Virtually all are related to mental health.

Although historically mental health has been viewed through the lens of mental illness, (e.g., depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disease), we have come to recognize that good mental health is not simply the absence of illness, but also the possession of skills necessary to cope with life's challenges. As educators we need to understand the role mental health plays in the school context because it is so central to our students' social, emotional, and academic success.

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2000 Report on Children's Mental Health estimates that one in five children and adolescents will experience a significant mental health problem during their school years. The Center for Mental Health Services indicates that 11% of children in the U.S. have a serious mental disturbance that is accompanied by significant impairment, in home, school, and/or social contexts. Unlike outdated notions concerning children's mental health, it is now well recognized that these problems are not "just a stage" or simply a function of poor parenting or crowded classrooms, but are instead the result of a complex interplay of individual genetic, environmental, developmental, and physiological factors. In any given year, it is estimated that one in five children and adolescents have a mental health disorder, yet less than 20% of these children receives needed treatment. These issues vary in severity, but approximately 70% of those who need treatment will not receive appropriate mental health services. Failure to address children's mental health needs is linked to poor academic performance, behavior problems, school violence, dropping out, substance abuse, special education referral, suicide, and criminal activity. These issues may seem removed from the world of elementary school, but mental health concerns can develop as early as infancy and, like other aspects of child development, the earlier we address them the better. Family is the first source of support for a child's mental health. However, the increased stress and fracturing of life today make it imperative that schools partner with parents to help children thrive. Indeed, schools are excellent places to promote good mental health. Children spend a significant amount of time there and, as trained caring adults, educators have the opportunity to observe and address their needs. Doing so effectively requires developing the capacity both to reinforce children's natural mental health strengths and to respond to children suffering from the more acute mental health disorders that we see on the rise today.

**Good mental health is important for everyone.** Mental health is as important as physical health to our quality of life. Mental health is not simply the absence of mental



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illness, but also means having the skills necessary to cope with life's challenges. If ignored, mental health problems can interfere with children's learning, development, relationships, and physical health. School mental health professionals are individuals who help children and youth overcome barriers to success in school, at home, and in life.

**All youngsters face mental health issues from time to time.** In order to understand mental health problems, it is important, first, to understand mental health. Mental health is how we think, feel and act in order to face life's situations. It is how we look at ourselves, our lives, and the people we care about and know. It also helps to determine how we handle stress, relate to others, evaluate our options and make choices. Some problems are more serious than others, but all children face challenges that can affect their learning and behavior. These can include:

- Stress and anxiety
- Worries about being bullied
- Problems with family or friends
- Loneliness or rejection
- Disabilities
- Depression
- Thoughts of suicide or hurting others
- Concerns about sexuality
- Academic difficulties
- Dropping out
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Fear of violence, terrorism and war.

**School mental health services are integral to student success.** Mental health is as important as physical health to children's quality of life and directly impacts their learning and development. Children cannot learn effectively if they are struggling with a mental health problem, such as depression, or feel overwhelmed by academic, social or family pressures. It is important to recognize that mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness; it also means having the skills necessary to cope with life's challenges. Students, families, schools, and society at large benefit when schools meet the needs of the whole child by fostering social-emotional skills and identifying and preventing mental health problems early.

Research demonstrates that students who receive social-emotional support and prevention services achieve better academically in school. School leaders who recognize the relationship between student success, good schooling/instruction, and comprehensive school health programs that include attention to students' mental health will more effectively improve student and school outcomes. A recent study provided strong empirical evidence that interventions that strengthen students' social, emotional, and decision-making skills also positively impact their academic achievement, (Fleming et al., 2005). Prevention programs that reach all students and early identification and intervention with at-risk students are both crucial. Examples include education on mental health issues, school violence prevention, social skills training, bullying prevention, suicide prevention, conflict resolution, and screening for emotional and behavioral problems.

Providing quality school mental health services requires that schools have an adequate number of appropriately trained professionals. The vast majority of school-based services are provided by school-employed school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. They are specially trained in school system functioning and learning, as well as family contexts and mental health. Proper training is critical, as is close collaboration among school-based providers and with other educators. While sharing some core competencies, each profession also has its own unique skills and provides different, albeit interrelated, services. Together, school mental health providers support teachers, improve school safety and climate, and reach out to all students and families, enabling teachers to teach and students to learn more effectively.

School helps promote a SENSE OF BELONGING. A sense of belonging is essential to all of us. It is the basis for children's positive adjustment, self-identification, and sense of trust in both the system and themselves. In fact, studies have shown that school connectedness in elementary school decreases incidents of risky behavior into young adulthood. Young children's strongest bond is to their parents, and a primary objective in early elementary school is to extend that sense of connection to school. A close bond with the classroom teacher or other significant adult is crucial. This develops through personal interaction, but it is also important to establish a positive relationship with parents. Children take cues from their parents when it comes to affiliation and a sense of trust between teacher and parent will transfer to the child.

School helps promote a SENSE OF ACOMPLISHMENT. Children need to know that they can accomplish goals through their actions. This is often referred to as self-efficacy or self-determination. Children who lack this ability may be overly dependent or tend not to accept responsibility for their actions because they do not believe they are in control. We can build on children's ability to complete a task (e.g., organizing blocks by color) by helping them learn to set their own goals. Steps in this process include helping the child define the goal (reading better), identifying strategies (reading ten minutes before bed), establishing a method of assessment (able to read book X), and determining the time period in which it will be accomplished. Although it takes considerably longer, this method also works for problem solving and conflict resolution. The goal is to enable a child to recognize a problem, define a desired outcome, identify the resources they have to solve the problem, assess progress towards the goal, and judge when they need help. It is appropriate for children to seek help once they have exhausted their own capacity or recognize that the situation is beyond the scope of their competency.

School helps children ADAPTING TO CHANGE. Routine is important to young children. They are introduced to the concept in kindergarten and first grade with habits such as coming in quietly, putting belongings in a cubby, checking in, ordering lunch, etc. Such regular activities lend structure to the child's environment and help establish their sense of competence and belonging. Equally important, though, is the ability to adapt to change. This is a critical capacity throughout life that begins to develop at a young age. Some children react negatively to change, particularly if they are experiencing emotional stress. They may need help adjusting even to small changes at school (substitute teacher, new seating arrangement) or at home (new sibling, different bed). Principals and teachers should encourage parents to inform them of any

unsettling changes at home. Adults can minimize anxiety associated with change by giving students advance warning and allowing them to take part in the change, such as discussing the possibilities for rearranging the classroom. It is also important to help children develop coping strategies. Identifying the things that have not changed and focusing on their competencies (switching tasks independently during center time) can help children maintain a sense of control and stability.

School RECOGNITION helps build self-esteem. All children need recognition. Positive feedback validates behaviors or accomplishments that are valued by others. School staff recognizes academic achievement through grades, sharing a child's work in class, and awards. They can also use recognition to help children develop mentally healthy behaviors, such as praising a child who exhibits self-control when angry, raises their hand instead of calling out, or shows compassion for a peer. The key is to focus on positive behaviors, even as a way of stopping negative

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### **Mental Health Resources for School Personnel**

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#### **Text**

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#### **Government Reports**

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#### **Organizations and Websites**

American Academy for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 3615 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016; [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

American Academy of Family Physicians, P.O. Box 11210, Shawnee Mission, KS 66207; (800) 274-2237; [www.aafp.org](http://www.aafp.org)

American Association of Suicidology, Suite 310, 4201 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20008; (202) 237-2280; [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)  
American Psychological Association, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 336-5500; [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
American Psychiatric Association, 1400 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 682-6000; [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA), Suite 501, 730 N. Franklin Street, Chicago, IL 60610-7204, (800) 826-3632; [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)  
National Association of School Psychologists, Suite 402, 4340 East West Highway, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 657-0270 (suicide resources);  
[www.nasponline.org/NEAT/suicide\\_resources.html](http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/suicide_resources.html)  
National Hopeline Network: 1-800-SUICIDE provides access to trained telephone counselors, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
National Institute of Mental Health, Room 8184, 6001 Executive Boulevard, MSC 9663, Bethesda, MD 20892; (310) 443-4513; [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)  
National Mental Health Association, 1021 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; (800) 969-NMHA; [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)  
National Resource Center for Safe Schools, [www.safetyzone.org](http://www.safetyzone.org)  
Safe and Responsive Schools Project, [www.indiana.edu/~safeschl](http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl)  
SOS High School Suicide Prevention Program, Screening for Mental Health, Suite 304, 1 Washington Street, Wellesley Hills, MA 02481; [www.mentalhealthscreening.org](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org)  
Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, P.O. Box 644, Westminster, CO 80036-0644, (303) 429-3530; [www.yellowribbon.org](http://www.yellowribbon.org)  
*Adapted from "Depression in Adolescents" in Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts For Families and Educators (NASP, 2004).*  
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#### Self injury Websites

[www.focusas.com/SelfInjury.html](http://www.focusas.com/SelfInjury.html)  
[aacap.org/page.wv?name=SelfInjury+in+Adolescents&section=Facts+for+Families](http://aacap.org/page.wv?name=SelfInjury+in+Adolescents&section=Facts+for+Families)  
[www.helpguide.org/mental/self\\_injury.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm)  
[www.coolnurse.com/self-injury.htm](http://www.coolnurse.com/self-injury.htm)