



UNDERSTANDING THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY

PTAs are an important bridge between learning what families need to prioritize and maintain good mental health and helping schools create services and supports that are relevant, accessible and helpful to ALL families, and create an atmosphere that promotes students' healthy minds.

WHY IT IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUR COMMUNITY?

Asking your entire school community what their mental health needs, concerns and barriers are:

1. Gives everyone an opportunity to have their voices heard. To say what is best for them, versus being told what is best for them.
2. Helps identify where there are gaps in school-based mental health services and skills and where school leadership needs more mental health resources and supports.
3. Helps your PTA and school create school-based mental health supports, resources or programs that help ALL families with their identified concerns and needs.
4. Helps identify your PTA's role is in meeting the needs of families at your school and supporting your school's mental health efforts.

WHO SHOULD YOUR PTA TALK TO?

FAMILIES

Ask **families** about what their biggest mental health concerns and barriers are, what they know about mental health and any school-based mental health services and programs offered, if they have or would use school-based services, and how the school and your PTA can create an atmosphere that supports families' and students' good mental health.

To ensure that all mental health family supports, services or programs offered are helpful, accessible and address the needs of every family at your school, your PTA should seek feedback from a diverse sample of students and families from every racial, ethnic or financial background at your school.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Your PTA should also talk to **school administration** to understand what your school has done in the past or is doing now. This will also inform what questions you should be asking families.

Start by talking with school leadership about any existing school-based mental health services or programs, if they are used, and how they are promoted to families. Ask to see any student or family mental health data if it has been collected before.





You should also talk to any other school staff who may influence or impact students' mental health, so that they are aware of your mental health initiative and can inform and support your efforts. Depending on your school community, this could include:

- School counselors, psychologists or therapists
- School nurses
- School principals
- Teachers & aides

WHEN SHOULD YOU ASSESS THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY?

You should always be in touch with your community! This includes before, during and after running programming.

- **At the beginning of the school year:** Assess families mental health knowledge, attitudes and behaviors; learn what your school communities' biggest mental health concerns and barriers are; identify gaps in school-based services and supports and how your PTA can help.
- **Throughout the school year:** Invite a representative sample of school stakeholders to review any new or existing mental health materials, resources or meeting agendas to ensure they are inclusive and accessible to all families and meet identified needs.
- **At the end of the school year:** Seek feedback from your school community on the usefulness, relevance, accessibility and helpfulness of new or existing mental health resources and supports.

HOW DO YOU GET THIS INFORMATION FROM YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY?

Before planning a family-based mental health program in your school it is important to understand:

- Families' mental health knowledge, attitudes, behaviors.
- Families' biggest mental health concerns and barriers.
- Existing school-based mental health supports or data.





Gather this feedback from families by:

1. **Distributing a [School-Wide Healthy Minds Survey](#). This step will help your PTA get a broad understanding of the mental health needs of your school community, and where you may need more information.**

Tips:

- Explain upfront why your PTA is collecting this data from families and what you plan to do with the information gathered.
- Make your survey available electronically and hard copy.
- Translate your survey for non-English language speakers, if possible.
- Assign a member of your PTA to enter hard copy survey results received.
- Ask if families are members of your PTA to inform if families need more information about the value of joining PTA.
- The survey should take less than five minutes to complete.
- The [School-Wide Healthy Minds Survey](#) has sample questions you can use to customize your survey.
 - If your school already distributes a school-wide survey, ask if specific mental health questions can be included, if they are not already.
 - If your school already has collected mental health data, review the existing data first to determine how best to customize your survey to collect any new information you are seeking.

2. **Hosting family focus [groups](#) to ask more specific questions about what families need, what their barriers are, and collect detailed feedback about any existing school-based services and supports.**

Tips:

- Limit focus group participation to around 8 people.
- Recruit families in your community. Be mindful of trying to reach a representative group and customize your outreach channels and messages to different populations.
- Incentivize families to participate. Consider using gift cards, providing food, doing a giveaway, etc.
- Explain at the beginning of the discussion why your PTA is focused on mental health, why you are seeking family feedback and what you plan to do with the information gathered.
- Focus group questions should build off school-wide survey results.
- Focus groups can be held either in-person or virtually.
 - In-person focus groups allow participants to participate in the discussion distraction-free, build trust with the moderator and other participants, and have their voices heard.
 - Virtual focus groups allow participants to share their views without worrying about transportation, childcare, weather or health concerns and constraints.
- Assign two members of your PTA to each focus group: One member to facilitate the discussion and one member to take notes.
- Focus groups should be limited to 1 hour.
- The Family Discussion Questionnaire has sample questions to guide the conversation.





3. Having one-on-one [conversations](#) with families with families who were not well represented in the school-wide survey or focus group.

Tips:

- Incentivize families to participate. Consider using gift cards, providing food, doing a giveaway, etc.
- Explain at the beginning of the discussion why your PTA is focused on mental health, why you are seeking individual family feedback, and what you plan to do with the information gathered.
- Conversations can be held either in-person or virtually.
- If participants are non-English language speakers, explore ways to conduct the discussion in their native language, if possible.
- Discussions should be limited to 30 minutes.
- The Family Discussion Questionnaire has sample questions to guide the conversation.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO WITH WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED?

Once your PTA understands the mental health needs of your school community, use what you have learned to:

1. **Create a plan** for how your PTA is going to help meet the identified mental health needs or fill in gaps in mental health knowledge, resources or supports.
2. **Share the data** collected with all school stakeholders and district leadership.
3. **Take action** to meet the identified mental health needs or fill in gaps in mental health knowledge, resources or supports as a PTA. Actions may include:
 - Sharing existing school-based mental health resources, supports or data available to students and families using your school and PTA communication channels.
 - Distributing National PTA's [Healthy Minds](#) family education, action plans, and discussion guides.
 - Hosting Healthy Minds education events featuring local mental health or medical experts. These events could be either in-person or virtual. If virtual, record the session and post it on your PTA website so families who were unable to attend the live event can still receive the information.
 - Facilitating opportunities for parents/caregivers to talk, learn and get support from each other.
4. **Advocate** at the local and district level for increased school-based mental health services, supports and personnel, if needed.

