



Children's Mental Health: What Parents Need to Know

Although we like to think of childhood as a time of joy and innocence, the American Psychological Association estimates that about 15 million children in the U.S. have a diagnosable mental health disorder and millions more are at risk because of inherent or environmental factors. Yet only about 7% of these young people receive the help they need. So, to what extent can these disorders be prevented? How can parents recognize the signs that their child might have a mental health problem? And why is it important to seek professional help as early as possible?

I. Why it's so important to focus on children's mental health

- Some mental health problems are preventable. For example, mental health problems may be the result of emotional neglect, especially in early childhood, or exposure to violence (both experiencing violence directly but also witnessing violence). Ensuring good quality care and protection from violence are effective prevention strategies.
- Other kinds of mental health problems may not be preventable, but a child's long-term adjustment and development will improve greatly with early intervention and support.
- Embarrassment and shame stop many parents from seeking help for their children. So we need to remove the stigma and understand that seeking help is the smart thing to do, whatever kind of health challenge you face.

II. Recognizing signs of a possible mental health issue in your child

- Severity, frequency and duration of troubling behavior
It's normal for toddlers to throw tantrums, one-year-olds to have separation anxiety and young teens to get sassy. But when those behaviors become a persistent pattern and continue beyond the time they are considered age-appropriate, that is a sign that the child's social and emotional development (mental health) may be off track.
- Interference with a child's participation in (and enjoyment of) age-appropriate activities
If a child's attitudes and behavior stand in the way of making friends, building positive relationships with adults, being focused and persistent in learning tasks or enjoying play and exploration, that is a sign of a problem that needs professional attention.
- A sudden change in friendships, school performance or other behaviors
Especially as children move toward adolescence, these major changes may signal depression, substance abuse or other mental health problems. Although it is common for young adolescents to seek greater privacy, to be moodier or to question parents' rules and values, it is not typical or healthy for young people to become belligerent, isolated, disengaged from school and other activities or to make a major shift in their social network.