



WHO CAN HELP ME?

It can be difficult to tell the difference between normal developmental stages, which are temporarily disruptive and more serious emotional disturbances.

Caregivers and parents must rely on their knowledge of child development and their sense of what is appropriate for children. It is important to get more, rather than less, information. If you are concerned about a child's development or mental health, please talk to a mental health professional who can help you with your concerns. The following resources have more information about mental health in your community:

THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH



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WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH?

Just as we teach children how to care for their physical health, we need to teach them to care for their mental health. We all have mental health needs, and these needs change as we grow and develop. Most of us have grown up not knowing how to take care of our mental health. That can make it hard for us to know how to teach our children to care for their mental health.

While some people are born with mental health problems, others develop them later in life. It is important to know that emotional/mental health problems can develop at any age. Difficult events (called emotional stressors) can make mental health problems worse. There are also beneficial events (called emotional supports) that help a person to be able to deal with their problems. Children who live with many stressors without support are more likely to develop mental health problems. However, even children with a great deal of emotional support can still develop mental health problems.

The sooner a problem is identified, the sooner help can be found. This is important, since research studies confirm that help in the early stages of a mental health problem can prevent the problem from getting worse.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP CHILDREN?

Change and stress are normal parts of life. However, teaching children how to cope with upsetting change and stress helps them to be healthier, happier people.

Some things seem to strengthen a child's ability to cope with stressors in their lives. They include

- having a stable and supportive family or adult (such as a parent, relative, friend, or teacher)
- other stable and supportive resources (such as school, church or preschool/ daycare setting)
- having a personality which is good at solving problems, handling stress, and seeking out support
- understanding that we all have mental health needs, and knowing how to care for those needs



WHAT KINDS OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS DO CHILDREN DEVELOP?

Emotional Disturbances

Four general types of behaviors may tell you when a child has an emotional disturbance. They are:

- **Acting out behavior** (self abusive, aggressive, violent, disruptive, cruel)
- **Withdrawing behavior** (fears, depression, anxiety, refusing to talk, acting younger than age, refusing to be social)
- **Defensive behavior** (lying, cheating, manipulating others, avoiding others)
- **Disorganized behavior** (out of touch with reality, seeing or hearing things that aren't there, multiple personalities, disconnected thinking or acting)

A child may exhibit just one of these types of behavior or some combination of them.

HOW DO I KNOW IF THERE'S A PROBLEM?

When a child behaves in unusual ways, it is difficult to say whether there is something wrong with the child, or whether the child is reacting.

Mental health develops in a series of stages, just like physical, social, and other kinds of development. This means that sometimes an emotional stage may be very difficult, while at other times, these stages may be more positive. It can be difficult to tell the difference between emotional stages that normally occur, and problems that are of a more serious nature.

The following is a developmental checklist to help you to know if a problem may exist.

INFANTS (0-12 months)

- Jumpy or jittery, over-reacting to noise, touch or light
- Does not notice when touched or when things are going on nearby
- Too much fussing or crying, inability to be soothed or comforted
- Not gaining weight (not due to physical problem)
- Lack of harmony between parent and child

TODDLERS (1-3 years)

- Delays of at least six months in walking, talking, social or other behavior
- Hand-waving or hand-clapping that does not stop
- Self-destructive behavior, such as biting or head banging
- Aggressive behavior directed at other people or things
- Unable to become connected to people who take care of the child
- Overly dependent or overly obedient

PRESCHOOLERS AND KINDERGARTNERS (4-6 years)

- Anxious or fearful, depressed mood, total lack of interest in or withdrawing from other people
- Unable to separate from parents
- Lack of confidence which keeps the child from having fun
- Unable to control his/her own behaviors
- Aggressive behavior
- Refusal to comply with rules and expectations
- Sexual or physical aggression
- Constant refusal to comply with rules at home or school
- Truancy, chemical abuse, running away
- Eating disorder, unusual eating patterns
- Inability to develop values, morals, relationships or educational goals

ADOLESCENTS (13-19 years)

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (7-12 years)

- Depressed mood, loss of interest in activities and relationships
- Trouble sleeping or difficulty with eating
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, suicidal talk or action
- Continued resistance to attending school
- Headaches or stomach aches that keep occurring but don't seem to have a cause
- Easily distractable or unable to pay attention
- Poor school work, including being very behind in reading or math
- Aggressive or hurtful behavior
- School work or attendance which is going downhill
- Acting out sexual behaviors that are inappropriate for the child's age
- Depressed mood, loss of interest in activities and relationships
- Trouble sleeping or difficulty with eating
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, suicidal talk or action
- Declining school performance or attendance
- Sexual or physical aggression towards others
- Sexual intrusiveness or promiscuity
- Chronic resistance to complying with rules at home or school
- Truancy, chemical abuse, running away
- Eating disorder, unusual eating patterns
- Conflicts around personal identity, such as values, morality, relationships, sexuality, vocational or educational goals