

Early Childhood Mental Health Care

Is Mental Health Care Necessary for Young Children?

Yes. According to Glenace Edwall, Director of the Children's Mental Health Division at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, early childhood mental health care is for "children who will never have a mental health diagnosis, those who may develop a problem at some point, and those who have evident problems early on."

She also says that this care "embraces families as the most important people in their children's mental health development, but it also acknowledges the importance of the quality of relationships that children begin to establish outside the family during their early years."

The Need for Early Intervention

Because emotional problems tend to impact a young child's ability to regulate their behavior, mental health problems can cause a child's relationships and social development to be negatively affected. Children who are emotionally well-adjusted have a greater chance of early school success, while children who experience serious emotional difficulty face risks of early school difficulty. There also appears to be a natural advantage to interventions that happen during early childhood when a child's brain is still developing. Unfortunately, many young children do not receive the needed support or interventions.

Stigma

One of the most preventable reasons a child doesn't receive mental health care is because of the stigma that surrounds mental illness. How many times have we seen images on television or in movies (cartoons even) portraying people with mental illness as violent, running around in straight jackets, or locked in padded cells. These portrayals cause stigma, and it is this type of stigma that can prevent parents from seeking appropriate help when they have a concern about their child's mental health.

Why Stigma Is a Problem

Most families expect their children to have a carefree childhood—full of the everyday joys and upsets that are typical for children. When they realize that this may not be true for their child, some parents have mixed feelings about getting help. Because of the stigma associated with mental health problems, some parents fear that their child will be labeled. They may also be told by friends and family that their child just needs to work harder to control their behavior; or some think that their child's mental health disorder is their fault.

Parents can combat this stigma by learning more about mental health disorders. Knowing how to get help when a disorder is suspected and what strategies work when caring for a child with a mental health disorder will ensure that a child will receive appropriate and timely care.

Mental Health Problems in Young Children?

A 2002 study showed that 16 percent of the infants and toddlers in families that were surveyed had social, emotional, or behavioral problems. Most of the concerns were addressed by regular program services, but 7 percent required additional services and/or urgent care.

Myths and Facts

Myth: Mental health disorders do not affect children.

Fact: One in five children have a mental health disorder. Just as some children have physical ailments like asthma, some children have mental health disorders like AD/HD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) or depression.

Myth: Mental health refers to people who are "crazy."

Fact: Mental health refers to how a person manages their life—how they handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Just like good physical health, good mental health is important at every stage of life—even childhood.

