

TREATMENT OF CHILDREN WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Not long ago, it was thought that many mental health disorders such as anxiety disorders, depression, and bipolar disorder began only after childhood. There are some children with mental health disorders where some level of difficulty is experienced in their daily life. Perhaps the mental disorder most studied, diagnosed, and treated is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This tip sheet contains answers to frequently asked questions regarding the treatment of children with mental health disorders.

Children are in a state of rapid change and growth during their developmental years. Diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders must be viewed with these changes in mind. Some problems are short lived and don't need treatment. Others are persistent and very serious, and caregivers should seek professional help for their children.

Questions and Answers

Q: What should I do if I am concerned about mental, behavioral, or emotional symptoms in my young child?

A: Talk with your child's doctor. Ask questions and find out everything you can about the behavior or symptoms that worry you. Ask whether your child needs further evaluation by a specialist. Such specialists may include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and therapists. Every child is different and normal development varies from child to child. Sensory processing, language, and motor skills are all developing during childhood. Also developing is the ability to relate to caregivers and other children. If your child is in daycare or preschool, talk with the caretaker or teacher if your child has been showing some worrisome changes in behavior. Then discuss this with your child's doctor.

Q: How are mental health disorders diagnosed in young children?

A: Similar to adults, disorders are diagnosed by observing signs and symptoms and doing a variety of testing. A skilled professional will consider these in the overall development of the child. They consider reports from caregivers and other caretakers or teachers. These professionals will do an assessment. It is important to ask what experience the evaluator has with young children. Very young children often cannot express their thoughts and feelings, which makes diagnosis a challenging task. The signs of a mental health disorder in a young child may be quite different from those of an older child or an adult.

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Q: How do I know if my child's problems are serious?

A: Many everyday stresses cause changes in behavior. For example, the birth of a sibling may cause a child to temporarily act much younger. It is important to recognize such behavior changes. It is also important to see the difference between them and more serious problems. Problems deserve attention when they are severe and impact daily activities. Seek help for your child if you observe problems such as changes in appetite or sleep, withdrawal from friends, or fearfulness. Also look for behavior that seems to slip back to an earlier phase such as bed-wetting. Signs of distress such as sadness or tearfulness; self-destructive behavior such as head banging; or a tendency to have frequent injuries can also be indications of a more serious problem. In addition, it is important to review the development of your child, and any important medical problem he/she might have had. Family history of mental health disorders, as well as physical and psychological traumas or situations that might cause stress are often reasons for concern.

Q: Won't my child get better with time?

A: Sometimes yes, but in other cases children need professional help to assist with speeding up the process. Problems that are severe, persistent, and impact on daily activities should be brought to the attention of the child's doctor.

Q: Which mental health disorders are seen in children?

A: Mental health disorders with possible onset in childhood include: anxiety disorders; attention deficit and disruptive behavior disorders; autism and other pervasive developmental disorders; eating disorders (e.g., anorexia nervosa); mood disorders (e.g. major depression, bipolar disorder); schizophrenia; and tic disorders. Under some circumstances, bedwetting and soiling may be symptoms of a mental disorder.

Q: Are there situations in which it is advisable to use psychotropic medications in children?

A: Psychotropic medication may be prescribed for young children with mental, behavioral, or emotional symptoms when the potential benefits of treatment outweigh the risks. Some problems are so severe and persistent that they would have serious negative consequences for the child if untreated. Behavioral interventions may not always be effective by themselves. The safety and effectiveness of most psychotropic medications have not been studied in young children. As a caregiver, you will want to ask many questions and evaluate with your doctor the risks of starting and continuing your child on these medications. Learn everything you can about the medications prescribed for your child, including potential side effects. Learn which side effects are tolerable and which ones are not. In addition, learn and keep in mind the goals of a child's treatment.

The source of this information is the National Institute of Mental Health. To access the complete booklet call Families and Children Together (1-866-298-0896) and a staff person can send you the materials. You can access their website at: www.nimh.nih.gov.