

The Power of Early Intervention

Mental health disorders are the most common health issues faced by American school-aged children (K-12), yet most go undiagnosed or untreated. According to the American Psychological Association, “The impact of child mental health on child development and society as a whole is well documented but under recognized”. When our children and teenagers show signs and symptoms of physical illness, one of our first responses is to take them to a physician to be evaluated. Whether a broken bone, the flu or a more serious health condition like diabetes or cancer, we don’t let our youth suffer, instead we follow the guidance of trained physicians and seek help. However, when our youth are struggling with a mental or emotional health condition, we aren’t as quick to react and miss opportunities to relieve their “suffering”. 1 in 5 (20%) youth have a diagnosable emotional, behavioral or mental health disorder, yet 2/3 are NOT getting the help they need (National Alliance on Mental Illness).



Our mental and emotional wellbeing is every bit as critical to our overall health as our physical wellbeing. Mental illness does not affect emotional health in isolation. Research confirms the relationship between mental health issues and poor outcomes such as suicide, self-harm, substance abuse, suspension, dropping out of school, and involvement with the Juvenile Justice System. When mental health disorders go unrecognized and left untreated, youth are at greater risk for poor academic, social and behavioral outcomes.

The good news is, mental health problems are treatable. Early intervention is our best defense, helping improve resilience and the ability to succeed in school and life. Early detection of childhood and adolescence mental health problems, timely referral and access to appropriate services can reduce the risk of long term consequences and improve outcomes in multiple domains of life (including family dynamics). The first step in early intervention is recognizing signs of concern. These may include but are not limited to:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks.
- Trying to harm or kill oneself or making plans to do so.
- Out-of-control, risk-taking behaviors that can cause harm to self or others.
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or fast breathing.
- Not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight; significant weight loss or gain.
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships.
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol.
- Drastic changes in behavior, personality or sleeping habits.
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities like hanging out with friends or going to school.
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still that can lead to failure in school.

Schools and parents alike play an important role in identifying and connecting students to supports. Programs like SCIP (School Community Intervention and Prevention), provide parents and educators with tools and resources to aid in the identification and intervention process. Navigating the mental and behavioral healthcare system can sometimes be overwhelming for children and families. Utilizing school and community resources that are in place can assist families in addressing barriers and challenges in accessing appropriate services.

Tips for Parents:

- Care for your children's mental health just as you do for their physical health.
- Pay attention to warning signs, and seek help if you are concerned.
- Let your children know that everyone experiences pain, fear, sadness, worry and anger and that these emotions are a normal part of life; encourage open communication about feelings, concerns and emotions.
- Provide your children with opportunities to problem solve and learn coping skills.
- Be a role model- talk about your own feelings, apologize, don't express anger with violence and use active problem-solving skills.
- Encourage your children's talents and skills, while also accepting their limitations.
- Celebrate accomplishments.

Tips for Schools:

- Think about mental health as an important component of learning and success in the classroom.
- Know the warning signs of mental illness and take note of these in your students and seek consultation from school mental health practitioners or social workers.
- Utilize community resources and mental health professionals within your school to help educate staff on prevention, early identification and intervention of youth mental health.
- Utilize SCIP and other school based mental health supports.
- Encourage social-emotional learning within your classrooms
- Build trusting relationships with the children and families you work with. When concerns arise, utilize positive communication, active listening and parental engagement strategies to address concerns.

References: National Alliance on Mental Illness; American Psychological Association; National Center for Mental Health Checkups at Columbia University; Mental Health America; Association for Children's Mental Health; Child Mind Institute