

Take a Closer Look: Children's Mental Health Matters

Julio, age 5, doesn't want to go to school. He clings to his mother and cries uncontrollably when she leaves.

Jamal, age 8, is having a hard time paying attention in class. His handwriting is bad and he can't seem to sit still. He even got in trouble on the bus for jumping around. He's having trouble keeping friends because he can't seem to focus on games.

Amber, age 15 used to be an A student. Now she's pulling in B's and C's. She no longer hangs out with her friends and instead spends a lot of time alone in her bedroom. She struggles with things that used to be easy and occasionally seems blue.

Is this just a phase? Or should you take a closer look?

Jamal, Julio and Amber may be going through more than just a phase. All children have trouble sitting still, paying attention or interacting with others from time to time. But when these problems occur for more than two weeks and interfere with friendships, school, home, or life, it might be time to take a closer look.

Jamal, Julio and Amber may be showing signs of mental health problems that affect children. For example they may be showing signs of clinical depression, attention hyperactivity disorder, or an anxiety disorder, the most common mental health disorder in children.

Take a Closer Look

Mental Health America (MHA) aims to increase awareness that children's mental illnesses are real, common and treatable. MHA works across the nation to ensure that children's mental health is recognized as essential to children's overall health and wellbeing.

Mental Health is Essential to Overall Health

If you suspect your child has asthma, you would take him or her to a doctor. If your child's grades dropped due to poor eyesight, you would get your child a pair of glasses. If your child broke a bone, you would take your child to the hospital. If you suspect your child may have a mental health problem, you should take your child to a doctor or mental health professional. Just like physical health problems, children can also suffer from mental health problems—both are real, common, treatable and need to be taken seriously.

Mental health problems are nothing to be ashamed of. As many as one in five children and adolescents may have a mental health problem that can be identified and treated. One in ten may have a problem so severe it interferes with their ability to function in school, at home and at play.

Early diagnosis and treatment can help children reach their full potential. A comprehensive treatment plan should be developed with the family, and child involved in making treatment decisions.

Warning Signs

If your child seems to be struggling with any combination of these warning signs for more than two weeks, talk to your child and then talk with your child's doctor or a mental health professional.

- Seems or looks very sad, hopeless or irritable
- Falls behind in school or earns lower grades



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- Feels overly anxious or worried
- Appears scared and fearful
 - Has frequent nightmares
 - Loses interest in friends or things usually enjoyed
 - Is excessively angry
 - Can't perform common activities of other children their age
 - Avoids people; wants to be alone all of the time
 - Talks about suicide or death
 - Can't pay attention or sit still
 - Needs to wash, clean things, or perform certain rituals many times a day
 - Hurts other children or animals
 - Acts out or damages property
 - Has major changes in eating or sleeping habits
 - Often screams or yells at people
 - Uses alcohol or drugs
 - Has frequent problems with the use of the toilet
 - Wets the bed having already been toilet-trained

Get Help

If ignored, mental health problems may lead to further problems for your child. Intervening early may prevent further complications and problems from arising.

Children's mental health problems are real, common and treatable. A child's doctor or mental health professional can help evaluate a child's needs and recommend what course of action can help the child to reach his or her full potential.

Turning to help is important. Treatment is available. Speak with your child's doctor or a mental health professional.

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