

Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Introduction

Mental health is an essential component of young peoples' overall health and wellbeing. It affects how young people think, feel, and act; their ability to learn and engage in relationships; their self-esteem and ability to evaluate situations, options and make choices. A person's mental health influences their ability to handle stress, relate to other people, and make decisions.

Many people experience mental health problems at some time during their lives. At least one in five children and adolescents may express a mental health problem in any year and in the U.S., it is estimated that one in 10 children and adolescents suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. However, in any given year, it is estimated that fewer than one in five of such children receives needed treatment.¹

When young people's mental health problems go untreated, they can affect their development, school performance and relationships. The state of their mental health affects how they view themselves and others, how they evaluate and react to situations, and what choices they make and actions they take. Because mental health problems can affect a young person's judgment, in the rare case, emotional disturbances and mental disorders can be a risk factor for violence.

Overview

[Mental health problems](#) include all diagnosable emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders. Behavioral and mental disorders can create a chain of events contributing to violent or suicidal behavior. Particularly if not recognized and treated, these problems may affect a young person's self-esteem, ability to maintain relationships and their success in school. It is the co-occurrence of behavioral and mental disorders that can be most risky -- for example, anti-social conduct co-existing with depression -- that may result in violent or suicidal behavior. Left unaddressed, early mental health issues may also develop into severe problems in the adult years.

Risk Factors

Mental health problems in children and adolescents can be caused by biological factors, environmental factors or their combination.

Biological causes may include genetics, chemical imbalances in the body, and damage to the central nervous system. The relationship of genes to mental health is complex. Researchers have not yet isolated all of the genes that might contribute to vulnerability for specific mental disorders, or determined how environmental factors might trigger that vulnerability.

Stop youth violence before it starts

Family violence is an example of an environmental factor that can increase the possibility of developing a serious behavioral disorder. For example, a young person's exposure to childhood victimization such as child abuse and neglect places them at increased risk for delinquency, adult criminality, and violent criminal behavior.

Prevention and Intervention

Results from a government funded study finds that a nurturing social environment in childhood, good early education and academic success in school are related to protecting the mental health of youth.² The influence of peers is also critical. Having delinquent or antisocial friends may increase the likelihood of developing emotional or behavioral problems. Therefore, placing delinquent or antisocial youth together-as is done in many current youth programs-may, in fact, worsen problems. In fact, many effective intervention models are designed to separate youth with problem behaviors and/or surround troubled youth with peers who do not have behavior problems. It also suggests that increased adult or parental supervision can serve as a preventative measure. With more supervision, youth are less likely to socialize with delinquent peers who can affect their behavior.³

Treatment

An estimated one in five of all young people with mental disorders are not receiving any treatment.⁴ This is a result of several factors. Most often, children's and adolescents' mental health problems are not recognized or diagnosed properly, and effective treatment is not employed.

Children and adolescents with mental health problems are most often handled by the school or juvenile justice systems, which are generally ill-equipped to recognize and address mental disorders. Recent studies have indicated that between 70 and 80 percent of children with diagnosable mental disorders who receive mental health services are served within the school system, primarily by school psychologists and guidance counselors.⁵

A number of treatment models have been found to be effective in addressing mental health problems of children and adolescents. These prevention and intervention strategies, however, are often underutilized. While they can require significant time and investment, many prevention and intervention models are economically efficient when compared to the cost mental health problems exact from youth, their families and communities.

Research supported by the [National Institutes of Mental Health](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) (NIMH) has found that successful programs involve long-term intense interventions and address an array of factors such as family conflict, depression, social isolation, school failure, substance abuse, delinquency, and violence.

In treating serious offending delinquents, research has found two treatment models successful. One is multi-systemic therapy (MST),⁶ in which specially trained therapists work with the youth and family in their home, with a particular focus on changing the peers with whom the young people associate. MST therapists identify strengths in the family and use these strengths to develop natural support systems and to improve parenting.

The other model is Therapeutic Foster Care.⁷ This model offers a community-based intervention for serious and chronic offending delinquents. Therapeutic foster parents are carefully selected and supported with research-based procedures for working with serious and chronic delinquents in their homes.

Publications

[Child and Adolescent Violence Research at the National Institute of Mental Health](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violenceresfact.cfm)

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violenceresfact.cfm

Overview of research findings from NIMH reports.

[Child and Adolescent Mental Health](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp)

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp

Overview of the problem and treatment by the Center for Mental Health Services.

[National Institute of Mental Health Resource List](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm)

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/childmenu.cfm

This list provides online access to publications by NIMH related to child and adolescent mental health. The resource list includes:

- [Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder](#)
- [Brief Notes on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents](#)
- ["Children and Mental Health,"](#) chapter three from the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health
- [Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters](#)
- [Teens: The Company They Keep – Preventing Destructive Behavior by Harnessing the Power of Peers](#)
- [Treatment of Children with Mental Disorders](#)
- [Youth in a Difficult World](#)

[Promising Practices in Children's Mental Health](http://cecp.air.org/promisingpractices/Default.htm)

<http://cecp.air.org/promisingpractices/Default.htm>

Series monographs (1998 and 2000) that review what is working within 45 systems of care funded through the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program. Compiled by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. (1000 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20007, Phone: (202) 944-5300, Toll Free: (888) 457-1551, Fax: (202) 944-5454)

[Science on Our Minds](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/soms.cfm)

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/soms.cfm

These brief fact sheets highlight advances in the treatment of mental illnesses and cover exciting areas of NIMH research.

Federal Responses

[U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES](#)

www.dhhs.gov

- [National Institutes of Health](#)

www.nih.gov

Begun as a one-room Laboratory of Hygiene in 1887, the National Institutes of Health today is one of the world's foremost medical research centers, and the federal focal point for medical research in the U.S.

- [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#)

www.nimh.nih.gov

The Mission of NIMH is to reduce the burden of mental illness through research on mind, brain, and behavior.

- [For the Public](#)

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/index.cfm

Offers information from NIMH about the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of mental illnesses. Included are brochures and information sheets, reports, press releases, fact sheets, and other educational materials.

- [For Practitioners](#)

www.nimh.nih.gov/practitioners/index.cfm

Offers research reports and other valuable information to keep you up-to-date on the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. Also included are materials you can use to help educate your patients about their disorders.

- [For Researchers](#)

www.nimh.nih.gov/research/index.cfm

Offers information on RFAs, RFPs, Program Announcements, training opportunities, and job listings. Also included are special web pages on the NIMH Child and Adolescent Research Consortium and the NIMH Suicide Research Consortium. You will also find special reports and other publications.

- [Children's Mental Health Education Campaign](#)

www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/ChildrensCampaign/index.htm

A four-year national public education campaign sponsored by NIMH, to increase awareness about the emotional problems of America's children and adolescents and gain support for needed services. For free information about children's and adolescents' mental health--including publications, references, and referrals to local and national resources and organizations--call 1.800.789.2647; TTY 301.443.9006 or go to www.mentalhealth.org

- **[National Institute of Child Development & Adolescent Health \(NICHD\)](http://www.nichd.nih.gov)**
www.nichd.nih.gov
The NICHD conducts and supports laboratory, clinical, and epidemiological research on the reproductive, neurobiologic, developmental, and behavioral processes that determine and maintain the health of children, adults, families, and populations.

- **[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration](http://www.samhsa.gov)**
www.samhsa.gov
The federal agency charged with improving the quality and availability of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitative services in order to reduce illness, death, disability, and cost to society resulting from substance abuse and mental illnesses.
 - **[Center for Mental Health Services \(CMHS\)](http://www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/index.htm)**
www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/index.htm
Provides leadership in federal efforts to treat mental illnesses by promoting mental health and by preventing the development or worsening of mental illness when possible.

 - **[Knowledge Exchange Network \(KEN\)](http://www.mentalhealth.org)**
www.mentalhealth.org
Provides information about mental health via a toll-free telephone number (800-789-2647), this web site and more than 200 publications. KEN staff are skilled at listening and responding to questions from the public and professionals. KEN staff quickly direct callers to federal, state, and local organizations dedicated to treating and preventing mental illness. KEN also has information on federal grants, conferences, and other events.

- **[Office of the U.S. Surgeon General](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov)**
www.surgeongeneral.gov
 - **[Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/cmh/childreport.htm)**
www.surgeongeneral.gov/cmh/childreport.htm
On January 3, 2001, David Satcher, MD, PhD, Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General, released a National Action Agenda to improve Children's Mental Health. This report outlines goals and strategies to improve the services for children and adolescents with mental health problems and their families. According to the report, the nation is facing a public health crisis in mental health for children and adolescents.

- [Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General](#)
www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence
Examines the factors that lead young people to gravitate toward violence, reviews the factors that protect youth from perpetrating violence and identifies.

- [National Library of Medicine](#)
www.nlm.nih.gov
8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, Maryland 20894 National Library of Medicine listing of Youth Violence Resources, articles on mental illness as a risk factor and also provides a searchable database of research studies and articles.

References

¹ "Prevalence of serious emotional disturbance in children and adolescents." *Mental Health, United States, 1996*. Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996.

² [Teens: The Company They Keep---Preventing Destructive Behavior by Harnessing the Power of Peers](#) (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health)

³ [Teens: The Company They Keep---Preventing Destructive Behavior by Harnessing the Power of Peers](#) (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health)

⁴ "Prevalence of serious emotional disturbance in children and adolescents." *Mental Health, United States, 1996*. Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996.

⁵ [Child & Adolescent Violence Research](#) (Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health, 2000)

⁶ More on MST in *Youth in a Difficult World* at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/youthdif.cfm>.

⁷ More on Therapeutic Foster Care in Teens: [The Company They Keep---Preventing Destructive Behavior by Harnessing the Power of Peers](#)

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