

CHILDHOOD MENTAL ILLNESSES

Childhood is usually thought of as a happy, carefree time in life, but for more than seven million children in the United States, that happiness can be elusive because of mental illness.

Left untreated, mental illnesses in children and adolescents too often lead to tragic results. Because they occur at a crucial point in a young person's physical and social development, mental illnesses may cause delays in development that lead to further problems in adulthood. For many adolescents with a mental illness, the burden is overwhelming. Among adolescents ages 15 to 19, suicide is the second-leading cause of death.

Mental illnesses in children and adolescents can be successfully treated, but the key is early detection and access to adequate mental health services. Unfortunately, only one in five children with a mental illness actually receives needed services.

▼ Types of Mental Illnesses in Children and Their Causes

Children and adolescents are susceptible to the same mental illnesses that afflict adults. In fact, many of the symptoms of adult mental illness appear before age 20. Young people are especially at risk of depression, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, phobias, and substance abuse. Some mental illnesses, such as depression, can occur in young children too young to effectively communicate their pain.

Another form of mental illness that appears in childhood or adolescence are severe emotional disorders or behavior disorders. As many as one in five Missouri children may have an emotional or behavior disorder, ranging from barely noticeable to disruptive to their education, development, and family life.

The causes of mental illness are varied, but most are caused by imbalances in the brain's chemistry, by a head injury, or by emotional trauma. Some mental illnesses are more prevalent in some families, suggesting a hereditary link.

Mental illnesses are not a sign of weak character, immorality, or a punishment for sins. They cannot be willed away and children or adolescents cannot "outgrow" them.

▼ Warning Signs

Parents and educators are the most likely to detect a mental illness or emotional disorder because of their constant contact with a child. Some of the warning signs are:

- a drop in school performance
- unwarranted worry or anxiety
- an inability to cope with day-to-day problems
- changes in sleeping or eating habits
- aggression toward others
- an excessive fear of getting fat, of not being liked, etc., beyond the normal adolescent anxieties, in other words, a fear that causes them to act irrational or in a dangerous manner.

▼ Diagnosis and Treatment

The first step is to determine what is causing a youngster's unusual behavior. There are many possible causes, including physical problems. If the cause is determined to be a mental illness or disorder, treatment may range from counseling to medication. In most cases, treatment can be done on an outpatient basis in the child's own community. In rare cases, hospitalization may be necessary. Treatment also may include counseling for parents and family.

Fortunately, treatment from both private providers and the state's mental health system are available. Consult a family physician for a referral to a mental health provider or contact the Missouri Department of Mental Health's Division of Comprehensive Psychiatric Services at (800) 364-9687. The call is toll free.

The state's mental health system provides services regardless of ability to pay or the amount of insurance coverage available. Charges for the state's services are based on ability to pay.

▼ Further Help

Families of children with possible mental illnesses or emotional disorders do not have to face the problem alone. A number of support groups and parent networks are available in Missouri. To learn more call the Department of Mental Health at (800) 364-9687.

For more information,
please contact the
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