



Children's Mental Health Disorders, Treatment and Services

NEARLY 21 PERCENT OF U.S. CHILDREN AGES 9 TO 17 HAVE A DIAGNOSABLE MENTAL OR ADDICTIVE DISORDER ASSOCIATED WITH AT LEAST MINIMUM IMPAIRMENT AT HOME, AT SCHOOL AND WITH THEIR PEERS (U.S. SURGEON GENERAL, 1999). THE MOST COMMON MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSES IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS INCLUDE: ANXIETY DISORDERS, MOOD DISORDERS AND DISRUPTIVE DISORDERS.

Anxiety and Mood Disorders. Symptoms associated with these disorders may be feelings of unreasonable fear and anxiety, lasting depression, low self-esteem or worthlessness. Some of the diagnoses associated with these types of disorders include separation anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, major depressive disorder, and bipolar disorder (DSM-IV). Left untreated, these disorders can lead to suicide.

Disruptive Disorders. Symptoms of these disorders include inattentive, hyperactive, aggressive, and/or defiant behaviors. Some of the diagnoses associated with these types of disorders include attention-deficit disorder, conduct disorder, disruptive disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder (DSM-IV). Left untreated, these disorders can lead to school dropout, and juvenile justice system involvement.

Other mental disorders such as eating disorders also affect youth.

Assessment and Diagnosis

Because children typically have difficulty describing their thoughts and feelings, and because some symptoms of mental health problems occur sporadically throughout childhood, diagnosis of a mental health problem is done through an assessment by a mental health professional in partnership with parents. Assessments should include the

identification of strengths, needs and support strategies to assist the child and family.

Treatment Options

Children and adolescents receive some of the same treatments that adults do, particularly psychosocial treatments, such as individual, group and family therapy, and medication. Some treatments, such as interactive or play therapy, are unique to the treatment of young people. Studies have shown success in combining therapy with medication to treat childhood ADHD, anxiety and depression. Scientific research has shown that several different types of medication are effective for use with children and youth.

Services and Systems of Care

Some children with serious emotional disturbances need comprehensive, intensive and integrated services. These services are most beneficial when they are home-, school- or community-based. In addition, mental health services must be provided in a manner that is culturally and linguistically competent, individualized, family-centered and community-focused.

To learn more, contact your local Mental Health Association, the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health at www.ffcmh.org or the National Mental Health Association at 800-969-NMHA (6642) or www.nmha.org.

