



# background

Report # 122

Preventing Mental, Emotional And Behavioral Problems

April 2010

## A New Approach To A Quiet Crisis

*Calls for early prevention of mental, emotional, behavioral disorders*

A quiet, but substantial, population of children in the United States suffers from mental, emotional and behavioral disorders. These disorders, which range from depression to serious conduct problems, complicate childhood, put children at risk of experiencing trouble in school and other problems, and tend to have long-lasting consequences for those afflicted, their families and society. In fact, half of all adults who struggle with these disorders were first diagnosed before age 14.

For decades, the focus was on treating the potentially debilitating problems after they surfaced, rather than on trying to prevent their onset during childhood. That appears to be changing.

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine are among the latest voices to call for a shift in policy and practice toward addressing the roots of mental, emotional and behavioral problems rather than waiting until a disorder is well established and has caused harm.

A March 2009 report published by the influential National Academies of Science concluded that preventing such problems and promoting the mental health of children should be a national priority.

But such a shift won't likely come easily or quickly because it requires changes in how the disorders have traditionally been dealt with by behavioral science, educators, policymakers and others.

One important challenge is to embrace the early childhood years – when the quality of a child's environment, relationships and other experiences have a profound impact on

development and later outcomes – as a window of opportunity to prevent mental, emotional and behavioral problems later in life.

"It is a new way of thinking for everyone involved," said Ray Firth, director of the Division of Policy Initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD). "In psychology, there had been the nature-versus-nurture debate. Now, it's the interaction of the two."

### Prevalence Among Children

Mental, emotional and behavioral disorders ranging from depression to conduct disorders impose serious hardship on children, their families and society.

And the prevalence of these disorders among children, adolescents and young adults is surprisingly high.

Studies cited in the National Academies report suggest that between 14% and 20 % of children, adolescents and

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*Effective early prevention of mental, emotional and behavioral problems first and foremost requires a profound shift in thinking and practice that moves beyond the traditional disease model of waiting until a disorder occurs and only then initiating treatment.*

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young adults experience a mental, emotional or behavioral disorder. One study, for example, reports that in 2006 an estimated 21% of adolescents ages 12-17 years received treatment or counseling for mental, emotional and behavioral problems.

Symptoms can even be seen in children 5 years old or younger. The rate of expulsion from preschool programs for behavioral problems, for instance, is higher than expulsion rates for behavioral problems in grades kindergarten through grade 12.

The costs of failing to address mental, emotional and behavioral problems are high, according to the National Academies.

For the child, early onset of the disorders predicts lower school achievement. Early aggressive behavior increases the risk of conduct disorder and later drug use. For society, it leads to a higher burden on the child

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welfare system and greater demands on the juvenile justice system. In 2007 alone, the costs associated with mental, emotional and behavioral problems in the United States were estimated to be \$247 billion.

### Insight Into Prevention

The good news is that many factors have been identified within the family, schools and community that tend to increase or decrease the risk that children will develop mental, emotional and behavioral problems. And several interventions have shown promise in reducing the likelihood that such problems will become well-established disorders.

Within the family, poverty, a parent's mental illness, child abuse and neglect, divorce and separation and poor parenting are among the factors that raise a child's risk of developing the disorders.

Academic failure, bullying and violence are among the risk factors children may encounter in their schools and communities.

New perspectives on the development of the brain that researchers began reporting more than a decade ago also have implications for preventing the onset of mental, emotional and behavioral problems. Not only does a great deal of brain development occur very early in childhood, it also is greatly influenced by experience and environment.

The body of evidence, according to the National Academies, shows that mental, emotional and behavioral disorders are developmental; that the earliest years of life are the most opportune times to affect change; and that children develop in the context of their families, schools and communities – environments that cannot be ignored if their risks of developing

disorders are to be reduced.

Evidence also suggests that supporting the development of children requires coordination and collaboration across systems – such as health care and education – to more effectively support and finance preventive interventions on many levels.

### New Way Of Thinking

Effective prevention of mental, emotional and behavioral problems first and foremost requires a way of thinking that goes beyond the traditional disease model of waiting until a disorder occurs and only then providing treatment.

Such a profound shift challenges everyone from researchers and educators to practitioners and policymakers to develop and adapt to approaches designed to prevent these disorders early in life. It also affects everything from government reimbursement structures to the training of those who work with children.

For example, said Firth, “when you talk to speech therapists, they know that a lot of the children they serve for speech problems also have emotional problems. But they haven't been trained to address them as part of speech therapy. Their training is

limited, even though they know that it is an important dimension of the children they are serving – that the child's speech is not independent of the child's socio-emotional development.”

Prevention-based approaches have steadily gained support in recent years as effective ways to improve a range of child outcomes.

This is particularly the case in Allegheny County, home to one of the nation's most successful networks of family support centers, which take a prevention-based approach to improving the overall well being of children. Another example is the Allegheny County Maternal and Child Depression Initiative, a public-private partnership that is building a more cohesive, seamless system for diagnosing and treating women for depression. A mother's depression increases the risk of her child developing behavioral problems, academic difficulties and other poor outcomes.

From a national perspective, however, the National Academies report makes it clear that much more work remains to be done to more broadly and effectively address mental, emotional and behavioral disorders through early prevention.

## references

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