

Supporting better mental health for kids

By Megan Littlefield

Soon after a new school year starts, children's doctors see a spike in patients whose parents are seeking guidance for children with mental or behavioral problems.

With big changes in routine – like starting school – it's normal for children to react, even when it's a good change. Children already struggling with their emotions and their ability to control their behavior may fall apart with any disruption in their lives.

We know that getting an accurate diagnosis of a child's mental health challenges is crucial to successful treatment, but it can be difficult. Symptoms often overlap. About three-quarters of all children diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with anxiety and nearly half had behavior problems as well, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is the most commonly diagnosed mental disorder in children ages 3-17, affecting about 10% of children, according to the CDC. Anxiety is the second most common mental disorder diagnosed among children, followed by behavior problems and depression.

Chronic stress, trauma and other environmental factors can affect children's behavior. Chronic stress actually influences how a child's brain develops. A child may seem to have symptoms of ADHD when, in fact, the behavior reflects how the child is coping with chronic stress.

Consulting your child's primary care provider is the first step in getting help for behavioral problems. Your primary care provider can refer your child for needed counseling, mental health or developmental evaluations, occupational or speech therapy.

Adults are often too quick to label kids with a mental health diagnosis and to seek a prescription to fix the problem. I recommend medications when we have an adequate diagnosis, behavior interventions have been tried and the child still is constantly getting in trouble at home or school. If the child is failing over and over, that's when we want to think about medications to break the failure cycle. Medication would be part of a treatment plan that also involves counseling.

In addition to getting professional treatment, parents can do a lot to support children's mental health at home. Here are some suggestions:

- Make routines and expectations clear, especially for bedtime and morning. Consider making a poster with your child showing step-by-step what to do to get ready for school in the morning.
- Ensure that school-age children and teens get eight to 10 hours of sleep every night. Lack of sleep can worsen ADHD and anxiety.
- Decrease screen time on all electronic devices.
- Dedicate 15 minutes a day to play with your child doing something the child chooses. Kids seek their parents' attention and will misbehave if that's what it takes to get attention. Giving your

children your full attention when they are being good can make a huge improvement in their behavior.

- Keep children physically active for two hours during the day. Help your child find an activity she enjoys – sports programs, running, walking. Being outside in nature helps us reset our brains to cope with stress.
- Offer sensory activities. Play with Play-Doh or Slime or play catch with bean bags. Find good ideas online by searching for “sensory activities for children.”
- Help your child maintain calm by remaining calm yourself.

Together, parents and primary healthcare provider can support children’s mental health so they can learn and grow in self-confidence.

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