

Spotlight on children's mental health

By Dr. David Wolfe, Chair of the RBC Children's Mental Health Project

Most parents have an uncanny ability to quickly (and accurately) assess the severity of their child's physical ailments. In most cases, a quick 'once over' and a few pointed questions ("does it hurt when you do this?") provide the information we need to decide whether it's something that can be treated at home, or if it's serious enough to pack Johnnie or Suzie into the car and seek medical attention.

- A bad cough? "Let's keep an eye on it for a few days."
- A broken arm? "We're going to the hospital."
- Difficulty breathing? "I'm calling 911."

This parental instinct is something that is honed over time, fueled by generous doses of trial and error, late night phone calls to grandma or grandpa, comparing notes with our peers and reading dozens of parenting magazines, books and websites. As a result of this continuing educational process, most parents become pretty good judges of their kids' physical maladies.

But how good are we at identifying and assessing the nature of the problem when it affects our child's mind rather than their body?

The answer, unfortunately, is "not as good as we need to be".

Yes, children's mental health problems exist...

Mental illness is often mistakenly perceived as being an 'adult problem'. In fact, there's a long, troubling history of suppression of children's mental health issues in our society. Until relatively recently, children's mental health problems were the domain of folklore and unsubstantiated theories in both popular and scientific literature. Prior to the 18th century, children's mental health problems (unlike adult disorders) were seldom mentioned in professional or other forms of communication. Today, thankfully, we recognize that the mental health problems of children and adolescents are a frequently occurring and significant social concern worldwide.

There are currently 1.2 million Canadian children and youth who are affected by mental illness. And recent research suggests one in five children and adolescents will suffer from a mental illness of sufficient severity to cause significant distress and impaired functioning. Many other children have emerging problems that place them at risk for later development of a psychological disorder. And there's mounting evidence that many, if not most, lifetime psychiatric disorders will first appear in childhood or adolescence.

The importance of awareness

While there are numerous individual disorders encompassed by the term 'children's mental illness', they typically fall into the following broad categories:

- Behavioural disorders (e.g. issues with conflict, difficulty paying attention, acting out)
- Emotional disorders (e.g. concerns about mood [typically sadness], anxiety)

As a parent, the challenge is knowing whether a specific behaviour is simply part of a normal kid phase or if it's something more serious. We shouldn't automatically assume that a child behaving outside the parameters we consider 'normal' needs to see a psychiatrist. As anyone who has been to a shopping mall can attest, kids have temper tantrums. And yes, they have stresses in their lives, including pressures related to school, fitting in with friends, sibling rivalries, etc.

Virtually all children will experience brief periods of behavioural or emotional issues as they grow. It's part of life. But when these problems begin to interfere with how our children function at home or at school, it may be time to take a closer look. And while the process of deciding which problems merit professional attention and which ones might be outgrown involves a good understanding of both normal and abnormal child development and behaviour, there are some basic questions we can ask ourselves as parents. For example: Is this behaviour disruptive to our child? How long has it been occurring? Would this be considered 'normal' for their age group? The answers to these questions will help determine whether it makes sense to seek a professional opinion.

When a family is suffering from issues related to children's mental health, they can feel hopelessness, frustration and despair. Many parents who find themselves in this situation say they don't know where to turn for help. It's important to recognize that access to the right sources of help and information can help lead to early intervention, which can help give kids and their families hope for a brighter future.

However, fewer than 10% of children with mental health problems receive proper services to address impairments related to personal, family or situational factors. Sadly, this figure has remained unchanged for more than 30 years. The harsh reality is that the majority of children and youth needing mental health services don't receive them, due in large part to a poor understanding of mental disorders and limited access to intervention.

Reducing the stigma

The quality of children's mental health treatments and services continues to improve. That's the good news. Unfortunately, many children who might benefit from these services are falling through the cracks because of the stigma attached to children's mental health issues. Some parents are embarrassed that their child has a mental disorder. Some fear their child will be branded by their illness. Other parents may blame themselves for their child's suffering. Whatever the manifestation, stigma can be a paralyzing, negative force that prevents children from getting the treatment they need.

The bottom line is this: If we want to improve the rates of children receiving proper care, we – as a society – need to overcome the stigma currently associated with children's mental illness. Ignoring the symptoms only leads to negative implications, such as poor performance in school, conflicts inside and out of the home, or more serious problems such as substance abuse, etc.

Early intervention is key to creating positive outcomes. And overcoming the stigma associated with children's mental illness is an important part of that process.

What to do

If you suspect your child has a mental health issue, the first step is to pay close attention. Note the timing, nature and characteristics of your child's behaviour change. When did it begin? How does it manifest itself?

Next, gather credible information from trusted resources such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (www.camh.net), Children's Mental Health Ontario (www.kidsmentalhealth.ca) and similar organizations. These websites can provide a wealth of invaluable information, including fact sheets, FAQs, brochures and listings of service providers and more.

Finally, if you think there may be a problem, don't hesitate to seek the help of trained professionals. The best place to start is your family doctor, who will examine your child and who may provide you with a referral to a specialist if required.

And remember that no matter how scary or unsettling the situation may seem, you're not alone. There are thousands of parents across the country grappling with the same issues you and your family may be dealing with. And there are thousands of highly-trained, dedicated professionals who are ready, willing and able to help you every step of the way.