

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 provide the information we need to make a decision.

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".

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. 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. And there's mounting evidence that many, if not most, lifetime psychiatric disorders will first appear in childhood or adolescence.

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

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. There are some basic questions we can ask ourselves as parents. Is this behaviour disruptive to our child? How long has it been occurring? Would this be considered 'normal' for their age group?

The quality of children's mental health treatments and services continues to improve. 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. 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. Early intervention is key to creating positive outcomes. And overcoming the stigma is an important part of that process.