

How to Make Children's Mental Health a Priority



Photo: Courtesy of Caleb Woods

Most people think of mental health disorders as an adult problem, but the reality is that they usually start in childhood. In fact, half of all psychiatric illness occurs before the age of 14, and 75 percent by the age of 24. If we treated disorders like anxiety and depression more effectively in children and teenagers, the benefit would be huge – not only for the kids who get their childhoods back, but for the adults they will become.

Preventing mental illness

Anxiety is the most common disorder in children and the least likely to get treated. If left untreated, it will likely develop into adult depression, anxiety,

suicidality, and substance abuse. One study found that 60 percent of adult substance dependence could be prevented by early treatment of disorders in youth.

Kids who are anxious or suffering from trauma tend to act out in school, disrupting their classrooms and, in some cases, derailing their own futures. If we can empower more parents and teachers to recognize emotional and learning problems in children and get them support in school-based programs that have proved to be very effective, we can not only help these kids thrive, but also boost everyone's learning.

Early intervention

Research shows that early intervention is the key to the best outcomes for children with psychiatric and learning disorders. The good news is that treatment doesn't necessarily mean putting them on medication. Studies show, for instance, that the most effective treatment for anxiety, OCD, and depression is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In CBT, kids learn how changing their thinking can empower them to change the way they feel and act. Since children are such good learners, their brains are primed for it, and they are especially good at learning how to conquer overwhelming feelings and problem behaviors.

But not enough kids are getting this transformative care. To improve access to care, we must educate the public and reduce the stigma. We must make bold systemic changes that put mental health on the same level as physical health and make it a priority to treat children before they become impaired adults.

SOURCE: [Child Mind Institute](#), us.editorial@mediaplanet.com