



# CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

## How Common are Children's Mental Health Problems?

"Mental disorders and mental health problems appear in families of all social classes and of all backgrounds. No one is immune. Yet there are children who are at greatest risk by virtue of a broad array of factors. These include physical problems; intellectual disabilities (retardation); low birth weight; family history of mental and addictive disorders; multigenerational poverty; and caregiver separation or abuse and neglect."

Mental Health: A Report of the U.S. Surgeon General, 1999.

Emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders cut across all income, education, racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Children who have these disorders live with single parents and two-parent families and in birth, adoptive, and foster families. They live in every community across the country and attend every school. They span the entire age range. In recent years, both the Surgeon General of the United States and the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health have highlighted the urgency of addressing children's mental health needs.

### What is Known about the Scope and Magnitude of the Problem?

- 4 million youth suffer from a major mental illness that results in significant impairments at home, at school, and with peers. [U.S. Surgeon General's Report, 1999]
- One in ten children and adolescents has a mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. Yet, only about one in five of them receives mental health services in any given year. [U.S. Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health, 2000]
- Among children ages 9-17, there are one or two with serious emotional problems in virtually every classroom in the country. [President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2002]
- Among youth ages 15-24, suicide is the third leading cause of death, after auto accidents and homicides. [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]
- Child mental disorders continue into adulthood: 74 percent of 21-year-olds with mental disorders had prior problems. [U.S. Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health, 2000]

### Why Intervene as Early as Possible?

More public officials are recognizing the need to invest in children early on to help ensure their later well-being. The Institute of Medicine/National Research Council, in 2000, issued a comprehensive study called *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, which emphasized the importance of children's social and emotional development to their overall well-being. The report called for larger investments in children's mental health, including developmental and behavioral screens. It also

recognized the value of well-designed intervention programs to help children with serious health conditions, including mental and emotional problems.

There is growing recognition that some childhood mental illnesses can be prevented, and many others can be prevented from causing long-term damage if there is early, prompt, and appropriate intervention. But this requires making early identification and intervention a higher priority; it means that children of all ages must have access to mental health screens and assessments, both on a routine basis and when they show signs of possible emotional, behavioral, or developmental difficulties.

There are those who say that serving children with emotional, behavioral, and mental health problems is too costly. Yet, the alternative is even more expensive. Consider the human and financial costs of not intervening as early and promptly as necessary with children with serious mental health problems:

- **Lost Productivity.** Families often must miss work if called to school about their children's problems or if they have to stay home to care for them. Communities lose valuable workers when there is this kind of family disruption. The staggering emotional and financial toll on families can also affect their productivity on the job.
- **Lost Learning Opportunities.** Young people miss out on valuable time in school. Many are often too troubled to learn without special help and when they don't get it, they may bounce in and out of the classroom.

- **Safety Risks.** When children can't learn in school and drop out or are suspended or expelled, communities face the prospect of having unproductive children and youth "hanging around" and creating concerns about safety and crime for themselves and others.
- **Diminished Quality of Life.** Mental difficulties often surface during childhood and when they are severe, they are very destructive over a long period of time. This creates enormous suffering for the children and all members of their families, and all suffer a greatly diminished quality of life.

Full citations are included in the Action Strategies and Resources Guide.

