

GUIDE

**ACTION STRATEGIES AND**

RESOURCES

Promoting Children's  
Mental Health Screens  
and Assessments

Children's Defense Fund  
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# ACTION STRATEGIES

## Examining Children's Mental Health Screens and Assessments

**T**his Action Strategies and Resources Guide, a part of the Children's Mental Health Resource Kit, is designed to help you promote access to and the availability of mental health screens and assessments for children in your state. Please review the fact sheets included in the resource kit to familiarize yourself with key facts and background information. Use the resources portion of this guide to find other materials and organizational support available on children's mental health. The action strategies offer you specific steps you can take to move this important agenda forward in concrete ways in your own state and community. They will help you examine what's currently available and to expand screens and assessments. We encourage you to use these action strategies with other individuals and organizations to build broad and powerful networks capable of improving children's access to mental health services.

The Children's Defense Fund developed these action strategies to help you begin to build support to increase your state's investment in children's mental health screens and assessments. Start by examining what is currently being done in your state. Collect information that will help build support for improvements in early detection, prevention, and prompt interventions for children with mental health needs.

The Action Strategies are as follows:

- #1. Determine the status of children's mental health advocacy in your state.
- #2: Collect basic data about mental health screens and assessments.
- #3: Collect data to show how the state allocates funds for children's mental health services.
- #4: Collect personal stories from families about their experiences trying to get mental health screens and assessments for their children.

### **Strategy #1: Determine the status of children's mental health advocacy in your state.**

All states have active family groups that work to promote services and supports for children and youth with emotional, behavioral, or mental disorders and their families. Many of these family groups work in partnership with a variety of professional organizations and other advocates to promote children's mental health. Examples of information you want to know include:

- What family groups have organized to address state policies and procedures affecting children's mental health? See the resources and references section of this guide for contact information for the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, the National Mental Health Association, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. You will also want to connect with other groups working on children's mental health issues.

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- Is there an existing coalition of families and professionals working to increase attention and funding for children's mental health screens and assessments? If a coalition does not exist in your area, consider organizing one. Helpful allies include pediatricians, child psychiatrists, school psychologists and nurses, social workers, law enforcement officials, educators, and other children's health advocates.
- Do your state or local elected or appointed officials have a special interest in children's mental health issues? Individuals who have someone in their immediate or extended family with mental health problems are often the most interested in improving policies and procedures that can increase access to services and supports for this group of children and families.

**Strategy #2: Collect basic data about mental health screens and assessments.**

You'll want to get basic data about screens and assessments along with relevant state policies and procedures.

## **Gather different types of information on children's mental health services and treatment**

- Ask for program data, evaluations and audits.
- Get copies of any relevant state or local plans about mental health services and children's mental health services specifically.
- Ask for specific information about the children's mental health system such as waiting lists for services, descriptions of unmet needs, relevant litigation, or proposed administrative or legislative changes.

- Review formal recommendations from advisory groups or legislative committees for information about the status of children's mental health services in your state.

## **Check with the following to get the information:**

- Start with the state Medicaid Director and/or Medicaid agency staff that work on children's services.
- Ask the State Mental Health Director. Most have one individual assigned to children's mental health.
- Check with appropriate individuals in the child welfare, early intervention and pre-school, education, and juvenile justice agencies. Ask the children's mental health contact who is the best source in each of those agencies. Given the multiple funding streams for children's mental health, all of these public agencies can help increase children's access to mental health screens and assessments.
- Check with the state Mental Health Advisory Council, children's advisory councils or children's mental health advocacy groups.
- Don't forget about the family groups. They often are most active on these issues and have collected useful information.

## **Ask questions about mental health screens and assessments**

Be specific. Examples of questions include:

- Does the state have any written policies and procedures about children's mental health screenings? If so, request copies. These documents can provide basic information for you to monitor how well the state implements its own policies and procedures.

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- Does the state recommend a specific mental health screen for Medicaid providers to use? What is used? What, if anything, do they recommend for CHIP providers?
- For children enrolled in Medicaid managed care: Does the state Medicaid agency retain responsibility for children’s screenings or does the managed care company perform the screenings? Is this issue addressed in the managed care contract and, if so, how? If the managed care company is responsible, who monitors performance of its legal obligation to provide these screens?
- What data does the state collect about mental health screens performed by Medicaid providers? Does it show how many screens are performed? The frequency of screens for different age groups? What follow-up treatment resulted from the screens? You want all this information to monitor how the state provides the full range of EPSDT services—screens, diagnostic assessments, and treatment.
- Which public agencies conduct these screens and assessments? Request this information from Medicaid, child welfare, early intervention and pre-school, education, and juvenile justice agencies. Find out if any other agencies are also involved.
- How much does the state spend for residential care for children, both in and out of the state? How many children are in residential care each year, both in and out of the state?
- Is the state actively trying to bring children home from out-of-state residential placements? What steps is it taking to do so? What services and supports are now available for these children and their families?

**Strategy #3: Collect data to show how the state allocates funds for children’s mental health services.**

Most states allocate more funds for residential care of children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health disorders than for preventive services or for screens or assessments. Examples of questions to ask include:

- Does the state have any written policies and procedures about how it will allocate funds for children’s mental health services? These documents can provide basic information and help you to monitor how well the state implements its own policies and procedures.
- How much does the state spend on children’s mental health screens and assessments?

**Strategy #4: Collect personal stories from families about their experiences trying to get mental health screens and assessments for their children.**

At a time when budgets for human and social services are shrinking, it is more and more important that you have cost/benefit data. Although public officials need to have the dollars-and-cents data, do not overlook the power of families’ personal experiences. Tragically, the vast majority of families can back up the public policy argument that “you pay now or you pay more later,” because when they were unable to get services for their children at an earlier time, the situation only continued to get worse. The real life stories of children and families are very compelling. Whenever possible, show how the combination of data and personal anecdotes supports the policy solutions you propose.

Keep family stories focused, short and simple. They should state the facts and not place any blame. Be sure to include policy solutions for any problem described and explain how the policy change would

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produce better outcomes for the children and families. It is helpful to collect a diverse group of family stories featuring children of all ages (infants, pre-school, school age and adolescent); foster children; and kinship care families where grandparents or other relatives are raising children.

This resource kit focuses on the need to improve access to mental health screens and assessments through Medicaid and CHIP so children will be more likely to receive appropriate treatment. To help make the case for such improvements, document families' experiences in the following areas:

- Do families get Medicaid information that describes the full range of mental health services that are available? What do they get from CHIP about mental health services?
- If children qualify for Medicaid, are families told that a mental health screen is available and where to get it? How many children got their mental health screen and how often? What happened to children who got no screens?
- If children qualify for CHIP, are families offered a mental health screen? How many children got a mental health screen and how often through CHIP? What happened to children who got no screens?
- Did children receive any initial mental health screening when their problems first became evident? If not, did their mental health problems become more serious?
- Did children receive any assessment for specific treatment or services if their mental health screening indicated there was a problem to address? If not, did their mental health problems become even more serious?
- Was mental health treatment provided to children whose screens indicated the need for it? What treatment was offered? Was it home or community-based? Was it residential care only? Was the residential treatment offered in or out of state? Were parents told to go to the child welfare system for help?





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## Expanding Children's Mental Health Screens and Assessments

Once you have taken steps to examine children's mental health screens and assessments in your state, you can then take further steps to expand children's access to mental health screens and assessments. We describe five action strategies. Each strategy has several steps to consider. You may decide to pursue one or more strategies at the same time or sequentially because they require different amounts of time to plan and implement. The action strategies are as follows:

- #1. Educate families, policymakers, and the public about the need to address children's mental health problems as early as possible.
- #2. Promote the availability and use of screening tools in settings where children and families already receive services.
- #3. Encourage prevention and early intervention services.
- #4. Expand delivery models for mental health screens and assessments.
- #5. Organize advocacy and monitoring to expand access to mental health screens and assessments.

In addition to considering these strategies, be sure to check the resources and references section of this guide for specific references to organizations, reports, and articles that can help you develop an agenda to expand access to mental health screens and assessments for children.

**Strategy #1: Educate families, policymakers, and the public about the need to address children's mental health problems as early as possible.**

Despite frequent media attention to children's increasing mental health needs, there is still an appalling lack of knowledge about the scope of these problems and the long-term serious consequences for children, their families, and communities when they are not addressed. At the local and state levels, it is important to increase awareness about the profound long-term effects of unrecognized and untreated emotional, behavioral, and mental disorders on children's development, their family and social life, their ability to learn, and even their ability to lead productive adult lives. A huge part of the public education effort must focus on decreasing the stigma of mental problems so that children and families will seek help as early as possible.

### **Organize Anti-Stigma Campaigns**

Consider working with others to organize an anti-stigma campaign in your community or state. The "Caring for Every Child's Mental Health" campaign is funded by the federal Center for Mental Health Services. It is a national public information and education campaign to increase public awareness about children's emotional, behavioral, and mental health problems and to reduce the stigma associated with them. Designed to help families, educators, health care providers, and young people, the campaign encourages early, appropriate treatment and services. See the resources and references section of this guide for the Center's Web site, where you can download an order form for its extensive collection of products,

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including brochures, fact sheets, videos, bookmarks, print public service announcements, posters, and other materials. You can order these products in quantities, and Spanish-language campaign products are also available.

## Promote Local and State Public Education Efforts

Several national organizations can help you organize local and state public education efforts. Choose a segment of your community to educate. You may want to begin by focusing on one agency, such as early childhood providers, the schools, or your child welfare or juvenile justice agency. The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and National Mental Health Association all have wonderful local and state contacts. See the resources and references section of this guide for the national contact information for these organizations.

## Prepare State and Media Reports on Children's Mental Health

Some children's organizations are trying to increase public awareness about the inadequacy of children's mental health services in their states. These efforts are designed to educate the public, elected officials, and policymakers about effective strategies that may already exist in their states or ones to consider implementing. Broader children's advocacy groups are getting involved because, even if they have not traditionally focused on mental health issues, they want to ensure access to all EPSDT services (including screens) and highlight the effectiveness of early identification and early intervention strategies. Examples of recent state reports include:

- *Children's Mental Health Services in Rhode Island: An Issue Brief*. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, October 2002. See [www.rikidscount.org](http://www.rikidscount.org).

- *Relinquishing Custody: An Act of Desperation*. Maryland Coalition of Families for Children's Mental Health, September 2002. See [www.mdcoalition.org](http://www.mdcoalition.org).
- *Speak Out for Access: The Experiences of Massachusetts Families in Obtaining Mental Health Care for their Children*. Health Care for All and the Parent Professional Advocacy League, November 2002. See [www.hcfama.org](http://www.hcfama.org) and click on "Children's Division" and then "Children's Mental Health."

In the last several years, the general media has also focused attention on the unmet mental health problems of children and the need to address them. Mainstream weekly news magazines and daily newspapers have highlighted teen suicide and depression in children as well as other related topics. Two outstanding examples include:

- *Time* magazine, "Custody or Mental Health?" highlights what families face when forced to relinquish custody of their children to state child welfare systems so they can get the mental health services they need. See [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), October 22, 2002 issue.
- *Herald News*, Portland, Maine, "Castaway Children: Maine's Most Vulnerable Kids," August 18-20, 2002. A three-part newspaper series highlighting the tremendous difficulties faced by Maine families who try to get mental health care for their children. Includes very useful charts and statistics that make a compelling case about how to redirect resources for more home and community-based care. Available at [www.pressherald.com/news/children](http://www.pressherald.com/news/children).

You might also use the April 2003 U.S. General Accounting Office report, *Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice: Federal Agencies Could Play a Stronger Role in Helping States Reduce the Number of Children Placed*