



INTRODUCTION

Promoting Access for Children to Mental Health Screens and Assessments in Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)

“The burden of suffering experienced by children with mental health needs and their families has created a health crisis in this country. Growing numbers of children are suffering needlessly because their emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs are not being met by those very institutions which were explicitly created to take care of them. It is time that we as a Nation took seriously the task of preventing mental health problems and treating mental illness in youth.”

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D, U.S. Surgeon General, Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda, 2000.

Why is There a Need for a Children's Mental Health Resource Kit?

Please use this resource kit to educate yourself and others about the mental health care needs of children and to learn about opportunities for improving access to mental health screens and assessments for children through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). If you share the Children's Defense Fund's vision for improved access to mental health care for children, please use this resource kit to work toward this goal in your community and state.

Encourage others to join you. Find other people and organizations to connect with to advance this agenda. Build the case for why this is important for children by collecting data and the stories of children to inform others of the genuine need for, and importance of, children's improved access to mental health services. Every single individual who joins this effort can make a difference. Please become a persistent, visible witness for children wherever you live.

The mental health needs of children and youth call out for attention. There is widespread denial that mental health concerns affect children—across all age ranges, all cultural groups, and all income brackets. Such misunderstandings are frequent, and interventions and treatment are rare. Many people believe that children with mental health problems are “just going through a phase.” Yet, such problems are a growing concern for more and more of our country's young children, adolescents, and their families. Consider these facts:

- 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 youths ages 15-24, suicide is the third leading cause of death, after auto accidents and homicides. [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]

The Children's Defense Fund believes it is time to broaden understanding about the critical need to provide children with early and regular screens for potential mental health problems. And once problems are identified, children and their families must have access in their own communities to the treatment, services, and supports that they need.

We recognize that states are being asked to do more and more with fewer resources. States and localities with tight budgets now face major cutbacks in social, health, and human services. However, at the same time, the increasing mental health needs of children require that they receive more attention in the national debate about priorities for public spending. The devastating human and financial costs of ignoring early signs of mental health problems affect every community and the children and families who must face tremendous daily challenges.

It is time to have a public health approach to mental health care that emphasizes prevention, risk reduction, and early intervention to avoid more complex and expensive problems later. It is now more important than ever to stay focused on the core elements of comprehensive and effective health and mental health services, including early detection and intervention.

This Resource Kit focuses on the importance of providing age-appropriate mental health screens and assessments as early as possible for younger children and regularly for teens. Appropriate screening and assessment will increase the likelihood of appropriate treatment.

We recognize that mental health and drug and alcohol problems—especially among adolescents—frequently occur together, but we address only the mental health challenges in this resource kit. For more information about the special challenges of co-occurring disorders, see the Action Strategies and Resources Guide under the entries for the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health and the National GAINS Center.

What is the Goal?

The goal is to help increase access to mental health screens and assessments for all children—as early as possible and on a regular basis at appropriate age intervals so that appropriate treatment can follow. This is especially critical for the youngest children. Screens and assessments also should be available as quickly as possible when older children show signs of emerging problems. Mental health screens can identify problems that require immediate attention. If and when there is evidence of a potential problem, children should get a more comprehensive assessment to determine appropriate treatment and services.

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

To achieve this goal, we must broaden the network of advocates and policymakers who can promote this objective as part of a larger state and local children's health and mental health agenda. Part of that agenda must be to maximize the use of Medicaid and CHIP to provide mental health screens and assessments for all children. The resource kit is designed to help you do this.

What Can You Do?

You can take action now in your own state and community to broaden support for increased and improved mental health services for children who need them. While Medicaid and its comprehensive benefits package for children have existed to provide health coverage for children for more than 35 years and many states have used Children's Health Insurance Program funding since 1997 to expand their coverage for millions of eligible children through Medicaid or separate CHIP programs, these programs still are drastically underutilized when it comes to providing mental health care to children.

Many studies and lawsuits have documented that the delivery of Medicaid services, including children's health and mental health screens and treatment, remains sporadic and inadequate. Children's health and mental health benefits through private insurance coverage are riddled with benefit limits, exclusions, and significant cost-sharing burdens. Some states that have chosen to expand children's health insurance coverage through CHIP have replicated the shortcomings of these private health insurance benefits for children. The shortcomings in Medicaid, CHIP, and private insurance plans persist despite documented

benefits of early detection of, and intervention in, childhood health and mental health problems. The medical, education, advocacy, and policymaking communities' interest in, and emphasis of, early detection and intervention strategies present significant opportunities to promote and improve children's mental health screening and assessment.

Every state has a small core of dedicated family members, other advocates, and public officials who speak out about children's mental health issues. But more voices are needed in the effort to convince the general public and policymakers that ignoring children's mental health concerns has profound implications for children, their families, and communities. We hope you will use this resource kit to broaden the network of advocates working to increase and improve mental health screening, assessment, and services for children.

Who is the Audience?

Expand the circle of allies who can help you raise the prominence of children's mental health concerns in your states and communities. Individuals who can help include pediatricians, policymakers, children's and child health advocates, family members and young people themselves who have mental health problems, other concerned citizens, and members of the media. Working with the media can educate more people about the negative and costly consequences of ignoring warning signs of mental health problems as well as the positive results of early detection and intervention.

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