

Six FAQs about children's mental health

A child's mental health affects nearly every aspect of their overall health. Their physical health and their ability to become successful, contributing members of society depends on the state of mind they bring to every situation.¹

Children's mental health issues are real, common and treatable. An estimated 15 million of our nation's young people can currently be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Many more are at risk of developing a disorder due to genetic and environmental risk factors. However, it is estimated that only about 7 percent of youth who need services receive appropriate help from mental health professionals.

Q. What should I do if I am concerned about mental, behavioral or emotional symptoms in my child?

A. Keep in mind that every child is different.

Even normal development, such as when children develop language, motor, and social skills, varies from child to child. If you are concerned about changes in behavior or other symptoms, talk to your child's doctor or health care provider. If your child is in school ask the teacher about observed changes in behavior and see if the school system can provide an evaluation. Share this with your provider as well. Be prepared to seek further evaluation by a specialist with experience in child mental health issues. Specialists may include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, and behavioral therapists.

Q. How do I know if my child's problems are serious?

A. Many everyday stressors can cause changes in a child's behavior, however, not every problem is serious.

For example, the birth of a sibling may cause a child to temporarily act much younger than he or she is. Behavior patterns that may indicate a more serious issue include:

- Problems across a variety of settings, such as at school, at home, or with peers
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Social withdrawal, or fearful behavior toward things your child normally is not afraid of
- Returning to behaviors more common in younger children, such as bed-wetting, for a long time
- Signs of being upset, such as sadness or tearfulness
- Signs of self-destructive behavior, such as head-banging, or a tendency to get hurt often
- Repeated thoughts of death.

¹Department of Health and Human Services, 2001—Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda

Q. How are mental illnesses diagnosed in young children?

A. Just like adults, children with mental illness are diagnosed after a doctor or mental health specialist carefully observes signs and symptoms.

Some primary care physicians can diagnose a child themselves, but many will refer to a specialist for diagnosis and treatment.

Before diagnosing a mental illness, the doctor or specialist tries to rule out other possible causes for a child's behavior. The doctor will:

- Review the child's medical history
- Discuss the issues you have observed
- Review the child's developmental level
- Ask about any family history of mental health disorders
- Ask if the child has experienced physical or psychological traumas, such as a natural disaster, or situations that may cause stress, such as a death in the family
- Consider reports caretakers and/or teachers

Children are constantly changing and growing and diagnosis and treatment must be viewed with this in mind. While some problems are short-lived and don't need treatment, others are ongoing and may be very serious. In either case, it is important to see more information so you can understand treatment options and make informed decisions.

Q. What are the treatment options for children?

A. The specialist will recommend specific treatment based on the diagnosis.

Treatment options may include psychotherapy and/or medication. Talk about the options with the specialist and ask questions. Some treatment choices are a part of standard health care practice while others may be in the experimental stage.

Q. Will my child get better with time?

A. Some children get better with time and others children may need ongoing professional help, it all depends on the diagnosis.

That is why it is important to consult with a health care providers as soon as possible because treatment may produce better results if started early.

Q. How can families of children with mental illness get support?

A. Like other serious illnesses, taking care of a child with mental illness is hard on the parents, family, and other caregivers.

Support groups are available for many different types of issues and age groups. By sharing experiences in a safe and confidential setting encourages empathy and a sense of community.

Help is available. For additional information, visit MagellanHealth.com/MYMH

Sources: American Psychological Association, National Institute of Mental Health

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan Health does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.

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