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# Children, Youth and Mental Disorders



*Reports from many jurisdictions indicate that the burden of suffering imposed by children's mental health problems and disorders is not diminishing. When present, they permeate every aspect of development and functioning, including family relationships, school performance and peer relationships. Often the most serious of these illnesses continue into adulthood and affect productivity and functioning in the community, particularly if they are not detected early and treated effectively. No other illnesses affect so many children in such a serious and widespread manner.*

— Child and Youth Mental Health Plan,  
Ministry of Children and Family Development

Though Canada prides itself on its universal health care system, mental health services for children and youth are not keeping pace with the high rates of depression, suicide, eating disorders, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses in young Canadians.

A 2002 analysis of mental illness preva-

lence studies concluded that 15% or around 150,000 children and youth in BC, “experience mental disorders causing significant distress and impairing their functioning at home, at school, with peers, or in the community”—anxiety, conduct, attention-deficit, and depressive disorders being the most common.

Depression and suicide are among

the most talked about youth mental health issues. A quarter of a million young people had symptoms of major depression in the past year; about the same number thought about suicide. In a 2003 school-based survey in BC, about 8% of 12-19 year-olds said they were seriously emotionally distressed in the past month such that they had felt so sad, discouraged or hopeless that they wondered if anything was worthwhile. Even more troubling is that about 16% of young people admit having considered suicide in the past year, and 7% admit having attempted it. Suicide risk drops the more connected the youth is to their family, friends and school.

Despite the number of children with depression, eating disorders and other mental disorders, many of these illnesses are left untreated in children, according to mental health advocates. For example, while an estimated 15% of BC's children and youth are needing help and would benefit from treatment, only

## Signs of Mental Illness in Children and Youth

- **changes in behaviour:** e.g. an active child becomes quiet and withdrawn or a good student suddenly starts getting poor grades
- **changes in feelings:** for example, a child may show signs of feeling unhappy, worried, guilty, angry, fearful, hopeless or rejected
- **physical symptoms:** frequent headaches, stomach or back aches, problems eating or sleeping, or a general lack of energy
- **changes in thoughts:** for example, a child may begin saying things that indicate low self-esteem, self-blame or thoughts about suicide
- **abuse** of alcohol and/or drugs
- **difficulty coping** with regular activities and everyday problems
- **consistent violations** of the rights of others: e.g. thefts and vandalism
- **intense fear** of becoming fat with no relationship to the child's actual body weight
- **odd or repetitive movements** beyond regular playing such as spinning, hand-flapping or head banging
- **unusual ways of speaking** or private language that no one else can understand

## What Parents Can Do to Help

- encourage your child to discuss his or her concerns, but avoid a confrontational approach; listen carefully to what he or she has to say
- check with your family doctor to determine whether there is a physical cause (e.g. iron deficiency) for your child's feelings of fatigue and low moods
- ask school teachers if they have noticed changes in the child or can suggest reasons for the child's altered behaviour
- ask if your school board has a staff counselor who can refer you to individual or group counseling to help children and teens cope with stress
- based on referrals from your family doctor, school counselor, or self-referral, book an appointment with a children's mental health team, psychiatrist or psychologist who works with children
- consider family counseling or a family support group to ease conflicts and teach family members how to support each other through difficult times

1 %, or around 11,000 children and youth, were connected to the mental health system in BC in 2002, according to the Ministry of Child and Family Development.

One reason for the lack of diagnosis and treatment is that people do not expect mental illness to affect someone so young. Another is that identifying mental illness in children can be challenging, partly because young people change so much as they grow.

Parents may have difficulty distinguishing between normal phases in development and an underlying mental illness. For example, frequent outbursts of anger or tears may result from

hormonal changes in puberty or they may be symptoms of depression, a drug and/or alcohol addiction or an eating disorder.

The pressures of school and growing up can be very difficult for some children to cope with successfully. Parents who look at situations through adult eyes may not realize the depth of their children's concerns—and even if they do, other factors such as culture and gender moderate whether a young person would even talk to their parents in the first place. In one BC study, Chinese youth, for instance, were twice as reluctant to consider parents a preferred source of help for depression problems (17 %) compared to non-Chinese youth (33 %). In both cases, girls were the ones more likely to choose friends over parents.

Proper diagnosis and treatment are critical to recovery since the symptoms of mental disorders can worsen over time. Without help, mental illness can slow a child's mental and emotional development and lead to problems in school, family upheaval, substance use problems and even suicide.

Children with anxiety problems or disorders—at least 5 % of whom having significant problems such as panic disorder, generalized anxiety, obsessive-compulsive or post-traumatic stress disorder, social phobia, or other phobias or disabling fears—can have varying reactions and social consequences from upset and worry to anger, uncooperative behaviour and even aggression. Left unmanaged, anxiety in young people can worsen and lead to development of other problems such as depression.

Young people with depression are much more likely than other children to have low-self-esteem, problems in school, physical ailments and substance use disorders.

Conduct and attention deficit disorders, which may include hyperactivity, reduce a child's ability to direct and control his or her

## Partners:

Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Centre for Addictions Research of BC

FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health Care

Jessie's Hope Society

Mood Disorders Association of BC

## Mental Health and Mental Disorders among Canadian Children

Disorder	Prevalence (%)	Approximate Number in BC <sup>1</sup>
Any anxiety disorder	6.5	60,900
Conduct disorder	3.3	30,900
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder	3.3	30,900
Any depressive disorder	2.1	19,700
Substance abuse	0.8	7,500
Pervasive development disorder	0.3	2,800
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	0.2	1,900
Schizophrenia	0.1	900
Tourette's disorder	0.1	900
Any eating disorder	0.1	900
Bipolar disorder	< 0.1	< 900
Any disorder	15	140,500

1. The approximate number who may be affected is based on a population of 936,500 children and youth in BC (MCFD, 2002)

Source: Mental Health Evaluation and Community Consultation Unit

For more information call the Mental Health Information Line toll-free in BC at **1-800-661-2121**

or email **bcpartners@heretohelp.bc.ca**

web: **heretohelp.bc.ca**

## Resources for Children with Mental Illness

A comprehensive evaluation and treatment team may include:

- parents and family
- child or adolescent psychiatrist
- pediatricians and specialized physicians (e.g. neurologists)
- psychologists
- clinical social worker
- psychiatric nurses
- therapists/counsellors
- specific learning programs
- specific social skill and behaviour programs
- special schools or hospitals
- respite care services for the caregiver and family
- self-help groups and family support groups

attention. Left untreated, these illnesses can interfere with the learning process and make it difficult for a child to live in harmony with family and friends.

Psychosis is a serious condition that often strikes young people, and often goes undetected for months and even years. It's characterized by symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, paranoia, social withdrawal and at its most extreme, loss of contact with reality. The symptoms of psychosis may be related to ongoing illnesses such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and some forms of unipolar or bipolar affective disorder (also known as depression and manic depression). Since early detection of psychosis is associated with a better chance of recovery, it's important to intervene as soon as possible.

Like adults, young people develop mental illness for a variety of reasons. Some children develop depression in response to major life changes such as moving to a new city, being bullied or going through their parents' divorce. Eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia nervosa may be linked to depression, social pressures, low self-esteem and disordered food behaviours in the home. Children who are neglected, sexually abused, and/or exposed to family violence are much more vulnerable to mental illness. Genetic factors may also play a role. For example, research suggests that a child has an increased chance of developing

schizophrenia if a parent, both parents or an identical twin is diagnosed with the illness.

Regardless of the cause, mental illness can make life difficult for children and youth and others around them. An adolescent with depression may feel worthless and believe that he or she is disliked by everyone. Children with attention deficit disorders may create havoc in the classroom and at home because of their impulsivity and difficulty expressing their true needs. And major illnesses, such as schizophrenia, may require extensive, ongoing care from parents which can lead to jealousy and resentments in other family members.

Nevertheless, professional and community support services that do exist throughout BC can help improve the quality of life for the child with a mental disorder, the caregiver and the rest of the family. Many services offer practical support, education on mental illness, and messages of hope and recovery. The symptoms of mental illness are highly treatable and recovery is possible with the appropriate therapies, medications and support.

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