



## **Children in Distress**

No child is immune to mental health problems. Approximately 8.1 million children in the United States suffer from some form of mental or emotional disturbance. This is about 15 % of the younger generation. A small portion of that group may be diagnosed as having severe problems such as schizophrenia, major depression or severe behavioral disorders.

Mental health problems in children usually develop gradually. The trouble signs are not always so obvious that you would recognize them as symptoms of mental health problems. Anger, fear, sadness, withdrawal or opposition to authority are emotions felt and expressed by most children. But children with mental health problems display negative behavior with greater intensity, more often and with less provocation.

There are a number of causes that are not fully understood. Physical injury, infection and brain damage before or after birth are examples of biological factors. Poverty, discrimination, a family crisis, child abuse and neglect may also contribute to mental or emotional problems. Recent studies indicate that children whose caregivers are alcohol or substance abusers, or have had mental health problems themselves are at greater risk.

### **Symptoms**

Most children with mental health problems express unhappiness. They may have difficulty coping with almost all aspects of daily living. They may be tearful, anxious, frightened or rebellious. Perhaps they will be aggressive or destructive toward themselves, others or property. They may be unable to make friends or get along with other children. Adults who try to form relationships with them may find them “hard to reach.” Children with mental health problems may be unable to play or communicate; they may be depressed or feel isolated. They may have speech or language problems and difficulty with concentration and schoolwork.

### **How to Find Help**

Parents are frequently helped by teachers, ministers, doctors, social workers, psychologists, nurses and child care workers in recognizing a child in distress. These individuals are often able to suggest appropriate services to a family whose child is in need of treatment. Community health centers and public health departments also provide mental health services.

Mental Health Associations are excellent sources for information and referrals. Community Mental Health Centers (called NorthKey in Kentucky) provide services for children with mental or emotional problems. You can use your child’s medical card or fees will be set according to your income. For more information on getting treatment, call NorthKey at (859) 331-3292.

## **Identification and Treatment**

Each child's problems are unique. It is very important that the child be evaluated by mental health professionals. The evaluation (consisting of observation, interviews and testing) will assist the specialist in identifying the specific problem or illness. This clinical diagnosis will serve as a guideline for the treatment plan.

Although the parents may feel guilty or overwhelmed by their perceived inability to cope with the child, help will also be available for them. Once the child begins treatment, the parents should continue to look at the program to evaluate the benefits. The best therapy combines the insight and training of a professional and the involvement of those people closest to the child.

The setting for treatment may be a community health center (such as NorthKey) or the office of a private psychiatrist or counselor. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who typically provide prescriptions for medications (such as anti-depressants) when necessary. Therapy is primarily provided by psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses or family counselors who specialize in children's mental health.

Individual therapy takes place when the child is seen by a therapist alone; group therapy is when other children with similar mental / emotional problems work together with a therapist. There may be family sessions for the child as well as other family members. Treatment may be psychotherapy (helping children express their feelings appropriately and teaching them how to cope) or behavioral (teaching children ways to replace undesirable behavior with more appropriate and acceptable behavior) or a combination. As mentioned earlier, medication is sometimes prescribed to reduce the symptoms of the illness. Education for parents offers suggestions for record keeping (keeping track of the child's symptoms) and how to work with the child at home.

The length of time children need to remain in treatment varies depending on the seriousness of the condition and their response to treatment. Parents should be involved in the planning process and ask about the expected length of treatment. The goal of therapy is to help the child:

- increase self-esteem (feel better about him / her self)
- learn more appropriate (or acceptable) ways of behaving
- cope with normal amounts of stress
- understand him or herself better
- compromise when perfect solutions to problems are not possible
- express feelings in appropriate ways

While psychotherapy is generally offered on an outpatient basis, some children may need hospitalization or residential treatment. If so, the child should be placed in a center near his / her home to continue family and community involvement. The daily environment of a treatment facility is designed to provide a total therapeutic experience.