

Fifteen Steps Toward Protecting Children's Mental Health

(NAPSA)—Although half of adult mental, emotional and behavioral disorders begin before age 14, there are signs that parents can watch for and 15 steps they can take to help their own kids.

The Problem

Some 10 million adults and 2 million teenagers have a serious mental illness, while more than 23 million people have needed treatment for substance use. By 2020, mental and substance use disorders are expected to surpass all physical diseases as a major cause of disability worldwide. In addition, drug and alcohol use can lead to other chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. Addressing the effects of substance use alone is estimated to cost Americans more than \$600 billion each year.

The Reason

People have biological and psychological characteristics that can make them vulnerable or resilient to potential behavioral health problems. Qualities like positive self-image, self-control or strong social connections can all help during times when behavioral health might be challenged. According to the experts at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, symptoms of mental disorders change over time as a child grows, and may include difficulties with how a child plays, learns, speaks and acts, or how the child handles emotions.

Explains Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a pioneer in the field of early childhood development, "We are finally making the connections between a child's physical and mental health and between the mental health of a child and their parents. We know what to do to support a child's early learning and health development and we must do it together—right from the start." Based on advice in SAMHSA publications "Strengthening Parenting and Enhancing Child Resilience" and "Recovery Is a Family Affair: The Complex Dynamics in Families Struggling with Mental and Substance Use Disorders," here are some important steps with which parents can support children's resilience.

Positive Parenting Tips

1. Talk and read to your baby even before she can understand the words and continue reading to her all through school.

2. Spend time cuddling and holding your baby and play with him when he's alert and relaxed.

3. Encourage your child to take part in pretend play.



Singer and songwriter Mary Lambert joined dignitaries celebrating National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day.

4. Give your child attention and praise when she follows instructions and shows positive behavior and limit attention for defiant behavior.

5. Let your child help with simple chores.

6. Encourage your child to play with other children.

7. Talk with your school-age child about school, friends, and things she looks forward to. Help her set her own achievable goals.

8. Talk with your child about respecting others. Encourage him to think about possible consequences before acting.

9. Get involved with your child's school. Meet the teachers and understand how you can work together to help your child.

10. Support your child in taking on new challenges. Encourage her to solve problems on her own.

11. Encourage your child to join school and community groups, participate in team sports, or to take advantage of volunteer opportunities.

12. Talk with him about risky things that friends might pressure him to do, like smoking or dangerous physical dares. Try to meet the families of your child's friends.

13. Respect your teen's privacy.

14. Talk with your teen about her concerns and pay attention to any changes in her behavior. Ask her if she has had suicidal thoughts, particularly if she seems sad or depressed. Asking will not cause such thoughts, but it will let her know that you care how she feels.

15. Seek professional help if necessary. Data have shown that early intervention following an episode of mental illness can be vital for improving clinical and functional outcomes.

As the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council note, cost-benefit ratios for early treatment and prevention programs for addictions and mental

illness programs show that a \$1 investment yields \$2 to \$10 savings in health costs, criminal and juvenile justice costs, educational costs and lost productivity.

What's Being Done

To encourage more families to know the signs of and seek solutions to mental health and substance abuse problems, particularly in young people, SAMHSA and other agencies are working on ways to integrate services for behavioral health, primary care, child welfare and education—the settings where challenges are often noticed first.

Expert Advice

Said SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde, J.D., "When providers and other professionals who are interacting with a family are communicating with each other, dots are connected. When people are talking, there is a real opportunity to share information that can promote resilience and recovery."

The importance of connecting and discussing concerns was echoed by singer and songwriter Mary Lambert, who recently joined dignitaries in Washington, D.C. to celebrate National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day, sponsored by SAMHSA. Lambert spoke of her experiences with mental illness, body image and child trauma, saying, "I've seen the hurt that so many are experiencing. Mental and substance use disorders can be incredibly isolating. It's difficult enough to fit in at school when you have a unique style or point of view. Once you've been branded with a mental illness or substance use issue, it's hard to get out from under the judgment and segregation." Her openness and promotion of self-care and positive body image have resonated with fans.

The event kicked off with a special message by Howie Mandel, who was the first honorary chair in 2005. "I just wish there wasn't just one Mental Health Awareness Day," he said. "I wish we were aware of our children's mental health every day."

Added Lambert, "The only way we can truly address the real difficulties being experienced by kids and their families is to talk about it everywhere; in school, at the doctor's office, on the street, during dinner, at the bus stop...It's time to make it safe for children, youth and families to come out of the shadows and experience all the beautiful aspects of life that they deserve."

Learn More

Further facts and advice on mental health and substance abuse are at <http://store.samhsa.gov>.