Children at Risk Can Be Identified

There are a number of ways to identify children at risk for mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. Doing so can prevent some problems before they ever happen and treat others when symptoms first appear. People don't have to wait for problems to become big or full-blown disorders.

Children experiencing problems in school, at home, or with peers may be showing signs of mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. These problems often come to the attention of parents in reports of repeated fighting, rule-breaking, school failure, or substance use. Children may also report feeling sad, depressed, or anxious.

Some life events make children vulnerable to mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. When children experience divorce or the death or incarceration of a parent, they may develop mental, emotional, or behavioral problems. These children are more likely to have physical health problems, use alcohol or drugs, and drop out of school. Physical and sexual child abuse is a serious factor in the development of depression, anxiety, and alcohol and drug abuse.

When children are bullied or victimized, experience academic failure, spend time with deviant friends, or use alcohol and drugs, they may develop mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. Witnessing violence increases the likelihood of developing posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, and the use of alcohol and drugs.

Children with a family history of certain mental, emotional, and behavioral problems may be at higher risk for these disorders themselves. When a parent suffers from depression or anxiety, has a psychological disorder such as schizophrenia, or abuses drugs or alcohol, their children are also much more likely to suffer from these disorders.

Parents are very important in promoting the healthy development of their children and preventing small problems from growing into large ones. The good news is that there are many effective strategies and a growing number of programs to provide parents with tools to guide healthy children and to help them respond quickly when they face new challenges.

For additional information and resources about mental, emotional, and behavioral health in young people, the parents page of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) website is a good place to start.

http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/ ChildrensCampaign/parents.asp

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

A Resource for Parents

M ental, emotional, and behavioral problems are as common in children as a broken arm or leg. They don't happen to every child, but they do happen. About 20% of children in the United States experience one or more of these problems.

Making sure that children develop in a healthy way from the start may prevent many problems from ever occurring. Knowing what healthy development looks like is the first step. Parents, schools, and communities all have a role to play.

Healthy children feel good about themselves and their abilities. They make friends, get along with their peers, and can cope with life's stresses. Healthy children learn and behave appropriately at school.

Healthy families are nurturing and positive, provide stimulating activities, engage in positive communication, and provide support for their children, especially during times of stress.

Healthy schools expect children to do well academically, have teachers who manage their classrooms well, and offer opportunities for partnerships with parents.

Healthy communities offer high-quality child care and learning opportunities for young children. They provide support services to children and their families and opportunities for the children to build skills and explore in work and school.

Many of These Problems Can Be Prevented or Treated Early

Creating nurturing environments for children promotes healthy development and can prevent mental, emotional, and behavioral problems. However, it is not unusual for children to sometimes develop problems during childhood that, like a broken bone, should be attended to and set properly so they grow stronger into adulthood.

Effective family, school, and community programs can help children and their families. Treating children when the first signs of a problem appear is important because what happens in childhood can affect a person for a lifetime.

Effective **family programs** can help develop positive parenting skills and make communication easier. They can improve parent-child interaction, reduce children's aggressive behavior and risk for substance abuse, and improve academic success. They can also help children cope when stressful family events occur.

Children who attend early education programs have higher rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and monthly earnings than those who do not. As children get older, **school programs** that promote good behavior and prevent behavior problems can improve students' relationships, self-awareness, and decision-making skills, as well as reduce disruptive behavior, prevent suicide attempts, and significantly reduce the risk of drug abuse.

Effective **community programs** focus on preventing risky behaviors among certain age groups, such as the use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs by teenagers. These programs also promote good mental health by encouraging community members to support each other.

A Focus on Healthy Development Can Prevent Problems

At every age, children must master the skills necessary to succeed in life. Focusing on their healthy development is a chance to help them succeed and an opportunity to step in before problems occur.

From birth to age 5 children change more than during any other stage of their lives. This period is an opportunity to help them establish a firm foundation for the rest of their lives. In addition to feeling safe, comfortable, and close to their parents, children must learn to focus their attention and express and manage their feelings so they can get along with others. They also begin to make friends and relate to peers.

During middle childhood children begin to attend school and develop academically, learning to read and write and do math. They learn to follow rules, develop positive relationships with friends and schoolmates, and learn to adapt to life's stresses.

During adolescence teenagers must develop the skills and abilities necessary to carry them into adulthood. They must establish good health habits, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and a sense of being individuals who are also well connected to friends, family, and the community.