



## Improving the Mental Health & Well-being of America's Children

### The Facts

Serious emotional and mental disorders in children are real. Empirical research in neuroscience and the behavioral sciences is advancing our understanding of the etiology of these disorders. (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999).

1. 10% of children and adolescents in the United States suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders that cause significant functional impairment in their day-to-day lives at home, in school and with peers (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999).
2. In any given year, only 20% of children and adolescents with mental disorders are identified and receive mental health services (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999).
3. Treatment of many serious emotional and mental disorders is effective. Psychotherapy, behavioral interventions, psychopharmacology and other interventions have been demonstrated to be effective for many childhood disorders. (Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, 1999).
4. Untreated, these disorders can lead to devastating consequences for children.
  - a. Unidentified and untreated mental disorders can mean the loss of critical developmental years and can lead to youth suicide, school failure and involvement with the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems.
  - b. Approximately 50% of students with a mental disorder age 14 and older drop out of high school -- the highest dropout rate of any disability group (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).
  - c. Suicide remains a serious public health concern and is the third leading cause of death in youth aged 10 to 24. More youth and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease combined (National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, 2001). Research shows that 90% of people who die by suicide suffer from a diagnosable and treatable mental illness at the time of their death (Mental Health: A report of the Surgeon General, 1999).
  - d. 70% of youth involved in state and local juvenile justice systems throughout the country suffer from mental disorders, with at least 20% experiencing symptoms so severe that their ability to function is significantly impaired (Blueprint for Change, National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2006).

## **The Value of Early Identification and Intervention**

1. Mental health is central to the health and well-being of children. Those living with emotional and mental disorders must be identified early and linked with effective services and supports to avoid losing critical developmental years that will simply never be recaptured.
2. Parents play a crucial role in the identification and treatment of childhood emotional and mental disorders. They must drive decisions related to the identification and treatment of mental disorders to help achieve the best outcomes for their children.
3. Schools are in a key position to identify mental health concerns early and to openly communicate concerns with parents. Schools that have an early identification process in place and open communication with families can help to reduce the pain and suffering all too often experienced by youth with undiagnosed and untreated mental and emotional disorders.
4. Treatment decisions must always be made by the parents of the child, in close consultation with a treating physician, and not with any pressure from the school system. Federal law prohibits schools from requiring a child to be placed on medication as a condition for attending school. It simply should never happen in any school in America.

## **Take Action**

We call on you to reject attacks on children's mental health, mental health screening, and the use of medications to treat serious emotional and mental disorders. These attacks often lack reliable data and research to support them and reinforce harmful myths and stereotypes that drive up stigma.

As a coalition of family and provider organizations, we stand ready to work with you to improve children's mental health and well-being in America. We look forward to working with you to ensure the development of effective systems of care and services for children and families.

## **Coalition Partners**

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)  
American School Counselors Association (ASCA)  
Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation (CABF)  
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)  
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (FFCMH)  
Mental Health America (MHA – formerly the National Mental Health Association)  
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

A national coalition of parents, educators, mental health professionals, and physicians united in ensuring the mental health and well-being of our nation's children and adolescents.

**November 2007**