

**WHEN THE NEW YEAR BEGAN**

in January, many families made resolutions and set goals to improve different areas of their lives. Many committed to exercise more, spend more quality time with family, or improve grades or work performance.

Unfortunately, resolutions regarding improving mental health are not as frequently voiced. When they are made, they're often stated in vague and general terms. Specifically for children, who are constantly in the throes of development and change, mental health difficulties can be difficult to spot. Children and adolescents, however, can and do develop mental disorders that are more severe than the ups and downs we associate with childhood. Fortunately, vast amounts of research show that early, preventive services can have long-lasting effects in reducing risk factors for mental disorders. Good mental health prevention also improves a child's social and emotional development.

A range of proven treatment options currently exists for disruptive disorders as well as attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder and depression. Primary care facilities and schools are major settings for the recognition of children's and adolescents' mental disorders, yet few of their staff are trained in their evalu-

# Preventive Mental Health for Children and Adolescents

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ation. As a result, children and families are often encouraged to seek assistance from mental health practitioners in an outpatient setting.

How can a mental health professional help a family? First, a clear evaluation of a child's difficulties and a screening for any mental health diagnoses are crucial. Often a child's difficulties do not rise to the level of a clinical diagnosis, but his or her parents can become better informed about those things that warrant monitoring.

Mental health professionals can also assist families in understanding that certain behaviors are typical of specific stages of childhood development. This "normalization" of a situation tends to provide much relief to parents. Alternatively, strategies that help manage behaviors that fall outside of typical development can be provided. Many mental health strategies have great track records in addressing behaviors and symptoms associated with

childhood depression, anxiety and defiance. Once parents and children learn these strategies (generally called cognitive-behavioral strategies), children and families can then practice interventions at home and at school. Once armed with these tools, parents and their children can possibly curtail future or more severe difficulties and sustain optimal mental health.

While the New Year has come and gone, it is never too late to commit to bring greater peace and happiness to your child and family. Resolve today to practice preventative mental health just as you practice preventative physical health. After all, what good is fine physical health without happiness?



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