

Children's Mental Health and School Readiness: What Can Be Done?

By Cari Michaels

How can children with mental health needs be better prepared to succeed in school? Research offers much information about the prevalence of mental illness in early years and the most successful interventions to provide needed services and improve health outcomes.

The 1999 *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*¹ defined children's mental health as, "the achievement of expected developmental cognitive, social, and emotional milestones and by secure attachments, satisfying social relationships, and effective coping skills" (p. 123). Mental disorders were defined as, "serious deviations from expected cognitive, social, and emotional development," (p. 123). *Early* childhood mental health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of children from birth to age six.² The terms "early childhood mental health" and "social emotional development" have been used interchangeably to refer to these needs.^{2,3} Although there is limited data,² social, emotional, and behavioral problems have been reported in 8%-11% of young children.^{4,5} In Minnesota, 47,402 children (ages 0-18) have a developmental, behavioral, or emotional issue that requires treatment or counseling.⁷ Social, emotional, and behavioral problems may also be predictors for later developmental difficulties.⁸

Despite a tendency to define school readiness specifically as age-appropriate cognitive development, the National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP) promotes a broad conceptualization of school readiness that included: health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognitive development and general knowledge.¹⁰ Research confirms that young children's social and emotional adjustment is related to early school success as well as future success.^{8,11,12} Young children who exhibit poor mental health are more likely to experience unfavorable educational consequences such as:

- > poor task performance
- > less participation in classroom activities
- > greater negativity about learning and school
- > low peer acceptance and interaction
- > less acceptance, instruction, and positive feedback from classroom teachers, and
- > increased grade retention in the early elementary years.^{8,12}

Untreated mental health problems in childhood are likely to continue into adolescence and young adulthood.¹¹ These problems are likely to worsen over time, creating significant and costly burdens for families, schools, and society.¹³⁻¹⁷ The promotion of good mental health during the first six years of life can help facilitate the establishment of developmental competencies that will positively contribute to children's school readiness, as well as positive lifelong development. Research has demonstrated that many changes can be made to enhance school readiness for children:

Research - Policy-relevant research can not only discern which aspects of early childhood intervention programs promote optimal development^{8,11} but also shows that research is most likely to affect policy if it addresses questions and organizes answers in ways that policymakers can put directly into action.¹⁸ Research can serve to explore and document the potential economic benefits of investing in different early childhood intervention efforts.⁸

Families - Research has shown that if parents have access to programs that promote positive parenting behavior during the early childhood years, they can engage in supportive, enriching, and developmentally appropriate caregiving.³ Families can be supported in taking an active role in the care and treatment of their young children with mental health problems and should be

empowered as experts about their children's needs.¹¹ Parents need greater access to leadership, liaison, and mentoring activities related to children's mental health¹³. Mental health facilities can support family involvement and eliminate barriers (e.g., transportation).¹³

Communities – Research has also indicated that the presence of accessible screenings and assessments in child and health care settings, along with appropriate services to respond to identified needs, predict which children may require more intensive services later on.¹⁴ High quality and culturally appropriate early childhood education programs significantly contribute to a child's mental health.¹⁹ Program staff benefit from timely access to evidence-based information on child mental health and disorders, staff training in child mental health issues, and access to consultation and referral sources.^{8,20}

Society - Public awareness campaigns can help eliminate stigma about mental illness and educate people about how to access high quality mental health services for young children and families.^{11,13} Some research has indicated that creating a statewide public-private health infrastructure will address the fragmentation and lack of availability of mental health services for many children.^{11,13} The existence of a well-coordinated, accessible system of mental health assessment and treatment can ensure that young children develop the emotional and behavioral competencies they need to successfully transition to school and accomplish later developmental milestones.

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