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about Mental Health in Sedgwick County Government

Mental Health Issues in Children

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I visited my daughter last week who lives out of state, and was surprised by some changes I saw in my 4-year-old grandson. He was restless, had anger outbursts and threatened to hurt his mother when he didn't get his way. Concerned, I asked my daughter about this change of behavior and, to my surprise, my daughter just brushed it off as him "just being a 4 year old." Isn't it true that treating a child's negative behavioral issues now can only benefit him for years to come? I am a concerned grandmother. Please help.

Identifying mental and emotional disorders in children can be tricky. Children differ from adults in that they experience many physical, mental and emotional changes as they progress through their natural growth and development. They also are learning how to cope with, adapt and relate to others and the world around them. Further, each child matures at his or her own pace, and what is considered "normal" in children falls within a wide range of behavior and abilities. For these reasons, any diagnosis of a mental or emotional disorder must be based on how well a child functions at home, within the family, at school and with peers, as well as the child's age and symptoms. Some of the mental health conditions that are more common in children include:

- **Anxiety disorders:** Children with anxiety disorders often respond to certain situations with fear and dread, as well as with physical signs of anxiety, such as a rapid heartbeat and sweating.
- **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):** Children with ADHD generally have problems paying attention or concentrating, can't seem to follow directions, and are easily bored and/or frustrated with tasks. They also tend to move constantly and are impulsive (do not think before they act).
- **Disruptive behavior disorders:** Children with these disorders tend to be argumentative, defy rules and often are disruptive in structured environments, such as school, beyond what is typical for their age
- **Affective (mood) disorders:** These disorders involve persistent feelings of sadness, irritability and/or rapidly changing moods, and include depression and bipolar disorder.

Other symptoms in children vary depending on the type of mental illness, but some general symptoms include inability to cope with daily problems and activities, changes in sleeping and/or eating habits, defying authority, skipping school, stealing or damaging property, frequent outbursts of anger, changes in school performance, loss of interest in friends and activities they usually enjoy, significant increase in time spent alone, excessive worrying or anxiety, persistent disobedience or aggressive behavior, and abuse of drugs and/or alcohol.

The exact cause of most mental disorders is not known, but research suggests that a combination of factors, including heredity, biology, psychological trauma and environmental stress might be involved. Untreated, mental health problems can disrupt children's functioning at home, school and in the community. Without treatment, children with mental health issues are at an increased risk of school failure, contact with the criminal justice system, dependence on social services, substance abuse, and even suicide. Providing effective age-appropriate services and supports to young children and their families has immediate and lifelong benefits. Studies suggest children who receive effective mental health services and supports are more likely to complete high school, have fewer contacts with law enforcement and improve their ability to live independently.

Now is the time to close the gap between the need for children's mental health services and their families receiving services. Our children are our future. Take time to educate yourself about children's mental health and how families are impacted by mental health issues. And please, take the time to help them get the help they need.