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May 2012

Children's Mental Health as Important as Physical Health

For the last couple months my 10-year-old son's teacher has grown more concerned about some behaviors that my son has begun demonstrating at school. I have watched his grades go from Bs to Ds; he has lost all interest in going to school and recently went to the principal's office for fighting. At home, I have begun to notice a change in my son's personality and his negative attitude. Is this typical pre-adolescent behavior or could he be showing early signs of a bigger problem like a mental health issue? His teacher is recommending that he see a counselor.

According to the 2001 surgeon general's report, one in five children and adolescents suffer from a diagnosable mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. One in 10 children is believed to have a serious emotional mental health issue and nearly two-thirds of all of these children receive little or no treatment.

How do you know if your child has a mental health issue or if something else is causing the problems? Scheduling an appointment with your child's primary care physician or seeking help from a qualified mental health professional are both good options to begin to help you and your child sort out what may be causing these behavioral changes. If your child exhibits some of the following behaviors and signs, seeking help from a qualified mental health professional is probably a good first step.

At Home:

- Frequent violations of household rules
- Dramatic change in personality or behaviors
- Isolative behaviors
- Aggressive behaviors
- Verbally assaultive
- Parents feel that youth is "out of control"
- Parents feeling at wit's end and even considering out-of-home placement
- Suicidal thoughts, plans or gestures
- Self-harmful behaviors

At School:

- School performance clearly below youth's ability
- Difficulties making or maintaining peer relationships
- Youth's behavior interferes with ability to learn
- Frequent detentions
- School avoidance
- Repeated in-school or out-of-school suspensions
- Failing classes not due solely to cognitive limitations
- Truancy
- Assaultive or aggressive behaviors
- Excessive number of sick days without medical basis



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In the Community:

- Lack of participation in normal community or peer related activities
- Contact with law enforcement due to youth's behavior
- Running away or threats to run away
- Legal action against youth
- Probation or a history of probation

Please keep in mind that 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 and contact with the criminal justice system.

Individual and family therapy has been shown to help many children, but for children and adolescents with serious mental illnesses, this alone is not always the answer. For youth with serious mental health issues a system approach is the preferred and most effective model of treatment. A system of care approach (also known as community based services) works with the child and the family in the least restrictive manner and in the most natural locations (i.e. in the community, at school and in the home) so the child and family can be supported in achieving their goals. Proven outcomes for effective community based services show behavioral and emotional problems are reduced, clinical functioning is improved, school attendance and school performance improves, and law enforcement contacts are reduced.

With summer almost here, now is the time to seek help for you and your child to assure a more enjoyable summer vacation and the start of a better school year next fall.

Jody Patterson, LCP is the director of COMCARE's Children's Services. Jody has been involved with children's mental health programs and services for 20 years. She is dedicated to helping children live healthy and productive lives in the community. To contact COMCARE Children's Services, please call 316-660-7540. We can help you help your child today.