

CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILY CONSORTIUM

Children's Mental Health as a Public Health Issue

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Meeting the needs of children with mental health issues is challenging. Our knowledge of available services and the extent to which they are utilized is limited. Many parents who seek care for their children are met with a fragmented system that is difficult to navigate and provides only short-term services. Barriers related to geography, cost, and language complicate delivery of services. Children often are served by many providers in different fields of practice with specific areas of expertise but little communication with one another. Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, some children with significant needs may not receive services at all.

Increasingly, public health professionals in the United States have begun to examine issues related to children's mental health. In contrast to medical practice, where intervention happens at the individual level, public health practice focuses at the population level. Epidemiology is the science of public health. It addresses the incidence and distribution of an illness or condition in a population, the conditions that cause it, and methods to control and prevent it. *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* emphasizes using epidemiology to determine incidence and prevalence of mental health in the United States. Theories and intervention models known and well-documented in the public health field can help clearly define children's mental health problems and inform effective interventions.



Epidemiological methods encompass not just the “disease” but also the determinants that contribute to it. Public health models emphasize a thorough environmental assessment of a condition that includes factors that are social, behavioral, environmental, educational, and political in nature. As with the socio-ecological model conceptualized by Urie Bronfenbrenner (and adapted by CYFC as Circles of Influence, found in the center of this publication), these models

place the child within the context of a specific family, community, and society with particular policies and administrative practices. Whether the child is generally healthy or significantly ill, all affect the child's mental well-being. Public health also strongly emphasizes the need to engage the population in defining the problem. Those directly affected by a problem can most accurately characterize its influence on individuals and the community and culture in which they live. Questions to ask regarding assessment include: Do the child's parents have knowledge of mental health disorders? How does this family perceive services available to them? What are the beliefs of this community regarding mental illnesses? Do service providers in this community emphasize the need for early diagnosis and treatment? Does this community consider children's mental health to be a significant problem?

Much of public health practice is interdisciplinary in nature. Creating a successful intervention in a field as complex as children's mental health requires the theories and models of practice from many disciplines. The discipline of public health also emphasizes the entire spectrum of intervention activities, from promotion and prevention to treatment and rehabilitation. The terms universal, selected, and indicated are used to reflect interventions that target entire populations, those determined to be at increased risk, and those in need of treatment, respectively. Prevention of further suffering or the progression of an illness can happen at any point along this spectrum. Identifying risk and protective factors help determine the likelihood of an individual developing a particular condition. These can be targets for intervention as well (for example, educating parents about early signs of mental illness, improving social connectedness, increasing the number of providers available within a community, and reducing stigma within specific populations).

It is critical to engage community members at the stage of prevention. This is the population that will be responsible for long-term change, and their involvement leads to programs that are more appropriate for their intended population and more likely to be utilized. Successful interventions address each level of the environmental assessment. In addition to improving mental health within a specific group, successful interventions will ultimately reduce stigma, improve services provided to children, improve public policy, and change cultural perceptions of mental illness and services designed to prevent and treat it. Questions that inform intervention include: Are preventive services available and affordable to children in this community? Do some individuals have greater access to knowledge and/or services? How effectively do services meet the needs of specific children? How well do systems of care work with one another to diagnose and refer children? What are the barriers to receiving prompt, high-quality care? What cultural practices contribute to or help prevent mental illness?

What does this all have to do with public policy? Children's mental health policy that is developed using a public health lens would:

- Include the full spectrum of intervention (promotion, prevention, intervention, treatment);
- View the child in the context of the many environments in which they interact (using a Circles of Influence model), and not address the child in isolation;
- Involve those affected in the shaping of policy;

- Recognize issues of culture and ethnicity that may not be the same for all population groups;
- Include plans for long term solutions and not just intervention in immediate crises;
- Assure that services are widely available and accessible, and represent the populations.