

# Children's Mental Health: When Love Is Not Enough

Children are small people with big tasks ahead of them. They are learning about the world and their place in it, mastering school subjects, learning how to relate to others, considering their future, and figuring out how they feel about themselves and others. Unlike adults who have some power to choose their environment, their work, their social network, and their living conditions, children typically live in circumstances they have little or no control over. When the normal work of childhood is complicated by family difficulties, violence in the school or community, learning issues, traumatic incidences, medical issues, the death of a loved one, behavioral problems, or other challenges, the love and support from family and friends are by far the most important things to help children be their best and overcome difficulties. Sometimes, however, more help is needed, and the child may also benefit from a professional. Professionals can look at the child's situation and behaviors from the outside and provide support from a mental health perspective.

Seeking professional help for children and youth is very difficult for most families. Some families feel that maybe they made a mistake or have failed their children. Many families feel embarrassed or judged by others if the child behaves poorly at school or in the community. Families may be used to solving problems on their own rather than exposing their situations to an outsider. Some families are afraid that their child will be labeled or that their problems will be excused rather than addressed. Sometimes families may not know where to look for help or which questions to ask.

While deciding to get outside help is not easy, it can be helpful to know how to get help and what to look for. Your child's pediatrician is an excellent resource to share your concerns with, and may know of professionals who can help. Your child's insurance card also has a phone number on the back to help identify and access mental health services, and some health insurance companies have websites with directories that you can also use. Websites such as *Psychology Today* have profiles of local providers and allow you to run a variety of searches.

When selecting a provider to help your child and family, you will want to consider a number of important topics. You may want to ask some questions such as:

- Does the provider regularly work with children in the same age range as your child?
- Does the provider treat others with the same challenges your child has?
- Does the provider have any special training to treat your child's condition?
- Does the provider listen to you and your child and make you feel heard?
- Does the provider answer your questions and concerns clearly and respectfully?
- Does the provider partner with the school, with psychiatrists and with others when necessary?

- Does the provider understand you completely, including your cultural and religious perspectives, your priorities, and your concerns?
- Is the provider affordable in case long term treatment is needed?
- Is this provider reliable? Does the provider keep appointments and respond in a timely manner?
- Most importantly, what does your gut tell you? Do you feel safe with this individual? Do you feel that you can talk to the professional openly about difficult and sensitive topics? What does your child think?

Seeking help for personal matters is never easy, for oneself or one's child. However, when mental health problems are present in children, they very rarely get better on their own, and sometimes can worsen as the child gets older and persist into adulthood. A qualified mental health professional can help you decide if mental health treatment would benefit you and your child.

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