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How mental health difficulties affect children

This KidsMatter resource pack provides information for parents, carers and school staff about children’s mental health difficulties and how to get help. Other resource packs focus on understanding specific disorders and ways of assisting children who experience them. These include anxiety problems, depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, serious behaviour problems and Autism Spectrum Disorders.

“There is no health without mental health.”¹



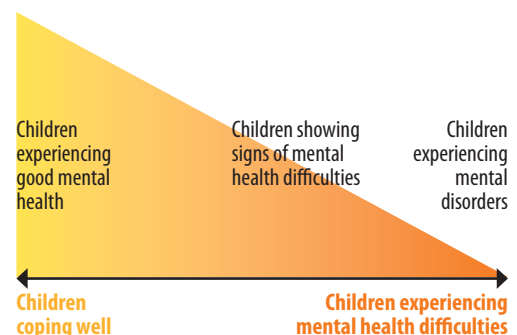
This recent statement from the World Health Organisation emphasises how mental health involves everybody. Mental health – the way we think or feel about ourselves and what is going on around us, and how we cope with the stresses of life – affects our sense of wellbeing as well as our physical health. In this sense everyone has mental health.

Good mental health is vital for learning and life. Children who are mentally healthy are better equipped to meet life’s challenges. They also learn better and get on better with others. Good mental health helps children enjoy and benefit from life experiences, and contribute to their families, friends and society in ways that are appropriate for their age. Good mental health in childhood and adolescence provides a foundation for positive mental health and wellbeing throughout life.

Having good mental health does not mean never having worries or feelings of distress. Everyone goes through difficulties that may have emotional impacts. Feeling worried at times, feeling sad, frustrated or angry are all normal emotions. Mentally healthy children are able to use positive coping skills appropriate to their age to manage feelings and deal with difficulties. They develop effective coping skills as part of their normal development and are not held back by emotional or behavioural problems.

The mental health spectrum

Most children experience good mental health. Everyone experiences occasional difficulties, but for some the difficulties are more frequent or more severe. When difficulties are severe and interfere with many aspects of a child’s life they may warrant diagnosis as a mental disorder. Mental health, mental health difficulties and mental disorders are best represented as a continuum rather than as separate categories.



Mental health difficulties and mental disorders

Mental health difficulties affect approximately 14%, or one in seven, Australian children². Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depression are examples of common mental health problems in primary school-aged children. However, children with mental health difficulties often do not receive appropriate professional treatment. According to national research, only one quarter of children with a mental health problem are likely to get any kind of professional help.

Having mental health difficulties affects children's emotions and their behaviour. It is distressing for children and may cause concern for those who care for them. Mental health difficulties affect children at home and at school. Other terms for mental health difficulties include mental health problems and emotional/behavioural problems.

A mental disorder may be diagnosed by a mental health professional when difficulties are particularly severe and/or

persistent. Diagnosis is based on established international criteria that define specific sets of symptoms and behaviours for each disorder. The symptoms must be severe enough to cause distress and interfere with the child's ability to get on with everyday activities and enjoy life.

One of the major aims of the KidsMatter initiative is to make information about children's mental health, and about ways to get help, available to school staff and parents and carers so that children experiencing mental health difficulties can receive appropriate treatment. Identifying children's mental health problems early and providing effective professional treatment can make a significant difference to children's lives. It can help to resolve mental health issues before they become worse or entrenched, improving the quality of life for children and their families. Early intervention limits the negative effects of children's mental health difficulties and provides skills for positive coping that have lifelong benefits.

What kinds of mental health difficulties do children experience?

Children's mental health difficulties are generally classified as being one of two types: 'internalising' and 'externalising'. Children with internalising difficulties show behaviours that are inhibited and over-controlled. They may have a nervous or anxious temperament and be worried, fearful and/or withdrawn. Children with externalising difficulties show behaviours that are under-controlled. They may have a difficult temperament, shown in impulsive or reactive behaviour. Often this pattern leads to problems with attention, aggression or oppositional behaviour. Externalising behaviours cause problems for others as well as for the children themselves. It is not uncommon for children to show behaviours associated with both internalising and externalising patterns of difficulty. The typical features associated with each pattern are summarised in the table.

Features associated with children's 'internalising' difficulties	Features associated with children's 'externalising' difficulties
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nervous/anxious temperament• Excessive worrying• Pessimistic thinking• Withdrawn behaviour• Difficult peer relationships (can be isolated, rejected, bullied)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficult temperament• Poor problem-solving skills• Attention problems, hyperactivity• Oppositional behaviour (e.g., doesn't like to be told what to do; won't follow rules)• Aggressive behaviour

Children with ADHD often show severe externalising difficulties. Children with other serious behaviour problems also show externalising patterns of behaviour, such as persistent aggression. Children with severe internalising difficulties may be diagnosed with an Anxiety Disorder or with Depression. Other KidsMatter resource packs provide further information on each of these disorder categories.

Is a diagnosis necessary?

A diagnosis is a medical label that helps mental health professionals make sense of the child's symptoms. Diagnosing a child as having a particular disorder can help to decide what treatment is needed. However, making an accurate diagnosis can sometimes be difficult. This is because children's growth and development varies from one child to another and an individual child may show some symptoms of a disorder but not others.

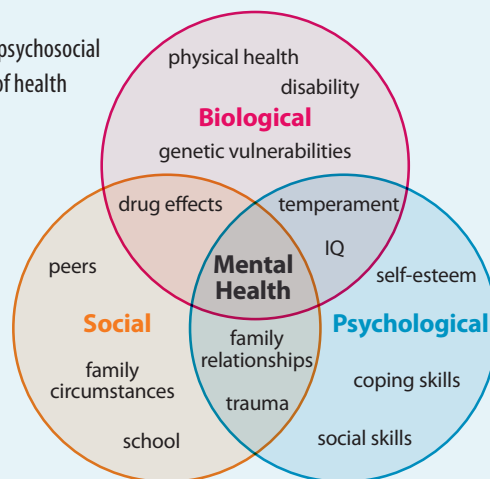
For families it can be a relief to have a name for what is wrong. A diagnosis helps them to explain why their child behaves as he/she does. However, it is important to recognise that a diagnostic label merely describes a pattern of common symptoms. Even though a child may be diagnosed with a mental disorder it remains very important to recognise his/her strengths and meet his/her individual needs.

What causes children's mental health difficulties?

Unlike some medical conditions that have a direct cause (e.g., the flu is caused by a virus), mental health difficulties and mental disorders are caused by multiple factors that interact in different ways depending on the individual child, family and social circumstances. The diagram to the right shows some of the biological, psychological and social factors that influence children's mental health.

Any one of these factors can have either a positive or negative influence on a child's mental health. For example, self-esteem may be high or low, family circumstances may be positive or difficult, and both may vary at different times. Opinions vary as to how much weighting should be given to each of these different areas and which factors are most important for children's mental health and wellbeing.

The biopsychosocial model of health



Risk Factors

- Difficult temperament
- Low self esteem
- Negative thinking style
- Family disharmony, instability or breakup
- Harsh or inconsistent discipline style
- Parent/s with mental illness or substance abuse
- Peer rejection
- School failure
- Poor connection to school
- Difficult school transition
- Death of family member
- Emotional trauma
- Discrimination
- Isolation
- Socioeconomic disadvantage
- Lack of access to support services

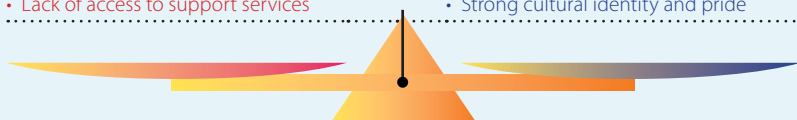
Protective Factors

- Easy temperament
- Good social and emotional skills
- Optimistic coping style
- Family harmony and stability
- Supportive parenting
- Strong family values
- Positive school climate that enhances belonging and connectedness
- Involvement with caring adult
- Support available at critical times
- Participation in community networks
- Access to support services
- Economic security
- Strong cultural identity and pride

Risk and protective factors for children's mental health

Through research, a number of specific factors have been identified that increase the risk of children experiencing poor mental health. Other factors have been identified as having a protective effect. Protective factors act to strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing, making them less likely to develop mental health problems.

The table to the left shows some key examples of risk and protective factors that influence children's mental health. It is important to note that just because a child is exposed to mental health risk factors it does not mean he/she will experience mental health difficulties. However, when multiple risk factors are present this likelihood is significantly increased.



What to expect in a mental health assessment

Whether or not a diagnosis is made, it is necessary to get an accurate picture of what the difficulties are before effective treatment can be provided. This information is gathered by conducting a mental health assessment.

The mental health assessment occurs at a consultation meeting in which a mental health professional (or sometimes a team) looks into the child's difficulties, background and needs. Sometimes more than one meeting is required. The mental health professional is likely to ask questions about the child's early history, progress and difficulties at school, and

the family situation. He/she will want to know such things as:

- in what situations the problems occur
- how the child gets on with other children and family members
- whether there are learning difficulties.

You may be asked to complete questionnaires that will enable your child's behaviours to be compared with others of the same age. You might be asked to keep a record of your child's behaviour for a period to help the mental health professional get an accurate picture of the extent of your child's difficulties. Recording your observations

can also help you see the problems more clearly.

The information you provide at the assessment meeting is considered confidential. It cannot be shared with anyone else without your permission. All of the information gathered in the assessment will help the mental health professional understand the problem and the way your family has tried to manage it up until now. Based on this understanding he/she will decide what kind of treatment will be most appropriate.

Treatment

After the assessment has been completed, the mental health professional will evaluate your child's difficulties and consider his or her strengths and needs. The mental health professionals will discuss a plan for treatment with you and may recommend counselling for:

- the child on their own
- the child in a group of children with similar difficulties
- the family as a whole
- parents and carers to help with understanding and managing your child's behaviours.

You are entitled to ask questions too. You might like to ask:

- What is the evidence to support the success of this treatment for my child? What other options are available?
- How will I be involved with my child's treatment?
- How will I know if the treatment is working?
- How long should it take before I see an improvement?
- If my child needs medication, are there any side effects I should be aware of?

Treatment for mental health difficulties requires learning new skills and new patterns of relating to others. This takes time. Progress should be reviewed regularly with the treating mental health professional or with your referring doctor to make sure the treatment is effective.

Mental health professionals who may help with children's difficulties

A good place to start:

- **School psychologist/school counsellor**

School psychologists and counsellors provide assessment and treatment for children with mental health difficulties. They advise parents and carers and school staff about helping individual children and may recommend specialist services outside the school.

- **General Practitioner (GP)**

Your family doctor will give advice and help you decide whether further investigation and treatment is needed. A doctor's referral is needed to be able to claim the Medicare rebate for mental health treatment from other professionals.

Other mental health professionals who can help:

- **Paediatrician**

Paediatricians are doctors who specialise in treating children. They consider what is normal behaviour for children at different ages to determine if the problem is physical or emotional.

- **Psychiatrist**

Psychiatrists are doctors who have undertaken additional training to become specialists in mental illness.

- **Psychologist**

Psychologists provide assessment and treatment for a range of mental health difficulties. They do not prescribe medication but offer a range of other therapies.

- **Social Worker**

Mental health social workers help individuals with mental disorders to resolve associated psychosocial problems and improve their quality of life.

- **Occupational Therapist**

Occupational therapists are trained to assist people to overcome limitations caused by injury or illness, psychological or emotional difficulties or developmental delay.

- **Mental Health Nurse**

Mental health nurses specialise in working with people suffering from mental illnesses or psychological distress.

For further information on children's mental health difficulties look for the accompanying KidsMatter list *Children's mental health difficulties – Other resources*.

For further information on specific mental disorders look for KidsMatter resource packs on *Children with anxiety problems, Children with depression, Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Children with serious behaviour problems and Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



¹World Health Organisation (2007). *Mental health: strengthening mental health promotion*. Retrieved 16th November 2007 from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/print.html>

²Sawyer, M. G., Arney, F. M., Baghurst, P. A., Clark, J. J., Graetz, B. W., Kosky, R. J., et al. (2001). The mental health of young people in Australia: Key findings from the child and adolescent component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35(6), 806-814.

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

