

what child care providers can do

If left untreated, a mental health problem can delay a child's normal development and cause more severe problems later, such as being excluded from child care, having social difficulties, or not being prepared to start school. Addressing these issues early may help reduce or even avoid the effects of the problem.

Child care providers can make an important contribution to families by helping parents identify children who may benefit from mental health services since providers are often the first to notice troubling behaviors. However, they must be sensitive in how they approach the parents as parents may have difficulty discussing their child's mental health and may become defensive. Child care providers should gently point out to parents the behavior(s) they have noticed and mention that these are different from the behavior(s) they see in other children.

Providers should do this privately, making it clear that they are concerned about the child. Parents may take time to respond, but providers can help parents face the problem by pointing out that with the right help the situation is likely to improve. It may be useful to give this brochure to the parents to read at home.

The information in this pamphlet is not intended as medical advice, but as a guideline to follow in determining if a professional evaluation might be needed.

Obviously, some behaviors are cause for alarm, and help is needed immediately. Other behaviors can be observed for a week or two before they need to be brought to the attention of the parents. As a child care provider, if you are uncertain, mention your concern to the parents and ask them if they have noticed the same thing. Suggest that together you could keep track of the behavior and keep an eye on the possible need for professional evaluation.



Maryland Committee for Children gratefully acknowledges Dr. Judith K. Milliken for her contribution in developing the original brochure. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Center for Maternal and Child Health provided the funding for reprinting the second edition of this brochure.

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Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
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identifying mental health problems in young children

how child care providers can help

Mental health is how people think, feel and act as they encounter life's ups and downs. Parents and child care providers are increasingly aware of the role of mental health in the overall healthy development of young children.

It is our task as caregivers to observe young children to be sure that they are maintaining mental health by mastering age-appropriate social and personal skills, such as understanding and managing their feelings, interacting with others and learning to assert themselves in the world.

Sometimes, we observe children who may display behaviors that could indicate a potential mental health problem. However, most of these behaviors are, in fact, behaviors we observe in all children at some time, such as sadness, short attention span, and defiance. Therefore, it can be hard to judge when the behavior has become so troublesome or so long-lasting that a child may need help.

As a child care provider, you may observe unusual or extreme behavior in a child in your care. You may wonder:



is it time for the parents to get help for this child?

unhappiness

All children will be sad at times, but, for some, the sadness doesn't go away. It's time to get help if, for two weeks or more, a child:

- rarely laughs or smiles,
- lacks his/her usual energy,
- begins doing poorly at school,
- is very irritable, moody, or grumpy,
- becomes overactive, destructive, or overly sensitive,
- gets into fights constantly, or
- says he/she wants to die or tries to hurt himself/herself. (Immediate professional help is needed in this case.)

anxiety

Healthy children may have periods of anxiety in which they are fearful of things like loud noises or separation from their parents. They may even develop patterns of doing things like washing their hands excessively or lining up their toys. However, it's time to get help when a child:

- maintains patterns of repetitive activity for a long time and these begin to interfere with sleep, appetite, or normal activities such as attendance at child care or school,
- complains of frequent headaches or stomachaches,
- starts to worry all the time, perhaps about what others think of him/her or about bad things that may happen, or
- frequently worries about death.

lack of friends

All children need friends. Some children prefer a small group to a large group. However, it's time to get help when a child:

- has difficulty relating to other children in his/her own age group,
- has trouble making friends because his/her behavior is overly aggressive and frightening to others,
- has trouble making friends because he/she has habits or ways of acting that seem strange to other children, or
- is socially isolated or constantly teased.

Who else can help

The provider might suggest that the parents speak with the family doctor or pediatrician about their concerns. If more help is needed, the doctor can suggest names of counselors, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists who specialize in treating children with mental health issues.

These mental health professionals will talk with the parents about the child's behaviors. They will ask about the child's health and experiences and about any family problems or family history. They will discuss different types of solutions which may include: behavior management techniques, play therapy, family counseling, individual counseling and/or medication.

For further information and resources in your local area call the Maryland Youth Crisis Hotline at 1-800-422-0009.



short attention span

At times, all children have a short attention span, but it's time to get help when a child stands out as inattentive because he/she:

- can't focus on one activity as long as other children of the same age,
- frequently doesn't seem to listen to instructions,
- is often overactive,
- regularly acts without thinking first,
- is easily distracted,
- is constantly being scolded or corrected, or
- is behaving in a way that is dangerous to himself/herself or others.

defiant or aggressive behavior

Every child has periods when they don't behave, but it's time to get help when a child:

- loses his/her temper more often than previously, more than other children, or has constant arguments, especially battles for control with adults,
- seems spiteful and openly defiant,
- is disrespectful and may even try to hurt adults or children, or
- cannot stay in child care or school because of defiant behavior.

other behaviors

Mental health problems may show up in other ways. It's time to get help when a child:

- displays behavior which should have been outgrown long ago, such as clingy behavior, wetting, or soiling,
- displays sexual behavior that is more than normal childhood curiosity,
- repeatedly plays with fire, is cruel to animals, or hallucinates – hears voices or sees things that aren't there. (In these three cases, professional help should be sought as soon as possible.)

remember

It's time for parents to get help when the behaviors last for a long time or interfere with a child's normal activities.