

## **Your Child's Mental Health**

### ***Identifying Potential Issues and Navigating the Mental Health System***

**Clearwater, FL; December 23, 2008** – Today, mental health issues are more commonplace than ever. Identifying problems and taking the steps to get help can be difficult for anyone, but this is especially true for children. Identifying, understanding, and treating mental health issues in children can prove to be a challenging task for parents. With some research and awareness about how to navigate the mental health system parents should feel confident about getting their children the help they need.

“The first step to getting your child help is identifying that there is a problem,” states **Nancy Gordon, LCSW, Clinical Director at Directions for Mental Health**. “Then, you have to figure out what to do about the problem and research how to fix the problem,” she continues. Identifying any problems a child may be having often starts after behavioral changes are observed at home or school. Parents will often be aware of the fact that something is wrong, but may not know exactly what is troubling their child.

After identifying there is a problem, approaching the child is crucial. Parents should emphasize the fact that there is nothing wrong with their child if they are having some issues. An open line of communication is crucial to ensuring that children feel that they are able to share their feelings with their parent(s). To facilitate the conversation, parents should begin asking questions and then listening to their child's answers. Parents should also be aware of some common indicators that there might be some issues which include trouble sleeping, depression, and difficulty in school.

Children must be reassured that asking for help is okay. Parents can utilize several resources once they have identified a problem that needs to be addressed. There are great resources available through their children's school, their pediatrician, or through mental health agencies and clinicians. School counselors are often a great first step to getting an accurate assessment for their child's issues. It is important to remain persistent when pursuing help. Sometimes parents identify a problem and others miss some of the indicators. It could be that the counselor, or the child, is minimizing or exaggerating their behaviors or the behaviors may only manifest themselves in certain environments like the classroom or at home. It is essential that parents who believe there is an issue exhaust all resources in an attempt to get their child help.

Children are exhibiting more indicators and being diagnosed more frequently with mental health issues. Gordon attributes this in part to two things, the increased awareness of mental health disorders and higher rates of divorce and abuse and

neglect. Along with increases in diagnoses comes an increase in treatments, including prescriptions. Parents should be especially interested in what their child's diagnoses are and what the corresponding treatment options are. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnoses are up, which leads to an increase in prescribed medications. However, parents should be aware of the fact that many of the same presenting symptoms for ADHD could also indicate post traumatic stress disorder, medical issues like sensory integration problems, or simply be a reaction to recent death or move. It is up to parents to educate themselves to ensure their children get the proper treatment.

Children are notorious for faking symptoms of physical illness in order to get out of school or other obligations. The same can be true for mental illness symptoms. While it is easier to evaluate objective signs of physical illness, such as fever or coughing, parents should evaluate their children's behaviors in same manner. Gordon points out that "all behaviors have functions." She continues, "Even if you identify their behaviors as attention-seeking behavior, there is a function or reason for those behaviors." While their actions may be conscious, their actions should prompt parents to question if they are lonely, feeling neglected, dealing with other issues, or reacting to parental fighting or marital issues. Again, maintaining communication lines is crucial to encouraging useful discussions that could lead to diagnoses.

The key to getting a child help with their mental health issues is identifying potential indicators, getting a proper assessment, and researching all treatment options. Parents should start with school counselors and progress as needed to ensure treatment is achieved. There are plenty of referral sources that can assist parents with getting treatment including mental health centers, the child's pediatrician's office, and through school resources.

***About Directions for Mental Health, Inc.***

Directions for Mental Health, Inc., established in 1982, is a non-profit organization committed to helping heal the hurt in the lives of thousands of Pinellas County residents suffering from – or at risk of – mental illness. With nationally accredited programs, Directions set the standard for best practices in mental health treatment, while making mental health care affordable and accessible to individuals and families, and building a safer, healthier community. Serving more than 8,000 people per year, Directions is dedicated to developing innovative programs that change lives, while reducing crime, homelessness, drug abuse, and child abuse.

For questions about mental illness and programs, visit Directions for Mental Health's website at [www.healthehurt.com](http://www.healthehurt.com) or call (727) 524-4464 extension 1700.

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