



KIDS' HEALTH

Children at Risk

WE NEED TO SCREEN KIDS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND LEARNING DISORDERS. OUR EXPERT EXPLAINS WHY

By Stephanie Watson



How can schools identify which kids are in need of mental health services?

I would love to see national screening. Schools do hearing tests and vision tests. They should also do mental health screening. I think there should be a 10-question screener in seventh grade and again in ninth grade. The reason for doing it in those grades is to see results pre-puberty and post-puberty.

What can parents do if they know or suspect their child has a mental health issue?

I would imagine that the No. 1 problem parents have is that they're ashamed. [We need to] get parents to not feel defensive about it and instead say, It's not a matter of my child being defective—it's just that my child has symptoms that are making their functioning in school more challenging, and as a good parent I need to find out what those symptoms are, what those symptoms mean, and whether there is something I can do to make their life easier at school.

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● About 1 in 5 kids in the United States has a mental health or learning disorder, according to the Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit that focuses on mental health care for children.

Children who aren't diagnosed and treated early on can face a lifetime of educational, legal, and emotional issues, according to the organization's *2016 Children's Mental Health Report*. Institute president Harold S. Koplewicz, MD, explains why schools can—and should—do more to identify and help these at-risk kids.

What happens to kids with mental health issues in schools?

The bad news is that schools overwhelmingly have adopted a zero-tolerance discipline policy. Kids are kicked out much faster than ever before. In 1974, school suspensions were 1.7 million. In 2001, we had 3.1 million suspensions.

The current antiquated way of focusing on bad behavior is throwing more kids out of school, but it's not effectively increasing high school graduation rates.

What are the best interventions for children with mental health issues?

I think the most effective

programs are positive behavioral interventions and supports, which focus on reinforcing kids' positive behaviors. It takes an effort, from the head of the school all the way to the lunch-room staff and the custodial staff, to focus on when kids are doing positive things. Schools that have adopted this cultural change of positive behavioral intervention and support have a 30% decrease in in-school suspension. We know that if you keep kids in school, they have a better chance of graduating high school. And when they graduate high school, they have a lower risk of going to jail.