

A Guide for Families: Childhood Mental Health

Mental health is the overall wellness of how people think, regulate feelings, and behave. Mental health is important at every stage of life, including childhood.

Mental health disorders in children are generally defined as delays or disruptions in developing age-appropriate thinking, behaviors, social skills or regulation of emotions. These disorders can cause distress to children and disrupt their ability to function well at home, in school, or in other social situations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), symptoms of mental disorders often start in early childhood, though some disorders may develop during the teenage years. The diagnosis is often made in the school years; however, some children with a mental disorder may not be recognized or diagnosed as having one.

According to the CDC, 7.1 percent of children ages three to 17 (approximately 4.4 million) have diagnosed anxiety, while 3.2 percent of children aged three to 17 (approximately 1.9 million) have diagnosed depression. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports that one in five teenagers between 13 and 18 will experience at least one “severe mental disorder” during their life, as will roughly 13 percent of kids between ages five and 15 years.

Common Childhood Mental Health Disorders

Anxiety: Anxiety disorders in children are persistent fears, worries, or anxiety that disrupt their ability to participate in play, school, or typical age-appropriate social situations. Diagnoses include social anxiety, generalized anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders.



Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):

Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (not being able to keep focus), hyperactivity (excess movement that is not fitting to the setting), and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought).

Depression: Depression negatively affects how a person feels, thinks, and acts. It causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person’s ability to function.

Eating Disorders: Eating disorders are characterized by severe and persistent disturbance in eating behaviors and associated distressing thoughts and emotions. They can be very serious conditions affecting physical, psychological, and social function. Types of eating disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, avoidant restrictive food intake disorder, other specified feeding and eating disorder, pica, and rumination disorder.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD): OCD is a disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions) that make them feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions). The repetitive behaviors, such as hand washing, checking on things or cleaning, can significantly interfere with a person's daily activities and social interactions.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, a death threat, sexual violence, or serious injury. People with PTSD have intense, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience that last long after the traumatic event has ended. They may relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares; they may feel sadness, fear, or anger; and they may feel detached or estranged from other people.



General Warning Signs of Mental Disorders

Signs and symptoms to look out for include:

- Persistent sadness for two or more weeks.
- Withdrawing from or avoiding social interactions.
- Self-harm or talking about harming themselves.
- Talking about death or suicide.
- Extreme irritability or emotional outbursts.
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, or personality.
- Changes in eating habits.
- Weight loss.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Changes in academic performance.
- Avoiding or missing school.

First Steps for Families Concerned About Their Child's Mental Health

Parents and caregivers who are worried about their child's mental health should consult their child's doctor and describe any concerning behaviors.

Early diagnosis and appropriate services for children and their families can make a difference in the lives of children with mental disorders. Families play an important role in supporting their children through struggles and treatment.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also offers resources and information for parents about common childhood mental health disorders, how to recognize them, and how to seek help for themselves and for their children.

Visit: [cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth](https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth)

Local Services

Pennsylvania Infant Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Consultation Program

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Consultation is a free resource offered through the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) that supports children's social-emotional development from birth through age five within early learning programs participating in Keystone STARS. IECMH Consultants specialize in early childhood development and mental health and well-being. They work with parents and caregivers in the early care and education setting to provide onsite or virtual classroom observations; screening/assessment strategies for children and classrooms; implement a process to identify strengths and opportunities for growth; facilitate the creation of an action plan to support children and classroom staff; and provide Referrals for additional supports if needed.

For more information, visit pakeys.org/iecmh

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) - Keystone Pennsylvania Chapter

NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania is a grassroots, nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of children, adolescents, adults, and families affected by mental illness through recovery-focused support, education, and advocacy. Resources about mental illnesses and services are available.

For more information, call 412.366.3788 or visit namikeystonepa.org

Steel Smiling

Steel Smiling aims to bridge the gap between Black people and mental health support through education, advocacy, and awareness. Their 10-year vision is to connect every Black person in Allegheny County to a positive mental health experience that improves their quality of life. For more information, call 412.532.9458 or visit steelsmilingpgh.org

The Alliance for Infants and Toddlers

The Alliance for Infants and Toddlers is an Early Intervention service provider in Allegheny County for children ages zero to three. For more information, call 412.885.6000 or visit afit.org

The Children's Institute of Pittsburgh

The Children's Institute of Pittsburgh offers behavioral health services for children and adolescents ages five to 21. Their licensed therapists and Certified Nurse Practitioner work closely with each client and their family to develop skills to manage mood, thinking, and behaviors – making the move towards resiliency and healing. For more information, call 412.420.2400 or visit amazingkids.org

Allegheny Intermediate Unit DART

The Allegheny Intermediate Unit offers DART Preschool Early Intervention for children in Allegheny County, ages three to five, who are experiencing developmental delays or disabilities at no cost to parents. For more information, call 412.394.5700 or visit aiu3.net



This resource was reviewed by [Pennsylvania Keys Infant Early Childhood Mental Health \(IECMH\)](http://pakeys.org/iecmh). For additional resources related to childhood mental health, such as social-emotional development or early intervention, please visit tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

To learn more, visit: tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

