

## Health For Life – The Chronicle Journal

Children's Mental Health

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*I've heard more people talking lately about children's mental health – are these real issues, or is it just something a child will grow out of? How do I deal with this as a parent?*

Great question. This is an important topic, not only for parents, but also for other family members, teachers or anyone with children or youth in their lives.

Children's mental health issues certainly are real. In fact, they are just as real and diagnosable as a physical illness – and equally important. Did you know that 1 in 5 children in our province suffer from a mental health issue? We all want the best for our community's children and youth, so here are some ways you can support them:

- Recognize that children and youth can face mental health issues. and that these problems are very real and serious. They require help and attention, just as any other illness. We don't ask children to 'grow out of' their broken arm; it is essential to treat their mental health with the same respect.
- Be an advocate! Despite gaining recognition, mental health issues among children and youth still often come with a stigma. In 2007, 38% of adults in Canada said they would be too embarrassed to say that their teen had a mental illness. Don't be part of that 38%. If you think your child needs help, take it seriously. Get the help they deserve.
- Talk to your child. Spend time with them; get to know their friends, and what they are up to. It may help them to confide in you. It will also help you to notice if there is a change or warning signs of a problem.
- Be aware of warning signs, such as a decline in school performance, persistent worry or anxiety, refusal to take part in normal activities, continuous nightmares, consistent defiance or aggression, bullying, mood swings, sadness or irritability. Quality time with your child will help you catch signs of a problem.
- Don't wait! Early intervention for mental health issues is key. Children and youth are amazing people and often have more strength than we realize. By getting help early, you can minimize the impact of a mental health issue and help them to resume a healthy life.
- Find out what resources are available in your community. There are many services, programs, groups and parenting groups available. Call service agencies for information, visit your local library, do a search online, call 211, or check the resource list in the 2009 Children's Charter Report (available throughout the community, or online at [www.thunderbay.ca](http://www.thunderbay.ca)).

- Balance, balance, balance! It is important to our overall health and well-being, and that includes our mental health. A balanced lifestyle allows time for work and play, meaningful relationships, proper nutrition and exercise, adequate sleep, and healthy outlets to deal with life's stresses.
- Be a role model. Children and youth look up to the adults in their lives. Speak out about mental health issues, practice a healthy life balance, talk to your child about issues in their lives, get to know their teacher if there are problems at school, and don't wait for an issue to become a serious problem. It will teach your child how important mental health issues are – and how important your child is to you!

Every child has the right to receive the support and services they need in order to live a happy, healthy and balanced life. It is better to build strong children than to mend broken adults – so let's make children's mental health a priority each and every day.

*These and other suggestions are outlined in the 2009 Children's Charter Report, entitled "Children's Mental Health and Addictions"*