

Our Children, Our Future

The Children's Mental Health Coalition



The Royal
Australian &
New Zealand
College of
Psychiatrists



Australian Affiliate of the
WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR
INFANT MENTAL HEALTH



AUSTRALIAN CHILD &
ADOLESCENT TRAUMA,
LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

The Goal

To give Australian children a better start in life by ensuring access to mental health services from early childhood.

The Facts¹

Population statistics: There are 4.1 million children in Australia aged to 14 years, representing 19% of the population. On average, 20% of children in modern societies have their lives harmed by mental health problems:

- Children with mental health problems could fill the Concert Hall at the Sydney Opera House on 300 consecutive nights (almost a year!)

9% of Australian children have a long term mental health problem. Looking only at these 234,600 children:

- They would fill the Concert Hall at the Sydney Opera House on 88 consecutive days (12.5 weeks)

Most of these children with chronic mental health problems are not receiving services. The cost and burden falls on children, their families and society when these children fail.

The Solution

Invest in prevention and early intervention for children's mental health; this will create an economic dividend through making more productive citizens and reducing pressure on justice, hospital and child protection services.

Children's mental health services are the least well funded part of the mental health system. More investment, in early identification and treatment services is crucial to reducing the overall rate of mental illness in our community.

Children's Mental Health Is Critical

Burden of disease: Mental disorders cause the highest burden of disease in the 0-18 years age group; with almost a quarter of the overall burden resulting from mental disorders (depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism) followed by respiratory disease with 18%. 50% of mental illnesses start before the age of 14².

¹ Data in this section comes from AIHW *Australia's Health 2010* and AIHW *A picture of Australia's children 2009*

² Kessler RC et al (2005) *Lifetime prevalence and age of onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the national co morbidity survey replication* in Arch Gen Psychiatry 62:593-602

Children's mental health problems are caused by diverse factors:

- Developmental factors like prenatal brain damage, malnutrition, genetic vulnerabilities, chronic illness or disability
- Social factors like bullying, physical or psychological trauma (from injury, abuse, loss of family), community and cultural disadvantage, discrimination or marginalisation
- Parenting and family factors include neglect, insecure attachments, harsh discipline, inadequate supervision, marital conflict/breakdown, maternal depression, high levels of parental stress

Many mental health conditions that start in childhood continue into youth and adulthood if they are not treated:

- Autism and attachment disorders, onset 0-3 years
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, typical onset 7-9 years
- Conduct disorders, onset 7-14 years
- Anxiety disorders, 7-14 years

Prevention, early intervention and treatment improves lives: Interventions early in life can address risk factors more effectively, reduce symptoms more easily, to improve outcomes for children and reduce adverse impact on development, especially for conduct and anxiety disorders. Identifying and intervening early helps:

Increase:

- Psychosocial development and later mental health
- Education and occupational attainment

Decrease:

- Later health care requirements
- Involvement in justice system
- Family conflict and intergenerational issues

Indigenous children: These issues are magnified for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (who represent 36% of the indigenous population) but suffer from increased socioeconomic, cultural and geographic disadvantage, with higher rates of mental illness.

Call to Action

To address the mental health needs of Australian children we need to:

1. Increase mental health funding for children
2. Invest in prevention and early childhood intervention
3. Establish Kids Life Centres – Growing Healthy Minds

The Steps

Increase mental health funding for children: Our children deserve services and treatments that are evidence based and effective. Their current share of the mental health budget is unfair, discriminatory and short-sighted. Less than 9% of the mental health budget is directed to children's mental health, yet they represent 19% of the Australian population. There is no health without mental health, and early in life is the best time to invest in mental health.

We recommend that:

1. 15% of the mental health budget in new funds be directed to children's (0-12 years) services
2. All governments in Australia commit to equivalent access to care for people with mental health needs that is consistent with that of physical health needs by 2020
3. Overall mental health funding must reflect the burden of disease, with at least 12% of the health budget

Invest in prevention and early childhood intervention: Prevention of mental health problems in children includes support for parents and families, promoting healthy emotional and psychological development, school and community based programs. This is the key to ensuring prevention of ill health and reducing pressure on child protection, family welfare, hospital and justice systems. Intervening early saves money and improves lives. Increasing investment in prevention, health promotion and early intervention across all ages makes sense.

We recommend as 'best buys':

1. Implementation of a range of family support and parenting programs with a focus on vulnerable families at risk
2. Investment in the home nurse visitation program
3. Strengthening the partnership between child mental health services, paediatric services and school/education systems to address childhood emotional, behavioural, conduct and social relationship problems
4. Invest in evidence based programs for children who have experienced maltreatment, abuse and/or neglect
5. A national campaign to reduce stigma around mental illness and encourage parents, carers and individuals to identify and seek help early

Establish Kids Life Centres – Growing Healthy Minds: Infancy and childhood is too important to mental health to be addressed piecemeal. We need early intervention mental health centres for children 0-12 that co-locate family supports, parenting interventions and mental health assessment and treatment for child mental health problems including attachment and developmental problems, neuro-developmental problems, anxiety problems and behavioural problems. These would be staffed by child mental health experts including child psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians and developmental specialists. Mental health improves school attendance, social functioning, and reduces rates of contact with the police and justice system and substance abuse.

We recommend:

1. Establishment of Kids Life Centres to provide targeted services for 0-12 year olds to intervene early, especially in conduct and anxiety disorders; to provide diagnostic and treatment services to those in need; and to support and increase the capacity of parents and carers to meet the needs of their children
2. Invest in internet based treatment programs for children and their parents to ensure access to services across Australia

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