

Prevention Approaches in Child Mental Health Disorders

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KEYWORDS

- Prevention • Child mental health • Psychiatric nurses
- Selected interventions • Indicated interventions
- Mental health intervention

We all aspire for children to reach early school years trusting adults, having a sense of initiative, and a level of self-regulation such that they might master the challenges they face. Children deserve adults who are committed to providing the type of environments and relationships that support their progress toward these developmental milestones. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated such maturation occurs when children's surroundings are populated by reliable, responsive adults who support and when needed, augment their maturing cognitive and emotional regulation skills.^{1,2} Now, via neuroscience, it is increasingly understood how these early environments, relationships, and experiences affect the developing brain and maturation.³⁻⁵ Of particular interest are neural circuits that appear to mature and modify as information/experiences are presented to the developing infant, events the infant is primed to take in, process, and store.⁴

This perspective of experience-dependent development lends an expanded perspective on prevention and promotion. With increasing clarity, researchers understand how adults in the child's surroundings might intervene early to modify the environment or experiences so as to promote mental health and, in this process, actually prevent emotional or behavioral disorders.^{6,7} With the knowledge that one-half of persons who experience mental health problems have symptoms before age 14 years and three-fourths by age 24,⁸ clinicians who work with children and families must engage in critical opportunities to promote mental health and prevent development

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of advanced mental disorders in children who show early symptoms.⁷ In the traditional disease model of illness care, one might simply wait until illness or at least a high level of symptoms appear, and then treat. This approach in the case of mental illness is costly not only in money and resources but also in the cost to human suffering, both for the person who is ill and his or her family.⁶

The newly released Institute of Medicine (IOM) Report, “Preventing mental, emotional and behavioral disorders among young people: progress and possibilities”⁶ provides a road map for mental health promotion and mental health prevention. It is certainly the most current compendium of mental health promotion/prevention strategies. The IOM prevention approach is grounded in the complex interplay of genes, environment, risk, and protective factors that influence the manifestation of behavior. The focus of this article is on one aspect of the IOM initiative: prevention efforts aimed at processes thought to be involved in the development of mental illnesses. Readers should not lose sight that the development of a diagnosable mental illness is influenced by multiple factors operating as the child (with a particular set of risks and protective factors) moves through maturation and adapts to the environment.⁹ The goal of the authors is to provide a resource on mental illness prevention for nurses who work with children, so the article begins with an overview of the IOM prevention paradigm and the levels of prevention.

A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF PREVENTION: EMPHASIS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Organizations worldwide are calling for a public health approach to mental health promotion and mental illness prevention.^{6,10–13} The prominence of mental health promotion and prevention represents a conceptual shift in the development and implementation of mental health interventions. Up to now, the emphasis has been on early recognition of symptoms and efforts to limit the impact of these symptoms on high-risk individuals.⁷ Prevention activities were often focused on reducing the likelihood of disability or relapse for those individuals diagnosed with a mental disorder. Now, as explained in the IOM report,⁶ prevention should focus on strategies that reduce risk before the onset of an identifiable mental disorder. Within this framework there are 3 levels of intervention: universal—general population; selective—at-risk individuals or populations; and indicated—at-risk individuals or populations who are experiencing minimal, but detectable signs or symptoms without meeting the diagnostic criteria (**Box 1**).

In this paradigm, the scope of mental health promotion broadens; that is, mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. According to the World Health Organization (WHO),¹¹ mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” For children, mental health and well-being include mastery of well-known challenges, that is, development of a sense of autonomy, industry, and initiative. Children’s mental health also includes the development of capacities to form positive and helpful relationships, interact meaningfully with the environment, engage in self-regulation, and cope with adversity and challenges.⁶

Universal

Universal approaches to mental health promotion aim at assuring all children have healthy, supportive relationships and a safe/secure community environment. Of course, the broader social and economic environment also influences a child’s mental

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