

Focus of Nation Should be on Children's Mental Health

by Janai Lowenstein

A guarantee for children's mental health would be a godsend. Since guarantees aren't available, adult caretakers must find winning formulas for children.

According to a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the number of preschoolers taking psychotropic drugs increased dramatically from 1991 to 1995. The increase for Ritalin alone was 150 percent, and the use of anti-depressants increased more than 200 percent. The number of children under the age of 5 taking clonidine, which is used to treat insomnia in children with attention deficit disorders, tripled.

Unfortunately, many of the drugs being prescribed to our youngest children have never been tested on them. None of them have been tested on children under 6, and many have not been tested on children under 16.

Sound the alarm for the direction our culture is taking as caretakers of children. Consider that millions of Americans suffer from depression, including children, as well as anxiety disorders, suicidal tendencies, sleeping and eating disorders.

What can we do?

In 1979, the National Center for Disease Control declared stress a major illness. Many stress-related illnesses and behaviors once diagnosed in adult lives have trickled down to teen-agers and children.

This is a powerful message: Our society is sick.

To gain health for ourselves and our children, we have to first make sure basic human needs are met. Prescription drugs are sometimes needed, but we already have drugless answers and tools to help our children be mentally healthy.

The following is a checklist to establish and maintain an atmosphere that supports mental health in children's lives. Specific chronic conditions are not addressed, but this list does support healthier balance. Consider getting back to the basics that support children with a foundation for mental, emotional and physical health. Do the children you care about:

- Feel loved?
- Have more quality contact time with you—reading books, going on nature walks, listening to bedtime stories, playing games, etc.—than amounts of materialism?
- Have a sense of belonging through responsibilities with chores and inclusion in meaningful conversations that tell them they are needed and that their caring counts?

- Receive healthy touching—pats on the back, holding hands while walking, hugs—that nurtures a feeling of connectedness and bonding, security and being cared for?
- Feel important in your life and respected?
- Have consistent quality rest? During sleep, chemical changes occur for physical and mental health that cannot be replaced.
- Receive good nutrition on a consistent basis? A breakfast with high sugar content (or having no breakfast) throws off children’s mental activity and behavior, reduces learning and attention span, creates negative tension with low blood sugar and harms development.
- Get regular exercise? Oxygen intake stimulates brain activity and fuels muscles, releases tension, oxygenates the blood and allows clear thinking.
- Know how to take deep breaths when upset for self-control and handling anger?
- Communicate feelings to someone who listens? Many emotional disturbances can be healed if children are taught skills to know how the mind, body and emotions work.
- Feel understood?
- Witness or experience physical, emotional, mental or sexual abuse? There is always a reason for a child’s acting out. Try to discover what lies at the root of the problem. Get professional help if needed. If aggression or violence is present in the home, children suffer with nightmares or other symptoms, even if they are just witnesses.
- Seem out of sorts frequently? Causes can be allergies, abuse, genetic deficiencies, chronic tension, lack of basic necessities.
- Receive more criticism than encouragement? Ongoing negativity from others marks a child’s psyche through thought and behavioral patterns. Get help for children and yourself before harm occurs.
- Laugh with you?
- Have a conscience that is developed to feel the difference between good and poor choices?
- Have consistent discipline? Consistent discipline helps children develop self-discipline and helps them feel secure with boundaries, which provide guidelines that create mental and emotional security.

Fill children’s hearts with good life experiences and their minds will be healthy.

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