

Blue Days

Identifying major
childhood mental
health concerns
and finding
treatment in
Fort Bend

Written by Jennifer Heath

With half of all
lifetime mental
disorders beginning by
age 14, here are some
warning signs to watch
for and places Fort
Bend parents can
get help

All parents have been guilty of it. We know we shouldn't, but occasionally we find ourselves comparing our children to our friend's children or even one of our children to the other. Parents just want to make sure their kids are on track emotionally and physically with their peers. Children may not be the first age group you think of as dealing with emotional health issues, but 4 million children and adolescents in the U.S. suffer from a serious mental disorder that causes a significant impact on their quality of life.

Making Your Child a Priority

Douglas Plaeger, a program coordinator with MedCare Centers for Counseling and Play Therapy, has an easy suggestion for checking in with your child's emotional well-being. He advises parents to make it a priority to spend uninterrupted, one-on-one time with your children each day.

"With a parent's busy schedule, it is often overlooked that 30 minutes a day of playing a board game will continue to strengthen their relationship with their child, [along with] teaching them skills like following rules and directions, taking turns, and [having] patience," Plaeger says.

While there are many different kinds of emotional and mental health issues affecting children and adolescents, below are three of the most common, according to Plaeger.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is most commonly detected during the school year when a child's attention and focus are important parts of their classroom behavior. The disorder may also be detected at home, though, too. Parents should look for tell-tale signs in their children like not having the ability to focus on a task, follow through with directions, or listen properly. Other signs include constantly moving around and being impatient and unable to wait their turn.

"Developmentally, a 4-year-old child can attend to a task for 10 to 15 minutes, so it is important to be mindful of the expectations set on a child with ADHD and the amount of time they can spend on a particular task," says Plaeger.

Parents can collaborate with school personnel to determine a behavior plan that can be implemented for the child to help accommodate their issue and promote a healthy learning environment. Parents can also help their children by involving them in household chores or even playing games like Memory that help them to focus.

Adjustment Disorder

Adjustment disorder is identified usually after the onset of a particular stressor, such as parental separation or divorce, moving, or changing schools. It affects the child by showing significant impairment in social and academic functioning. If your child starts acting out at school or home for attention, defies or withdraws from you or their peers, or

begins to feel sad due to the loss of something, they may be suffering from adjustment disorder.

It is a good idea to talk with your child about the event that caused the symptoms, making sure your responses are age-appropriate and can be appropriately processed by them. Plaeger also advises parents not to make up a story in regards to the event, as it may confuse them when they get older. While it is important for parents to be truthful, children should be able to handle the amount and type of information you give them. "It is important to recognize the child's age and emotional maturity for handling information," shares Plaeger.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Oppositional defiant disorder is more commonly identified in the home or through social functioning than it is at school. It shows some similar symptoms to that of adjustment disorder, but is not associated with a particular stressor. Children are usually defiant or refuse to listen to parents or authority figures, often lose their temper easily, get annoyed by others easily, or blame others for their mistakes or behavior.

Parents can begin by setting boundaries with their child and helping them to understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Giving your child choices of activities that you approve of is a great way to help steer them in the right direction. As a parent, once you give your child a set amount of choices, then he or she will learn they must pick one and nothing else.

Helping a Child with a Disorder

If your child persistently shows signs of an emotional problem, they could need counseling services to identify the correct issue and coping strategy. Growing up, children need consistency in the home and school.

"With today's hectic schedule of bringing your child to school, going to work, running errands, and then figuring out what is for dinner, it is more desirable to just sit down and take a break from things," says Plaeger. "That is when being consistent is needed the most. The extra time and effort that the parent gives to be consistent with childrearing will go a long way and [will] promote emotional and mental health with their child." **SLM**

JENNIFER HEATH works from home each day trying to make sure her two boys are active, healthy, and well-behaved.