



## **Meeting Children's Mental Health Needs**

When young children experience mental-health challenges, it impacts their educational and social development, as well as the well being of the entire family. May 9, 2013, was National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. This important day provided us with an opportunity to understand the importance of addressing the mental-health needs of young children as well as to identify helpful strategies we can use to support the mental health of children in our lives.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations (SAMHSA), between 9 percent and 14 percent of children birth to age 5 experience mental-health problems that negatively affect their development. Many of these children are not getting the help they need to address these problems and will be impacted throughout life. Children who enter kindergarten with effective social skills do better in school and these social and emotional skills are strong predictors of academic success in the first grade. Studies of cost effectiveness of mental-health interventions for young children indicate that support for young children results in positive outcomes later in life in areas such as educational level attained, delinquency and crime, and overall earnings. These outcomes benefit our entire community.

There are specific signs of mental-health challenges at every age. For infants, inconsolable crying, slow growth and sleep problems may be a sign that interventions would benefit the baby. Tantrums are a normal part of toddler development. Children who have tantrums that last for very long periods of time or are very violent during the outburst may be helped by services. In preschoolers, a child who withdraws from social situations and is fearful of others may have mental-health needs. Often mental-health problems may first present themselves as physical symptoms. Back pain, digestive problems, problems with sleep, headaches and fatigue may be an indicator of an underlying mental-health need.

There is much we can all do to support the social and emotional development of our young children and prevent later problems. One of the most important gifts we can offer our children is helping them develop resilience. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, resilience is the ability to rise above life's challenges and move forward with hope and confidence. Parents are the most important source of love, support and guidance for children and therefore we have the greatest effect on our children's ability to develop strong resilience.

You can make a difference by providing love, predictability, security and a deep connection to at least one adult. We must then step out of the way and allow children to solve problems on their own. This allows them opportunities to learn how to navigate in the world. They will make mistakes along the way and then have ample opportunity for learning. We can listen to them when they talk about their struggles and support them by letting them know we believe they can give it their best effort.

Powerful opportunities to teach resilience are provided to us by what our children see us doing every day. We set an example by the way we manage the constant and inevitable ups and downs of life. When we have difficulties in life, we can talk about how we are managing the stress and work thorough the challenge. When your child develops the skills to overcome challenges, they will know they can control what happens to them.

This May, consider how can support the positive mental health growth of young children in our community. For more information visit websites of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations.

Casie LaMunyon is a MECC member and supervisor with Axis Health Systems