



Recommendations on Helpful Ways for School Professionals and Families to Talk about Mental Health Related Concerns

While schools are primarily concerned with education, mental health is essential to learning as well as to social and emotional development. Because of this important interplay between emotional health and school success, schools must be partners in the mental health care of our children.

The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, July 2003

Schools are a critically important source of information for families about their children, including information about their emotional and mental well being. With children in the classroom for the majority of their day, teachers and school professionals are in a key position to notice learning, functioning and behavioral problems that should be communicated to parents.

What information should teachers and school health professionals communicate with parents¹ about a students' emotional and mental well being, and what steps if any should be taken?

- i. Observations about the student's academic and/or functional performance, or behavior in the classroom or school;
- ii. Modifications being made to address the student's academic and/or functional performance;
- iii. Options for referring students for an educational and/or health care evaluation, according to school policy;
- iv. If things do not improve, schools should follow local procedures to ensure that the student is provided with specialized educational services, consistent with section 504 of the rehabilitation act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); and
- v. Provide parents with resources to help them better understand IDEA and 504 accommodations.

Teachers, school administrators, and school health professionals may be the first to notice changes in a student's attendance, behavior and achievement. Good communication between home and school can be the first defense in identifying when referrals, interventions, and/or services are warranted. Although, communication about concerns is essential, teachers, school administrators, and school health professionals should avoid suggesting a mental health diagnosis and recommending prescription medication for a student. Parents appreciate learning about concerns related to their child's behavior, significant developmental delays, and academic performance. When there are major concerns, parents also want to know how best to address these challenges -- this may include information about how to obtain a comprehensive health care evaluation and perhaps a mental health evaluation.

Research shows that approximately 10% of children and adolescents have a serious mental health treatment need that significantly impacts their day-to-day activities. The early identification of mental health related concerns is essential to improving academic and functional performance, and in avoiding

¹ The use of the term "parents" includes reference to caregivers and guardians who play a critical role in many children's lives.

tragedies. Though the following signs may be the result of another health condition or other life circumstances, they can assist parents in determining if their child may need further help from a mental health professional:

- Decline in school performance
- Persistent difficulty with peers
- Poor grades despite strong efforts
- Constant worry or anxiety
- Persistent somatic complaints
- School refusal or loss of interest in usual activities
- Persistent and disruptive hyperactivity
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Repeated disrupted sleep patterns
- Continuous or frequent aggression, “acting out” or oppositional behavior
- Persistent sadness and/or irritability

Schools are just one of the players needed to identify children and adolescents who may be struggling with undiagnosed and untreated mental illnesses and linking them with an evaluation and effective services. Effective collaboration must also be developed between schools and other child-serving systems, including the community mental health treatment system, primary care, the child welfare system, and juvenile justice. Only then will we see real progress toward improving the overall health and well-being of children.

In communicating mental health related concerns with families, here are some of the factors that teachers and school professionals should consider:

- Remove feelings of blame or guilt about a child’s mental health concerns;
- Recognize and acknowledge that parental denial and anger may exist;
- Communicate empathy and compassion for the parents’ circumstances;
- Recognize that stigma continues to be associated with mental health related issues;
- Provide parents with resources and share with them that education is the key to understanding mental health related concerns;
- Take a problem-solving approach to addressing mental health concerns; and
- Recognize the value of parents and schools working together as a team.

Open communication between parents and school professionals is essential to students’ academic achievement and overall health and well-being.

Coalition Partners

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

American School Counselors Association (ASCA)

Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation (CABF)

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health (FFCMH)

Mental Health America (MHA – formerly the National Mental Health Association)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

A national coalition of parents, educators, mental health professionals, and physicians united in ensuring the mental health and well-being of our nation’s children and adolescents.

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