

mental health matters

Lincoln Public Schools • Department of Student Services • School Social Work Program

– Winter 2008 –



and Human Services, mental illness is the most prevalent health problem in America. Schools certainly are front line witnesses to the struggle some of our children and families have with this issue. One in five children have a diagnosable mental health disorder as reported by the U.S. Surgeon General and it is estimated that two-thirds of these are not receiving the services they need.

Early Interventions

Research increasingly demonstrates that early intervention can be the key to preventing more serious problems later in a child's life. Addressing the mental health concerns of our students is vital to their academic success as well as their success in becoming productive citizens. School is increasingly becoming the venue where the majority of children who need mental health services will receive them. With this in mind, it is important for all of us to be aware of the mental health issues that impact our students and to help ensure that they have access to the services and support that they need to be successful in school.

What is Mental Illness?

Myths, confusion and misinformation about mental illness have led to stereotypes and a negative stigma which often discourages people from seeking help. LPS school social workers have always focused on barriers to student learning. Certainly mental illness is one barrier becoming more prevalent among our students. Those with mental illness, without treatment, are more likely to fall behind and drop out of school and are less likely to be fully functioning as adults. The school social work program is working to increase LPS staff's knowledge about prevention of mental illness, as well as early warning signs, resources and ways to assist these students to be successful in school.

Most generally, mental illness can be defined as having thoughts, feelings and/or behavior that interfere with one's ability to carry on their daily



UPCOMING EVENTS

An Ounce of Prevention:

Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students

Presenter:
Dr. Beth Dell, UNL
School Psychology Program

A two part workshop:
Part I

February 12,
8:00 a.m.-11:30 a.m.
or 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.
(flex time)

Part II
March 4
8:00 a.m.-11:30 a.m.
or 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.
(flex time)

More information and recognition through Staff Development

Suicide Prevention

is coming to LPS middle and high schools. Look for more information in the Spring issue of Mental Health Matters.

Mental Health Websites:

www.aacap.org
www.mentalhealthamerica.net
www.nami.org
www.samhsa.gov
www.smhpsych.ucla.edu

Mental Health Matters

Lincoln Public Schools, like many districts across the country, is working both internally and with the community to find ways to better identify students who are struggling with issues that affect their mental health and to link them to appropriate resources. To help with this effort the School Social Work Program is promoting awareness of the mental health issues students face. Mental Health Matters, a one-page newsletter containing brief articles about mental health and mental illness will be distributed quarterly.

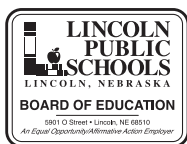
Expanded Services

A new service available to students is mental health screening. As licensed mental health providers, school social workers can, with parent permission, provide screening for depression. In addition, screenings for anxiety, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress will be piloted this school year. Also, a committee of school social workers is working with the Student Services Department on a checklist, which will be integrated into the SAT process to assist in identification of students who need more than academic assistance. And, Signs of Suicide (SOS), a suicide prevention program will be piloted in some of the middle and high schools this year.

Mental Health

Mental health can be defined as cognitive, emotional and social well being that results in productive activities, fulfilling relationships and the ability to adapt to change and cope with stress and adversity.

According to the United States Department of Health



activities. Diagnosis of mental illness is rarely simple. There are no infallible physiological tests to determine if a person has a mental illness. Each diagnosis has characteristic signs and symptoms related to biological dysfunction.

What causes mental illness?

Mental illness is a disease with a biological basis. A person with a mental illness is not able to simply decide to get over it any more than someone who has a different chronic disease (diabetes, heart disease). The surgeon general's report on mental health shares that the precise cause of most mental health disorders are not known, but the factors that shape them are known; biological, psychological, social/cultural. It is believed that the interaction between these factors is the cause for mental illness. Current brain research has shown that the neurochemical, anatomic and structural make up of the brain is not static. Brains are built and changed throughout life by the interaction of genes with environment and experiences. Roles of biological, psychological or social factors may vary across individuals and stages in the life span. Depression may occur as a result of exposures to stressful life events in one, while the foremost cause for another is genetic predisposition.

Prevention of Mental Illness

Research has identified "protective factors" that help individuals develop resiliency despite biological and environmental influences. Protective factors are biological, psychological and sociocultural, and reside with the individual and in the family or community. Early negative influences and adversities can be counteracted by experiences of self mastery and relationships that promote independence. Good mental health is a powerful protective factor against mental illness.

Schools Can Make A Difference

School staff is often frustrated by the negative influences and risk factors children experience outside the school setting. The good news is that schools can make a difference. One of the most significant protective factors is an ongoing relationship with a caring adult. The following individual protective factors can be taught, developed and enhanced in the school setting;

- a sense of belonging
- interpersonal skills
- conflict resolution skills
- ability to articulate feelings
- problem solving skills
- coping skills
- school achievement
- home- school collaborations
- school -agency collaborations
- regular, predictable and positive learning and teaching environments
- positive adults and peer models
- the move away from punishment and exclusion to a more inclusive system of positive behavioral interventions creates

Research will continue to expand our understanding of the etiology as well as prevention and interventions of mental illness. Meanwhile we must move ahead to do what we can to use the information we have regarding protective factors.

Kids and Depression

According to Mental Health America, as many as one in eight teens and one in 33 children have clinical depression at a level where treatment is indicated. Of even more concern is that these numbers are on the increase. Depression is an illness that needs to be taken seriously; it is more than just feeling sad, having the blues or the very natural grieving that comes with life's changes and losses. In teens, untreated depression can worsen to the point where suicide is a concern. In this case immediate intervention is



necessary. School social workers along with school counselors, health teachers and nurses will be working with middle and high schools to introduce SOS, (Signs of Suicide), a suicide prevention and intervention program to help address this serious issue.

Signs of depression in children and teens include:

- Persistent sadness
- Withdrawal from family, friends and activities
- Increased anger, irritability or agitation
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Frequent physical complaints
- Lack of enjoyment of usual activities
- Lack of enthusiasm or motivation
- Decreased energy and chronic fatigue
- Aggressive play or play with sad themes
- Impulsive or risk taking behavior
- Indecision, lack of concentration or forgetfulness
- Poor school performance
- Feelings of worthlessness, poor self-esteem, overreaction to criticism or excessive guilt
- Feelings of failure or disappointment
- Issues with authority
- Substance abuse
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

Teachers and other staff can help by knowing the warning signs of depression and noting the duration, frequency and severity of the behaviors. Students who are showing these signs need to be referred to the school social worker, school counselor, or other helping professional in the school.

School social workers now have available the Multi-Score Depression Inventory for Children. With parental permission they can administer this screening instrument as part of an assessment. Input would also be gathered from the student, parents and teachers to aid in identifying symptoms of depression. It is important to remember that depression is treatable. In most cases a combination of therapy and medication is the most effective. If further intervention is warranted the next step would be to assist parents in obtaining a diagnosis from a medical professional to ensure that the student gets the help he or she needs.

"We must move beyond a focus on 'risk factors' in order to create the conditions that will facilitate children's healthy development."

—Bonnie Benard