

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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If You Have Concerns About Your Child or Youth

The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides a wide range of direct clinical services and targeted community supports for children and youth at-risk or dealing with mental health problems, and for their families.

For more information, please contact your local MCFD office (listed in the Blue or Government Pages of the phone book) or visit: http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/help.htm

To learn more about BC's *Child & Youth Mental Health Plan*, please visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health

Preventing and Treating Depression in Children and Youth

A RESEARCH SUMMARY FROM THE Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program

Our Research Reviews

In 2003, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) made a long-term commitment to improving the mental health of children and youth in the province. The resulting five-year *Child and Youth Mental Health Plan* for BC takes a coordinated approach to strengthening prevention and treatment services, monitoring outcomes for children's mental health and enhancing public accountability for programs and services.

Our program supports MCFD's Plan by reviewing the best available research evidence on effective strategies for preventing and treating a variety of children's mental health problems, and by making recommendations to inform the development of related policies and services. Our full report on *Preventing & Treating Depression in Children* is available at: www.childmentalhealth.ubc.ca

Understanding Depression in Children and Youth

While symptoms may vary with a child's age, developmental stage or cultural background, depression often appears as prolonged and profound sadness or irritability, combined with a loss of interest or pleasure in most normal activities. Many children and youth with depression have other mental health issues that add to their problems coping, including anxiety, disruptive behaviour or substance abuse.

There is no one "test" to determine if a child or youth has depression. Instead, diagnoses are made through assessments and reports from parents, teachers, health professionals and young people themselves.

Where possible, it is important to deal with the underlying social or biological issues that

may cause mental disorders to develop. Family disadvantage, genetic makeup or exposure to severe long-term stresses may all affect a child's development over time and contribute to mental health problems.

On the other hand, many factors can protect children from risk. For depression, these positive factors include having good adult supports, strong learning and social abilities, a sense of competence in themselves and positive beliefs about the larger world.

While we do not fully know what causes mental health problems to develop in some children and not others, we do know there are effective strategies for both preventing and treating them.

Preventing and Treating Depression in Children and Youth

Review Results

It is crucial that children and youth with established mental health symptoms get the care they need. But research shows that this is not always the case. Large studies in Canada and elsewhere have demonstrated that only about one in four young people with mental health problems currently receive specialized treatment services.

To reduce the overall number of children and youth who suffer from mental health problems, we must both treat children with existing problems and develop programs to prevent the problems from occurring.

Our research summarized findings from relevant systematic reviews published between 1999 and 2004 on preventing and depression in children (ages 0-18) and/or adolescents (ages 12-18).

In total, three prevention and 45 treatment reviews were retrieved. Of these, one prevention and four treatment reviews met our criteria for inclusion, providing information on 21 prevention studies, including psychological and educational programs, and 75 treatment studies, including psychological interventions and medications.

Effective Prevention

The most effective prevention programs for depression use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approaches. These approaches help children and youth to modify their thinking patterns and are best used with groups. CBT approaches are also effective when provided to all children, or specifically to children at risk. Involving parents helps young people to apply what they have learned.

Effective Treatment

CBT also works well for treating depression. Again, CBT can be delivered individually or in groups and families can benefit from participation by being able to help their children. Interpersonal therapy (IPT) is another effective treatment and focuses on improving social skills and relationships.

Certain antidepressant medications may help in severe situations, but should only be used with careful monitoring given the potential for side effects.

Depression is a serious mental health problem affecting about 35,000 young people in BC.

Research evidence indicates that it can be both prevented and treated.

In most cases, CBT is the most effective approach for preventing and treating anxiety disorders. IPT is also effective.

Using medications to treat depression should be limited to severe situations and should always include careful monitoring.

Recommendations from the Research

Our report provides several recommendations to improve children's mental health in BC:

- Make prevention programs part of the spectrum of mental health strategies available to children in BC.
- Support CBT as "the standard of care" for treating depression in children. IPT is also an effective treatment.
- Limit the use of anti-depressant medications to severe situations where monitoring can be ensured.
- Ensure all new prevention and treatment programs are consistent with the research evidence or are evaluated to ensure they improve outcomes for children and youth.

About Us

The Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program is located within the Department of Psychiatry at UBC. We provide research, education and policy consultation services to build a broad public health strategy to improve the mental health and well-being of children and youth in British Columbia and Canada.

A Public Health Approach to Improving Mental Health for Children and Youth

