

Mental health problems in children on the rise

Mental health problems in children are on the rise and are likely to affect as many as 1 in 7 children under the age of 13, unless urgent preventative measures are taken, warns one of Australia's foremost early childhood authorities, the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

Up to 500,000 (14%) Australian children have significant mental health problems, with only 25% receiving professional help. Parents complain that services are difficult to find, too expensive and have long waiting lists.

“Whilst we welcome the Federal Government's recently increased funding to mental health, only a fraction is directly targeted at children, and then only to treat the most severely affected,” explains the Centre's Professor Frank Oberklaid, “We urgently need to develop effective promotion and prevention programs whilst ensuring adequate treatment services are available for existing children's mental health problems.”

The Centre's warning comes during Children's Week (October 21 – 29) and forms part of the Centre's latest Policy Brief report on childhood mental health.

According to the Centre, difficulties with early child behaviour such as aggression and persistent tantrums can continue for some children and lead to significant behavioural problems. Up to 50% of 'hard to manage' pre-school children are likely to have ongoing problems requiring professional help.

According to the Centre's Policy Brief, the younger the child, the more vulnerable the brain is to environmental influences.

“Experiences in the early years shape the development of young children's brains in ways that have long lasting effects,” explains Professor Oberklaid, “mental health problems can emerge at any time, from as early as infancy, but are often not recognised until later years.”

“Children's mental health problems have high human and financial costs for families and society in both the short and long term,” he added.

Children's mental health problems can continue into adolescence and adulthood, adding further costs such as school dropout, substance abuse, poor vocational outcomes, family violence, along with increased sick leave, unemployment, crime and risk of suicide.

Adult mental health problems often affect the next generation, with children of parents with depression and anxiety up to six times more likely to develop these problems themselves.



The incidence of mental health problems is even higher in severely disadvantaged children, such as Aboriginal children (24%), children residing in 'out of home care' (55-60%) and children with a disability, who are up to four times more likely to have mental health problems than children without a disability.

"Distinguishing between common and relatively transient behavioural problems and social-emotional disturbance in young children can be difficult," acknowledges Professor Oberklaid, "

"The challenge is to provide an integrated mental health service delivery system with adequate treatment services for children's existing mental health problems, while also recognising the need to develop effective promotion and prevention programs that build onto the existing primary and secondary service system."

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Notes to editor

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour and its findings are used to inform public policy, service delivery and professional practice. The Centre is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, a key research centre of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and an academic centre of the University of Melbourne.

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A copy of the Centre's Policy Brief: 'Childhood mental health: promotion, prevention and early intervention' can be accessed online at:

[www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB5_Childhood mental health.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/ccch/PB5_Childhood_mental_health.pdf)

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