



Schools: A vital component of Child and Adolescent Mental Health

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Mental health among children and adolescents persists as a significant public health concern, given the continuous escalation in the prevalence of mental disorders.¹ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), roughly 20% of young people encounter psychiatric difficulties.² A considerable proportion (50%) of psychiatric morbidity in adults manifests in the formative years of childhood. Children and adolescents living in LMIC have a high prevalence of psychiatric morbidity due to various adversities they face, including limited services to support children with neurodevelopmental disabilities and stigma, poor educational facilities and educational environment, bullying, caregivers' absence, chronic poverty, armed conflicts, etc. Despite the high burden of mental illnesses originating at young age and associated disability, evidence from both developed and developing countries suggest that the majority of children at risk of psychiatric illness remain undetected and untreated. In certain societies, it is not an anomalous phenomenon that parents are held accountable for their child's mental illness or that it is traced back to spiritual factors and demonic possession. Epilepsy, a significant co-morbid disorder with many developmental problems in children, is sometimes considered contagious. Lack of resources (finances, services, human resources) and stigma faced by children and families are among the main barriers identified in access to care. This situation is unfortunate as youth with positive mental health are productive and can tackle developmental challenges satisfactorily. On the other hand, poor mental health in early years is linked with multiple adverse outcomes, including academic difficulties, delinquency, school dropouts, interpersonal problems, substance abuse, high risk of suicide, and poor family functioning, besides increasing morbidity and mortality throughout life course.^{3,4}

There is an awareness that a significant disparity persists between the pressing demand to alleviate the burden of mental health issues among children and adolescents and the limited provision of services and resources in this domain. In low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), mental health, let alone child and adolescent mental health is not a priority for policymakers. Furthermore, as children's Unmet mental health requirements have been associated with significant global health, social, and economic ramifications, there is a real need to bring child mental health further up the healthcare agenda and

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close the treatment gap by task shifting approach in LMIC. It also necessitates changes in the manner that child mental health services are currently being provided. Increasingly educators, healthcare professionals and policymakers are focusing on the public health approach, which differs from the traditional approach with its focus on prevention rather than intervention. In this scenario, Schools have a front-line role in advancing children and adolescents' physical and psychological wellness and well-being.⁵ WHO health promoting school (HPS) framework's goal is to address the health needs of students through a multifaceted response. A health-promoting school is where all partners of the school community collaborate to provide students with positive experiences for their better health.⁶ Health-promoting schools can be considered one of the most cost-effective investments a nation can make to improve education and health simultaneously. School health programmes are a way forward to engage the education sector to change the educational, social, and economic conditions that influence risk, alongside directly reducing important health risks among young people. All school health promotion initiatives need to have mental health as an essential feature. Schools offer a unique platform to integrate promotion, prevention, and early identification of mental health issues and consistent support for children with psychological difficulties with access to specialist care where needed. Mental and emotional health is a cornerstone of wellness and is nurtured through positive experiences, stable, caring, and loving relationships and a sense of connectedness and support in schools.

Many reasons have been identified in the literature as to how schools are a vital component of Child and adolescent mental health and why they should invest in initiatives to promote mental health.

- Good mental health is critical to children's success in school. Addressing student mental health is a prerequisite to their learning, performance, and achievements.
- There is a direct link between students' academic achievements and their social and emotional well-being and mental health.⁴⁻⁷ Building positive relationships and school environments that support learning, reducing stigma, and identify

mental health challenges early leads to better academic outcomes.⁸

- Schools that focus on social and emotional aspects of students throughout their classes have been shown to improve school children's attitudes, behavior, and academic performance.
- Schools provide a distinctive opportunity and an economical approach to engaging a vast number of pupils. In 2013, global enrollment rates ranged from above 90% of children of primary school age to above 80% of children of lower secondary school age. Virtually every community has schools, and in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), schools are found throughout rural and urban areas. In most cases, they could be the only mental health service provision opportunity in rural areas.⁹
- As students spend substantial time in schools, it provides an ideal context for prevention and promotion efforts related to mental health. Positive mental health initiatives in schools lead to cost savings and reduced risk of violence and juvenile delinquency.
- Early identification of problematic behaviors in schools can lead to early intervention and better outcomes. Furthermore, being a less threatening and non-stigmatizing environment, it has been noted that the provision of services in school lead to a higher likelihood of students seeking mental health support. Three fourth of children who received mental health services were found to receive it through the education sector.¹⁰
- The promotion of positive mental health in students also leads to reducing stress among teachers in school.
- Schools may also prove to be turning points for children with poor support systems, unsuitable home environments and belonging to disadvantaged neighborhoods by building their resilience and abilities to cope with adverse life experiences.
- Protective factors of mental health may be strengthened in schools.

The significance of schools in mental health promotion and the opportunities it offers for interventions have been apparent for some time, with considerable growth in this area in the last two decades.¹¹ Gary Hornby and Mary Atkinson, in 2004, also

proposed a framework for a whole school approach to mental health, which concentrates on involvement at 4 levels.¹² First one is concerned with school ethos, which embraces the values shared by all staff and students. Positive school ethos nurtures both students' well-being and academic performance. Next level, the whole-school organization deals with a variety of school policies. Pastoral provision is the third level, emphasizing measures throughout the school. Classroom practice includes teachers' use of practical strategies to promote students' mental health and is the final level.

Some of the key ways in which schools can contribute to promoting child and adolescent mental health include.

Promotion of Healthy Habits

Integrating regular physical activities, counseling about healthy dietary habits and limits in screen-time, emphasizing teamwork, collaborations on projects, focusing on activities for building resilience, self-reflection and problem-solving skills, and teaching stress management strategies can help students navigate daily life challenges and develop skills for positive mental health.

Emphasis on improving Mental Health Literacy in schools

Mental health literacy, i.e., "knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention," is foundational for improving access to care and reducing stigma related to mental illness.¹³ The cornerstone of many mental health initiatives in schools is improving teachers, parents, and students' mental health literacy. The provision of accurate information and dispelling myths can lead to a more understanding and empathic society.

Creating a Supportive Environment

The role of the school environment in developing and maintaining student health, including promoting mental health, is of utmost importance. Schools with positive environments are likely to implement health promotion programmes, promote empathy and positive expectations, address risk-taking behaviors in their curriculum and influence students'

interaction with each other and with teachers alongside zero tolerance for bullying and discrimination. A positive school environment helps maintain positive mental health in all its members, whether students or teachers or other staff, which in turn encourages better academic performance in students and lessens staff absenteeism.

Training of Staff

Training school staff in mental health-related issues and developing strategies to support students with additional needs related to their mental health can positively affect their ability to recognize and respond to students' mental health needs.⁴

Early Identification and Intervention

Schools are an ideal position to identify early signs of psychiatric issues in children as, besides home; schools represent the environment where they spend a lot of their time. The timely recognition of the illness can result in a prompt referral, consequently reducing the length of time for which the illness remains untreated.

Provision of Mental Health Services in Schools

Schools can offer mental health services within school premises, which can help in reducing many barriers to help-seeking like cost, transport issues, conflicts in scheduling and stigma associated with mental health issues.⁷ There may be universal interventions (for all children irrespective of risk and protective factors), selected interventions for a subpopulation of at-risk students or indicated interventions that target students with mental health problems (like students with severe psychological distress). Treatment aims at reducing the symptoms of diagnosed mental health problems.

Collaboration with other stakeholders, including Parents and Community

Schools can also promote a positive role in mental health promotion through better collaboration between education, the health sector, and the

community, including parents, who are critical partners. Approaches may include regular Parenting workshops, fostering open communication between school and home, offering resources, and supporting referrals to mental health professionals where needed. Understanding the family's cultural context and help-seeking attitudes are also critical to engage them in supporting children's mental health.

Strategies in Reducing Mental Health Stigma

Schools have the opportunity to address the stigma surrounding child and adolescent mental health. This can be achieved by incorporating mental health into the curriculum, hosting regular interactive workshops with mental health professionals, sharing stories from people with lived experiences, encouraging student-led initiatives focused on mental health advocacy, and implementing peer support programs. Inclusive school policies can also foster a positive school culture where students feel supported and safe.

Promotion of Mental Health of teachers and Allied Professionals in schools

Prioritizing the mental health care of professionals working with children is essential before asking them to promote the well-being of others. It is crucial to provide staff with emotional and practical assistance, as well as healthy working conditions and manageable workloads.

Research has shown that many mental health issues arise during childhood, making early interventions vital for successful prevention and recovery. Experts recommend investing more in child mental health to address this issue. It's important for health-care professionals and school educators to work together to improve the mental health of children and adolescents in school. Schools have a unique opportunity to positively impact the lives of young people by promoting cognitive and psychosocial skills and creating an environment that supports positive mental health. Ultimately, children are our future and our most important national asset.

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