Myth 4: Children are too young to develop mental illness

From inconsolable preschoolers to moody teenagers, how do you know if it’s just a phase or a symptom of mental illness?

“The difficult thing for parents is identifying what is a normal part of growing up, and what needs intervention,” said Dr. Joyce Gilbert, medical director of the Sexual Assault Clinic and Child Maltreatment Center at Providence St. Peter Hospital in Olympia, Wash.

A phase is something that is developmental or temporary, and comes and goes. On the other hand, mental illness is something that does not dissipate. If a child is not overcoming a “phase” then parents, teachers, physicians and others should ask why and engage with resources early to ensure the child gets the help needed.

Mental illness can happen to anyone at any age, and in fact, one in five children suffers with mental health conditions such as anxiety, difficulty focusing and social challenges. Half of all lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14; brushing off issues as a phase kids and teens will eventually grow out of can lead to other problems later in life.

Early intervention is key

“Most of the time, the first signs of mental health issues occur in preschool or kindergarten, when children are surrounded by other children,” said Felisha White, RN, Psychiatric Center for Children and Adolescents at Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center in Spokane, Wash. “At that point, it becomes clear to their teachers and their parents that they aren’t behaving like their peers.”

For older children, White suggests watching for sudden behavioral changes, such as angry outbursts, declining grades, isolation from friends, or disruptions in normal sleeping, eating and hygiene habits.

How to get help

Unfortunately, referral information and resources for children who need psychiatric care are limited, leaving many families with nowhere to turn for help. The first, most accessible resource is to turn to a child’s pediatrician for help. Also, parents and children alike should be educated about how to manage their conditions, navigate challenges and be aware of their legal rights. Parents should talk with the child’s school or pediatrician to understand the resources available.

“Most parents don’t know they are entitled to educational support and accommodations made for their child at school,” Felisha added.

Our commitment to build resilience

In many of the communities Providence and our partners serve, we provide some of the only available pediatric psychiatry beds, care and services.

It is this unmet need, with such a vulnerable population, that is directing the Providence St. Joseph Health Mental Health and Wellness Institute to focus on building resilience for children, teens and their families. Together, we will work to build connections to resources in the community, collaborate with schools and improve care for this vulnerable population.

Do you need a pediatrician or provider for yourself or your child? Is so, click here to find a care provider in your area.

Sources: National Institute for Mental Health; National Alliance for Mental Illness

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Snohomish County Mental Health Resources

Connect now at LiveWellLocal and discover self-help resources in Pathways to Health hosted by Providence Institute for a Healthier Community
About our series: We are out to change mental health for those we serve

Each year, almost one in five Americans experience mental illness, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. More than half won't be treated due to stigma, lack of access to services, or lack of knowledge about help that is available. As part of our commitment to improving the lives of people with mental illness, we are launching a series of articles to debunk the myths surrounding these life-threatening conditions.

—Amy Compton-Phillips, M.D., executive vice president and chief clinical officer

Learn more about Providence Health & Services commitment to mental health and our strategic priorities with the newly created Institute for Mental Health and Wellness.