

Mental Health Disorders in Children: Is Diet To Blame?

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Mounting evidence suggests there's some truth to the old adage, "you are what you eat." And it's time to start listening.

Rising Mental Health Disorders U.S. Children

According to a recently released report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), millions of children in the U.S. suffer from mental disorders including depression, anxiety, autism, and ADHD.

In fact, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) ranks number one — with 4.2 million children ages three to 17 affected by the disorder. Boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed with ADHD as well as other behavioral and cognitive problems. In addition to the emotional and physical costs, the financial costs of childhood mental disorders amount to an estimated \$247 billion each year.

So, what can we do? What strategies exist to promote children's mental health so that they can lead productive, healthy lives?

What's the impact of mental disorders in children?

Mental disorders are chronic health conditions that affect overall health. Without early diagnosis and treatment, children with mental disorders can develop problems at home, in school, and in building friendships. These issues can interfere with their development and may continue into adulthood.

Childhood mental health problems are a major public health issue, yet only 21 percent of affected children get treatment. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, this results from a shortage of pediatric sub-specialists and child and adolescent psychiatrists.

Media Influences on Kids

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), there are strong associations between increases in advertising for non-nutritious foods and rates of childhood obesity.

McDonald's continues to get slack for targeting kids. In its most recent attack, the fast-food conglomerate was chided by a nine-year-old girl who accused CEO Don Thompson of "tricking kids" into eating their food. Thompson claimed that the company doesn't target children in schools. However, Corporate Accountability International notes that McDonald's has moved much of its marketing online — where it's harder for parents to monitor kids.

While McDonald's alone is not to blame, there's no question that kids are barraged with advertising on a daily basis. In its report examining advertising's effect on children's eating habits, the APA found that "a high percentage of advertisements targeting children feature candy,

fast foods, and snacks, and that exposure to such advertising increases consumption of these products."

"Most children under age 6 cannot distinguish between programming and advertising," according to APA, "and children under age 8 do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising. Because young children lack the cognitive skills and abilities of older children and adults, they do not comprehend commercial messages in the same way as do more mature audiences, and, hence, are uniquely susceptible to advertising influence."

What does this mean for kids? Product preference has been shown to occur with as little as a single commercial exposure and to grow stronger from repeated exposure. And product preferences affect not only children's purchase requests, but also parents' purchasing decisions.

Food & Mood

It may seem common sense that the foods we eat will affect our body as well as our brain. But researchers are only beginning to understand how the brain, as an organ, is influenced by nutrients from the foods we eat. Rodent studies have found that the effects of junk food, which included high contents of saturated fat and sucrose, showed a decline in cognitive performance.

While food and nutrition have traditionally been associated with providing energy to the body, evidence increasingly shows how diet affects the brain. What you eat can have an immediate and lasting effect on your mental health and behavior because of the way food affects the structure and function of the brain. For instance, a hungry person may feel irritable and restless, whereas a person who has recently eaten a meal may feel calm and satisfied. Or a person who consistently eats poorly, or too little food, will have less energy and may feel lethargic and moody.

The brain consumes an enormous amount of energy, compared to the rest of the body. Research is ongoing, but scientists are discovering how the mechanisms that are involved in the transfer of energy from foods to neurons is likely to be fundamental to the control of brain function.

Tips for Parents

Kids who exercise regularly and eat healthily are more likely to perform better in school, feel better about themselves and their bodies, cope better with stress, and suffer less from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Establishing healthy eating and exercise habits early in life can lead to long-term healthy behavior.

Here are some tips to encourage a healthy lifestyle in your kids:

- **Get Active** - healthy lifestyles for children and adolescents include moderate television viewing, regular family mealtimes, and regular exercise.
- **Monitor Media** - put limits on excessive time spent watching TV, playing video games, and web surfing.
- **Eat with your Kids** - share meals and take pleasure in your mealtimes together.
- **Lead by Example** - eat healthy and exercise to serve as a positive influence on your children's health.
- **Enforce the ABCs** - proper nutrition is essential for healthy brain development in children, which in turn effects critical thinking and learning skills. Promote the ABCDEs

(Act Boldly to Change Diet and Exercise) to establish healthy eating practices and teach your kids lifelong habits.

- **Plan Ahead** - learn more about creating quick and healthy recipes, educating your kids about smart dietary choices, and incorporating exercise into their routine.

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