Three such clusters of behaviour are recognised:

• Disruptive behaviour disorders requires specialist help,

- when emotional and social development has become severely disrupted, a child’s behaviour may seem entrenched, causing ongoing problems for the child and the family. The behaviour in these cases may fit a pattern described as a ‘disruptive behaviour disorder’.

• Conduct Disorder.

- When a diagnosis is accompanied by information and support to help families move forward, a new understanding of the child’s experience can be formed, rezulting in the family finding new ways to respond to the child. Without accompanying information and support, a child is at risk of feeling ‘blamed’ by the diagnosis. A family may also unintentionally ‘fossilise’ their child’s development if they are unaware of or concerned about their child’s potential capabilities.

APPROACHES FOR PRACTICE

Child-parent relationships continue to be the guiding force towards a child’s healthy development. However, this doesn’t mean that parents intrinsically know how to support their child’s emotional and social growth. Recognising signs of poor mental health is complex; problems with emotional and social development can be instantly put down to a child being ‘difficult’. Many parents will need the support of the professional community to help make sense of their child’s physical needs, behaviours, thoughts and feelings.

Professionals support more than just teaching parents a set of skills – it also involves helping parents develop a relationship with the child that embraces the whole child, understanding the child has an individual mind and needs help to make sense of the world. Helping families to build a cohesive family story that embraces the highs and the lows, and acknowledges the challenges, notes the failures and celebrates the successes, is a creative way to encourage and support them.

Parents also need assistance in knowing where to turn if they recognise, or have been asked, that there may be a problem with their child’s emotional and social development or mental health. With understanding and support from the professional community, together with support from the wider family, most families can overcome the most difficult times in family life, together.

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Gippsland Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

REFERENCES


Victims Support Agency. (2009). Community Child Health, 2009). When the foundations for mental health are disrupted, a child’s emotional and social development or mental health can be disrupted.

When this occurs, all the domains of a child’s development – physical, intellectual, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual – can be affected. Early detection and recognition of any development disruption is vital for the child and the family.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Positive emotional and social development, alongside physical and cognitive development, is a total process to future mental wellbeing. This means that mastering skills in regulating emotions and behaviour is just as important as mastering physical and cognitive skills.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As part of your interaction with parents, do you routinely address the social and emotional wellbeing of their child?

2. When a child is exhibiting challenging behaviour, do you focus on the child’s emotional and social wellbeing?

3. What key strategies would you use when working with families where you feel a child’s mental health may be at risk?

COMMUNITY PAEDIATRIC REVIEW

An initiative of the Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne

The Royal Children’s Hospital Foundation acknowledges the generous support of the Dali Foundation for the establishment of the Anne de Bouran Foundation for Research into Children’s Mental Health.

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EXECUTIVE INDEX

PROMOTING GOOD MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN

Feelings, moods, emotions and behaviours are all interconnected. They influence how we function and respond to the demands of day-to-day life. They also help us shape our sense of wellbeing, or our ‘emotional capital’.

The foundations for mental health are formed within the early infant-parent and caregiver-child relationship. (Centre for Community Child Health, 2000). When the foundations are secure and no major trauma is experienced by the child or the family, the child’s development usually continues on a healthy trajectory. Over time, with the parents’ help to master the developmental challenges of each new age and stage, the child develops a robust capacity to manage life’s ups and downs and to embrace life’s joys.

A healthy child enjoys:

• exploring the world around them
• learning new things

Age

Birth to two years

Three to four years

Five to six years

Seven to eight years

Nine to ten years

PARENTING

Sensory

Language

Sensory

Language

Sensory

Language

Sensory

Language

Sensory

Language

Parenting aim

To provide a secure environment, where sustenance and comfort is provided. To ensure basic needs are consistently met.

To provide a secure base from which a child can explore. To avoid a highly restrictive or unpredictable environment.

To encourage and support a child’s initiative and interest in their own everyday experiences.

To encourage and support a child’s initiatives and their achievements.

To provide a secure and stable environment.

To provide a secure and supportive environment.

To encourage and support a child’s and family’s successful efforts.

To encourage and support a child’s initiatives and their accomplishments.

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The importance of family

In infancy and as children grow, the relationships with the trusted adults in their life will continue to be the dominant guiding forces toward a healthy and fulfilling future. Children thrive in nurturing and dependable relationships. This means that parents (and other regular caregivers) in children’s lives are “actively involved and shape children’s development. The ways in which parents respond to their child will model that child’s sense of self and others.

 Likewise, in the way in which family members respond to each other forms the experience of how relationships look like. Relationships look like the child builds an internal map of how the world works. Bowlby called this “an internal working model” (Bowlby, 1979). A child’s internal working model will direct and influence how they behave and inform how they expect others to behave. In a family where the adults treat one another kindly and respectfully, over time and with their parents’ help, the child will learn to do the same.

A matter of temperament

No two children are alike, each brings with them unique and differing ways of engaging with and responding to the world around them. To some degree, this is influenced by their temperament. A child’s temperament is like a lens through which the child experiences their environment, and impacts on a child’s emotional intensity, activity level, frustration tolerance, response to new people, and adaptation to change. If a child’s expression of these characteristics is understood and responded to by their parents will influence and shape that child’s development. Parents’ temperament is also important, as it influences how they respond to their child.

Some child-parent combinations find harmony more easily than others. A child who is perceived to have a “difficult” temperament will often challenge even the most competent and caring parents. However, parents who come to understand their child’s particular temperament characteristics are more easily able to adapt their parenting style to be more “in tune” with the child.

When parents struggle with their child’s temperament, it may help them to remember that it is not a reflection of their care or parenting but is a reflection of the child’s developmental needs. Research shows that professionals can help parents to recognize and adapt their parenting style to be more “intune” with their child.

Emotional thinking comes from the parents’ shared understanding with their child. Encouraging the child to “use your words” helps the child find a more constructive and healthy alternative to expression or breaking something when they have big feelings to express. Over time, a parent can help their child learn a language for the “tumours” of feelings that are often threatening to overwhelm the child. Emotional thinking is a precursor to empathy and compassion.

Emotional thinking is important for healthy development because parents can use it to help their child feel safe and secure. Emotional thinking helps a child learn to “read’ others and understand and interpret their emotions. Emotional thinking allows a child to form strong emotional bonds with others and to feel safe in close relationships. Emotional thinking helps a child to feel safe and secure in their family relationships and in their relationships with others.

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