

# MENTAL HEALTH POLICY BRIEF



# YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

**“Mental health in childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones, and learning healthy social skills and how to cope when there are problems.”<sup>1</sup>**

Mental health is a vital and integrated component of children’s early development and lifelong well-being. Experiencing a range of emotions throughout childhood is healthy. Feeling helpless and out of control is not.

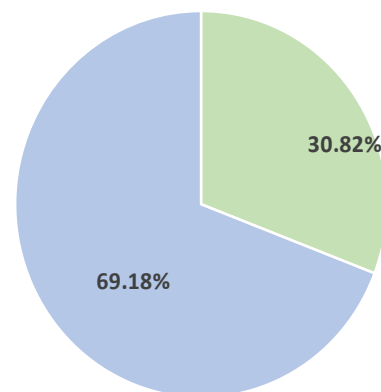
**By actively strengthening child mental health in Tennessee, we can equip our children to process, regulate and manage their emotions productively.** Positive mental health gives children a sense of security and contentment, facilitates positive social interactions and enables the steady development of critical competencies and life skills. Supporting caregivers and their children by ensuring access to treatment can help foster resilience when a mental health disorder, the most common health issue among United States children, may arise.<sup>2</sup>

## ONE IN SIX

children age 2 - 8 live with a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.<sup>3</sup>



Over 30 percent of Tennesseans aged 18-25 reported having a mental illness in the last year (2019-2020)<sup>4</sup>



When children have strong mental health, beginning during infancy they can learn to regulate their emotions, cope with distress and behave in ways appropriate to their age. They can engage fully with the world and thrive over their life-course. Children’s positive mental health in early childhood benefits all of us by creating more resilient families, better educational outcomes and, in the long term, a stronger society.<sup>5</sup>

Addressing and supporting child mental health requires a whole-child approach, responding to the biological, psychological, social and ecological factors that impact children’s mental health.

Children’s mental health is an essential part of child well-being. Although some mental health disorders can have a biological component, Tennessee can take steps that support positive mental health and build resilience in children and their communities.

Children’s mental health can be impacted by caregiver financial strain, access to educational opportunities, community health and safety, access to health care (both physical and mental) and nutritional food, experiencing violence, trauma or discrimination.<sup>6,7</sup> Supporting all aspects of child well-being provides a strong foundation for creating resilience and improving mental health among Tennessee children.

When mental health disorders do arise, it is critical that those seeking treatment do not face discrimination or stigma based upon their mental illness. One in seven Tennessee parents were worried about being judged if their child was diagnosed with a mental health condition.<sup>8</sup> Stigma reduces the likelihood those who need treatment will access it. It also increases the likelihood of delaying, dropping out, or refusing treatment once accessed.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

### Common Mental Health Disorders Among Children<sup>12</sup>

- Anxiety disorders
  - Social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
  - Appears in early childhood, usually before age 3.
- Eating Disorders
  - Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder.
  - The average age of onset of anorexia nervosa is 16-17 and bulimia nervosa is 18-19.<sup>13</sup>
- Affective disorders
  - Also known as mood disorders, are mental disorders that primarily affect a person’s emotional state.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

## Improving Children's Mental Health

Mental health challenges in children can create social, emotional, and educational challenges that can have long-lasting impacts on the child, their family, and community.

One way to support children with mental health challenges is through psychological therapy. Therapy is a tool to improve children's mental health by treating a condition or helping support a child with tactics to manage their symptoms. Therapy allows children to improve functioning and engage in their family, community and school life.<sup>15</sup>

When children are younger, therapy commonly involves their caregivers. Children may play, talk or engage in other activities that encourage communication. Family therapy, group therapy, parent training in behavior management and cognitive behavioral therapy are all effective approaches to improving a child's mental health.<sup>15</sup> Some children can benefit from a combination of therapies. Doctors or mental health professionals may recommend medication as part of a child's treatment plan. Some children's symptoms are dramatically improved by medications such as stimulants, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medication, mood stabilizer or an anti-psychotic to assist in the treatment of mental illness or symptom management.<sup>15</sup>

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone”

- Fred Rogers<sup>16</sup>



## Accessing Care

Tennessee children struggle to access mental health services. More than half of Tennessee's children with a mental or behavioral condition did not receive treatment or counseling.<sup>17</sup> Nationally, Tennessee ranked 45th in access to mental health care.<sup>18</sup>

Common symptoms of mental health disorders in childhood include changes in academic performance, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, frequent outbursts, hyperactivity, increase in isolation, extreme worry or sadness and substance abuse.<sup>12</sup> Due to the nature of these symptoms, school personnel and healthcare providers are often one of the first to observe potential mental health challenges in children, youth and young adults.

Students are often more receptive to participating in mental health care services when they are offered in schools. Students are 21 times more likely to seek out mental health care in school-based settings compared to community health settings.<sup>19</sup>

Frequently, mental health service providers in schools are called upon to complete tasks or fill in gaps that are not providing direct services to students. Tennessee is already struggling to meet recommended student-to-provider ratios in schools. Only 25 percent of districts met Tennessee's goal of one certified social worker per 1,500 students, a goal that is six times higher than the National Association of Social Workers recommended ratio of 1 to 250 students.<sup>20,21</sup> Approximately one in three districts met the goal of 1 certified psychologist for every 1,000 students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of one to 500.<sup>20,22</sup> Due to the shortage of professionals in schools, it is critical that mental health providers in schools be solely focused on providing direct mental health care to students.

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