

Child Development and Mental Health – Summary

- Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined by the achievement of expected developmental, cognitive, social and emotional milestones and by secure attachment, satisfying social relationships and effective coping skills.
- Mentally healthy children and adolescents enjoy a positive quality of life, function well at home, in school and in their communities and are free of disabling symptoms of psychopathology.
- Childhood and adolescence are marked by development characterized by periods of transition and reorganization.
- The Science of mental health in childhood and adolescence is a complex mix of the study of development and the study of discrete conditions and disorders.
- Appreciation of normal development is crucial to understanding mental health in children and adolescents and the risks they face in maintaining mental health. Distortion in the normal and healthy process of development may lead to mental disorders.
- Theories of normal development form the basis of many current approaches to understanding and treating mental illness and mental health problems in children and adults.
- Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's theory was about how children gradually acquire the ability to understand the world around them through active engagement with it.
- Dr. John Bowlby introduced the concept of attachment. When the mother was unavailable or only partially available during the first months of the child's life the attachment process would be interrupted, leaving enduring emotional scars and predisposing a child to behavioral problems and possible psychopathology later in life.
- Some infants who experience severe neglect in early life may develop mentally and emotionally without lasting consequences if their conditions improve. For example, if they are adopted by caring parents or if depressed or substance abusing mothers recover fully. But early neglect is all too often a precursor of later neglect, with impaired later adjustment.
- Infants should interact over a period of time with someone who is familiar and sensitive. One of the problems in the later development of children who experience early institutionalization or significant neglect is that there may have been no opportunities for the caretakers and infants to establish strong and mutual attachments in a reciprocating relationship.

- Successful use of language and communication is a cornerstone of childhood mental health. Skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing need to be acquired. Children with a variety of speech and language impediments are at risk. Language competence is a critical aspect of children's mental health.
- To be healthy children must form relationships not only with their parents but also with siblings and with peers. Abilities to form relationships are dependent on social skills. Children who lack such skills are rejected. They often exhibit features of oppositional defiant or conduct disorders such as regular fighting, dominating and pushing others around or being spiteful.
- Temperament is defined as the repertoire of traits with which each child is born. This repertoire determines how people react to the world around them. Temperament is often modified during development, particularly by the interaction with the caregiver. e.g. a timid child can become bolder with help of parental encouragement.
- Psychopathology in childhood arises from interactions of specific characteristics of the child (biological, psychological and genetic factors) and his/her environment (parent, sibling, family relations, peer and neighborhood factors, school and community factors, larger social cultural context) over the course of development. Understanding of a child's particular history and past experience is essential to understand a child's particular behavior. (biologic event affecting brain development).
- There are innate tendencies of the child to adopt to his/her environment . When environments are highly disordered or pathological children's adaptations to such settings may also be pathologic, especially when compared with children's behaviors within more healthy settings. Some pathologic behavioral syndromes could be best characterized as adaptive responses when the child or adolescent encounters difficult or adverse circumstances.
- A behavior that may be quite normal at one age (young children's distress when separated from primary care taking figure) can be an important symptom of mental illness at another age. Stressors and risk factors may have no, little or profound impact depending on the age at which they occur and whether they occur alone or with other accumulated risk factors.
- A child's context is important. Most important context for developing children is their care taking environment. Gross disruptions in this critical parameter have immediate and long term effects. The same behavior in one setting or culture might be acceptable whereas it may be seen as pathological in another.
- Research on factors that make children vulnerable to mental illness is important.
- Biological factors and adverse psychosocial experiences during childhood influence mental disorders of childhood.

- Roots of most mental disorders lie in some combination of genetic and environmental factors - the latter may be biological or psychosocial.
- Biological influences are not necessarily synonymous with those of genetics and inheritance. Biological abnormalities of the central nervous system that influence behavior, thinking or feeling can be caused by injury, infection, poor nutrition or exposure to toxins such as lead in the environment.
- Dysfunctional family life, economic hardship and exposure to acts of violence are among the risks from the environment.
- The quality of the relationship between an infant or children and their primary caregiver as manifested by security of attachment has long been felt to be of paramount importance to mental health across the lifespan.
- Children of depressed parents are more than three times as likely as children of non depressed parents to experience a depressive disorder. Parental depression also increases risk of anxiety disorders, conduct disorder and alcohol dependence.
- The relationship between stressful life events and risk for child mental disorders is well established.
- Child abuse is a widespread problem. Physical maltreatment and psychological maltreatment can lead to mental health disorders.
- The influence of maladaptive peers can be very damaging to a child and greatly increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes.
- Sibling rivalry in the presence of other risk factors may be the origin of aggressive behavior that eventually extends beyond family.
- Childhood is an important time to prevent mental disorders and to promote healthy development, because many adult mental disorders have related antecedent problems in childhood.
- The mental health community along with wider human services and law enforcement communities have made prevention a priority.
- There are primary mental health prevention activities e.g. vaccination against measles prevents neurobehavioral complications.