



## Research Snapshot

# The critical role of schools in child and adolescent mental health



### What you need to know:

#### The Mental Health Needs of Children and Adolescents

Almost one million children and youth in Canada will experience a diagnosable mental health disorder. Less than 4% will receive services to address their needs. Traditional children's services are relatively unable to deliver programs with the capacity to meet the mental health needs of youth. The number of youth struggling with mental health challenges is underestimated. Many youth do not meet diagnostic criteria but are still experiencing substantial levels of distress and impairment.

The delivery of mental health services is further complicated by stigma and negative stereotypes. In addition to the negative consequences of social stigma, individuals with mental illness engage in self-stigma where they internalize negative stereotypes about themselves. Stigma creates significant barriers to youth acknowledging their disorder and seeking treatment. There is renewed interest in identifying alternative service delivery to proactively address the mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents. School-based mental health services that engage youth and promote anti-stigma initiatives are being developed.

#### The Vital Role of Schools

Schools play an essential role in prevention, assessment, intervention, and community engagement. A study by the World Health Organization indicated that a majority of

Mental health problems are common yet unidentified among youth.

Approximately one million youth in Canada will experience a diagnosable mental health disorder and only 4% of these youth will receive the necessary services. Many youth who do not meet diagnostic criteria are struggling with substantial distress and their needs are often underreported and undetected. Schools can play an active role in mental health promotion.

---

Canadian youth feel supported by their schools and have a sense of belonging. Positive school environments and high levels of teacher support were related to positive mental health. For a small group of youth, school was not perceived as a positive place. One-quarter of boys and girls reported that they wished they were someone else. One-fifth of boys and more than one-third of girls reported feeling depressed at least once a week. Students who are excluded from daily school activities are at higher risk for mental illness. This is important to consider with students with disabilities because they are often marginalized by assumptions about their capabilities. School psychologists should shift their focus to a more supportive role offering teachers strategies to create inclusive classrooms.

## Key Elements for Effectively Promoting School-Based Mental Health

Santor, Short, and Ferguson (2009) outlined four priorities for school-based mental health promotion in Ontario. First, school boards and educators should hold a shared vision that improving mental health and reducing substance abuse problems is a priority. Second, evidence-based programs should be chosen that are well suited to the community where they will be implemented. Third, collaboration and cooperation is needed among school boards, educators, community mental health programs, parents, and other stakeholders. Lastly, there needs to be a commitment of communities and schools working together to develop resources and promote collaborative research projects.

Weare and Nind (2011) identified four elements needed for school mental health promotion to lead to positive changes: a clear focus on positive mental health; the use of universal and targeted approaches; implementing long-term prevention efforts to promote sustainable improvements; and the importance of a whole school approach reflected by changes in the curriculum and integrating student learning and teacher education.

### The Role of Teachers

It is important for teachers to have a strong understanding of mental health issues. In contrast to single workshops, it may be more effective to implement system-wide efforts that focus on current research and teachers' reports of what they need. Teachers can promote healthy student outcomes by using emotional intelligence (EI). EI refers to competencies related to the identification, processing, and regulation of emotions. Focusing on emotional intelligence can improve the psychological well-being of teachers and in turn influence student and classroom outcomes.

## Innovative School-Based Mental Health Initiatives in Canada

This article identified three initiatives in Canada. **The School-Based Pathway to Care Model** is a holistic model that engages students, teachers, families, health care providers, and the community through training programs. **The Psychology School Mental Health Initiative** is a service that aims to proactively address students' mental health difficulties using cognitive-behavioural interventions. **The School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Consortium** is a group of 40 leading Canadian researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. It provides a comprehensive review of mental health and substance use programs and practises in Canadian schools.

### Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Leschied, A. D. W., Flett, G. L., & Saklofske, D. H. (2012). The critical role for schools in a new mental health strategy for children and adolescents. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 28*, 5-11.

### About the Authors:

**Alan Leschied**, Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University. **Gordon Flett**, Professor, Faculty of Health, York University. **Donald Saklofske**, Professor, Department of Psychology, Western University.

**Keywords:** School mental health; Children; Adolescents

**About this Summary:** This summary was written by Amanda Kerry, PhD Candidate at Western University. For further information about Western's Centre for School Mental Health, visit [www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh](http://www.edu.uwo.ca/csmh).

