

Mental Health Overview

“Of the approximately half-million children and adolescents in foster care in the U.S., experts estimate that 42 to 60 percent of them have emotional and behavioral problems”

- Rick Nauert, PhD

Mental health underlies many aspects of health and well being for children within the dependency system. From the exposure to domestic violence and substance abuse to direct trauma caused by child abuse or years of neglect including the secondary trauma of watching others being abused, the day to day functioning of these children is impacted. The extent of the impact is influenced by many variables. Each child brings with them a set of personal characteristics and interactions that either create vulnerability or help the child develop the resilience needed to support positive growth and development.

It is imperative children receive careful attention to areas with which they struggle, including the area of mental health. Thoughtful evaluation and individualized treatment can help children heal, grow, and excel. Judicial officers overseeing child safety and well being who are well-versed in potential child and adult mental health diagnosis are much more likely to ensure the provision of adequate treatment and care. This section provides information regarding commonly diagnosed mental health illnesses as well as potential treatment modalities.

Two primary articles have been chosen for inclusion in this section. The first article, a special publication of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, is devoted to the subject of mental health in child welfare. A majority of the article focuses on the mental health of children and systems supporting those children. Notably, the article also provides information about the mental health of parents. The mental health issues of parents, particularly as they relate to the parents' ability to care for and reunify with their children are a prime concern for judges. This article provides basic information about supporting parents with mental health issues and their children. When used together with the Benchbook (Shelter Care – Chapter 5, Disposition - Chapter 8, Permanency Hearings - Chapter 10), judges can ensure adequate and appropriate services to meet the mental health needs of children and parents are included in the Family Service Plan.

System responsiveness and system change is the main focus of the second article. While the focus is on responsiveness and change within the juvenile justice system, core strategies discussed in the article are applicable to the child dependency system as well. Information contained in this second article can support work being done through local children's roundtables and judicial leadership (Benchbook Chapter 2). Information presented in this article may be helpful for those roundtables examining mental health needs and service availability.

Additional resources include a link to the National Institute of Mental Health, an excellent national resource, two articles regarding infant mental health and two articles regarding adult mental health issues. These resources provide a more comprehensive look at mental illness and the array of treatment options.