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The need to address mental health issues in children

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Many children fail to express the reason behind their behavior and actions



Every day in a hundred small ways our children ask,

Do you hear me?

Do you see me?

Do I matter?

Their behavior often reflects our response.

~ LR Knost

Our abilities to think properly, make decisions, communication and behavior are directly governed by our mental health. However, the subject of mental health doesn't get much attention in India with the focus even lower on children. The National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-2016) had estimated that nearly 7.3% of Indian adolescents (13-17 years) suffer from mental health problems.

One of the biggest challenges in identifying mental health issues in children is usually the fact that childhood is a time of constant behavioral changes and developments. Depending on their age, many children fail to express the reason behind their behavior and actions.

Add social stigma and bullying to that and they usually end up not talking about their feelings and mental condition. In many cases, even parents refrain from seeking support for their children in a bid to avoid the social stigma and isolation.

The prevalence of mental health problems has only increased with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and due to more time being spent at home, they are facing a lot of emotional and mental challenges. Parents need to pay attention to the behavior, habits, and other mental health indicators to identify whether the children need support. The first and most important thing is to understand the various common mental health disorders among children.

Anxiety – Anxiety problems among children usually manifest in the form of fears and worries that reduce their ability to play, participate in school activities, or the usual interactions with other children, etc. They might be suffering from social anxiety, OCDs or general anxiety.

ADHD – A lot of children face challenges related to attention, unpredictable behavior, hyperactivity, etc.

Eating and sleep disorders – It is not unusual for children to become obsessed with a particular body type, losing weight or binge-eating, etc. They might obsess about eating or not consuming a specific type of food item and such behavior can lead to physical deficiencies, inability to perform certain tasks, and even social inactivity. Due to the pandemic, children are spending almost all their time at home and with excessive screen-time. This can lead to serious disillusion with the physical and social spheres, create withdrawal symptoms, and various psychological issues created by gaming on smartphones. In some children, it could also manifest as Schizophrenia as they remain occupied in the virtual world for many hours each day.

Depression and mood swings: Depression is when the child starts to consistently feel sad and disinterested in activities. This leads to them becoming withdrawn and less interactive at school. Extreme mood swings and emotional behavior can lead to Bipolar disorder or risky actions.

ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological problem that affects toddlers under age 3. This makes it difficult for the child to communicate and interact with others.

Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) – Long-term emotional discomfort, anxiety, nightmares and unpleasant memories caused by physical abuse, illness, injury, bereavement or any form of bullying and violence can lead to long-term emotional distress.

By continuously monitoring the actions and behavior of their children, parents can spot some of the common mental health disorder symptoms such as the following.

ï?· Continuously being unhappy (2 weeks or more)

ï?· Showing lack of interest or avoiding interactions with others

ï?· Inflicting injury on self or talking about doing so

ï?· Suicidal tendencies

ï?· Discussion on death

ï?· Inexplicable outbursts and short-tempered behavior

ï?· Uncontrollable anger

ï?· Sudden behavior changes or change of habits

ï?· Weight-loss

ï?· Lack of appetite

ï?· Insomnia

ï?· Repeated complaints of headaches, stomach or other aches

ï?· The decline of academic performance

ï?· Lack of concentration

In case any or more of the above symptoms or behavior patterns are identified, parents should consult a doctor. Today, there are digital platforms available that offer relevant guidance and support online. In case parents don't want to disclose their child's identity but wish to get information about their mental condition, these platforms help in doing so anonymously. If after discussion, observation, and testing, a child is diagnosed with a mental health problem then parents must ensure that the child gets adequate professional support. There are two primary ways in which medical professionals like doctors, psychiatrists or psychotherapists will treat the child: psychotherapy and medication (in cases where it is absolutely needed).

Mental health in children is crucial and such disorders are prevented or treated with the right attention, guidance, encouragement as well as timely professional intervention.

Parents need to ensure that the children are not subjected to any abusive, anti-social or discriminatory behavior at home. They must also try and spend quality family time where the children get to enjoy with them and learn new things. The most important and effective step that all parents need to take is to continuously motivate and support their children and help them develop self-belief in a responsible and sustainable manner!

Shumita Kakkar, Founder, United We Care