



Removing the stigma of mental health

As a child psychiatrist I receive a phone call about once a week from a friend or a “friend of a friend” who is worried about their child’s wellbeing.

Wellbeing refers to a state of positive mental health. For children and young people it means their capacity to enjoy their family life, relationships and educational opportunities. It is the foundation for children’s capacity to adapt, their future resilience and mental health.

When parents see that their child is distressed and not enjoying life, is not as connected to others and is struggling to cope, they rightly become concerned.

Each parent and family’s story is unique but they have common worries: that their child is suffering, and not thriving in the way they would hope. They feel helpless as they can’t fix their child’s problems. Parents can worry what seeking treatment for mental health difficulties might mean for their child’s future. Frequently they have delayed seeking help as they don’t want their child “labelled”, still feeling stigma around seeking mental health treatment.

It always surprises parents I talk to how common their concerns are and that help is available.

One in seven children has a mental health disorder, and one in seven of those children has a disorder that is seriously impacting many aspects of their life.

Mental health difficulties affect children’s thinking, feeling states and social abilities. They have a negative impact on their quality of life, capacity to engage in school, community, sports and cultural activities. As a result children’s sense of their own worth, their home life, friendships, learning, leisure and relationships are all affected.

Children and young people present with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, severe behavioural problems, eating disorders, substance use disorders and psychosis.

Untreated mental health disorders in childhood can continue into adulthood, and many of the disorders that begin in adulthood can be traced back to experiences in childhood. Getting help for a mental health disorder in childhood is essential to reduce the impact on future development. Unfortunately, only half of children with a mental health disorder are referred for treatment.

With this in mind, why is it still so hard to talk as a community about children’s mental health?

The Big Splash WA campaign, and its pod of wildly colourful dolphins, is designed to start a bigger conversation about the importance of wellbeing in childhood and what we can do as parents, and a community, to support wellbeing and positive mental health.

Loving and supportive families who value connection and relationship play a critical role in supporting wellbeing. A positive rewarding school environment that encourages a sense of belonging is also crucial.

School programs that strengthen social and emotional skills are preventative and can assist in recovery from mental health problems. These programs teach children how to express and control their emotions, how to understand others, how to resolve conflict and change behaviours and attitudes that contribute to violence and bullying. For this reason, The Big Splash WA campaign has developed fun, age-appropriate Resource Kits that can either introduce or sit alongside existing socio-emotional skills programs. The package has activities and information for students, teachers and parents. Check if your child’s school is on board - Resource Kits can be purchased at thebigsplashwa.com.au/schools.

**Stay tuned, and support
The Big Splash WA!**



Caroline Goossens is a Child Psychiatrist, and has worked in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for over 25 years. She and her team have collaborated with Perth Children’s Hospital Foundation on the development of The Big Splash WA, and have written the content of The Big Splash WA Schools Program Resource Kits.