MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS SEEN IN CHILDHOOD

By Kristen Fuller, M.D. | Oct. 09, 2019

Whether you are a parent, teacher, grandparent, aunt or uncle, our children are often our greatest pride and joy. They are our future. We love them, raise them, teach them, laugh with them, play with them and nurse them back to health.

As protectors, we want to do everything we can to keep our little ones happy and healthy. But unfortunately, genetics, society and trauma all play a major role in the development of mental health conditions, and children are not exempt. Studies show that 7.7 million youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year—that’s one out of every six children in the U.S.

With that in mind, it’s important to play close attention to a child’s mental health. While abnormal behavior could just be normal aspects of childhood or a phase of growth or puberty — it could also be a mental health disorder.

RECOGNIZING THE WARNING SIGNS
In addition to genetics, trauma is a major player in the development of mental health conditions in childhood.
FOSTERING A CHILD WHOSE PARENT IS IN JAIL OR PRISON

From the Coalition for Children, Youth, & Families

More than 5 million U.S. children have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their lives, according to an Annie E. Casey Foundation report from 2016. Many of these children live with the other parent or with extended family members during the parent’s period of incarceration. But many others find themselves in the foster care system. One factor is the exponential growth of women in prison and the number of single parent households.

The Women’s Prison Association reports that the number of women in prison has grown by over 800% in the past three decades. Most of the increases in female imprisonment can be traced to the “war on drugs.” More women are being sent to prison for drug offenses; in fact, two-thirds of women in prison are there for nonviolent offenses.

There are also significant racial disparities in the prison population. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prison population, just as they are in the out-of-home care population.

The events that bring children to foster care—including the very act of being removed from one’s family—create emotional upheaval in most children who enter the system.

Additionally, most studies conclude that the incarceration of a parent engenders a unique grief which compounds that of entering foster care.

Children of incarcerated women are more likely to be adopted and less likely to qualify for family preservation services. It is difficult enough for parents to establish themselves in an apartment, find employment, and participate in a community, let alone try to rebuild a family with their reunited children.

Suggestions to Help Children Cope

Examine your own feelings about criminal activity and drug abuse. How can you help both the child in your care, and his or her parent if you find it difficult to accept something the parent has done? Would it help to talk to a trusted pastor or rabbi, your case worker, or a counselor to come to grips with your own feelings?

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