

## Mental Wellness Matters Among Children

**Linda J. M. Holloway\***

*Associate Professor, Program Coordinator of Counseling Programs at Alabama State University, Montgomery, Alabama, USA*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Linda J. M. Holloway, Associate Professor, Program Coordinator of Counseling Programs at Alabama State University, Montgomery, Alabama, USA.

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Mental illness among school age children is believed to be one of the most dangerous hidden crises that impacts their lives. Specifically, mental illness among children often goes undetected and untreated, resulting in children being impacted in various domains of their life. It has been reported by the National Alliance of Mental Illness that 1 out of 6 young adults will suffer from mental illness [1]. In addition, 1 out of 6 youths between the ages of 6 - 17 will suffer from a mental disorder in the United States, with 50% of all mental illnesses developing around 14 years of age. Such statistics prove one of the reasons that suicide is the second leading cause of death. Thus, these statistical facts enhance our insight into what children are experiencing when it comes to their overall mental and emotional wellness. Moreover, we must keep in mind that children are impacted by what is actually taking place in the world and society at large. It is highly unlikely that parents or the child's school system can shield children from the constant everyday tragedies around the world. We live in a world that is bombarded by the media 24/7. Thus, children have emotions and feelings that develop based on what is occurring in society and often struggle with trying to cope with these everyday experiences. As a result, children often feel overwhelmed, stressed, and depressed.

When school age children were asked what some of the challenges were they encountered, this is what they reported:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Bullying
- Family problems
- Depression
- Learning disability
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Self- Injurious behaviors
- Suicide
- Eating disorders
- LGBTQ+

- School violence
- Low self-esteem
- Racism/discrimination

Research suggests children who experience emotional stress, anxiety, and depression are more likely to experiment with drugs, withdraw, die by suicide, become truant from school, and not be emotionally present when in classes. These children's academic performance suffers tremendously, resulting in dropout. Moreover, children who miss several days from school often perform poorly academically and are also more prone to dropout. School age children who do dropout often struggle with finding suitable employment in their adult life, further compounding the complexity of their mental and emotional wellness. Thus, there is a clear correlation between one's academic performance and their mental and emotional well-being. The better you feel, the more likely you are willing to perform at your best.

Several school districts have taken a proactive measure by intervening regarding overall mental and emotional wellness of their children by creating comprehensive emotional wellness programs. Establishing and maintaining comprehensive emotional wellness programs within the schools is an extremely positive step in the right direction to provide the necessary support to children who are suffering from mental illness. Since children spend a great deal of time interacting within the school, this is an excellent environment to provide students with the necessary assistance they need with their overall mental and emotional wellness. Many schools are already equipped with properly trained staff who can provide the necessary support for students such as clinical psychologists, school psychologists, school counselors, mental health social workers, and license professional counselors. Thus, the goal is to ensure schools are a psychological safe place, whether the trauma is internally or externally introduced, in order to provide a healthy environment for learning to occur.

In addition, teachers are also being trained to identify signs and symptoms of what to expect from children who may be suffering from mental illness(es). It is important that teachers are made aware of the early warning signs because in many ways, they are frontline personnel who are most likely to recognize changes in a child's behavior. Once a child has been deemed as possibly suffering from mental and emotional issues, the next step in the process is to ensure they are put in touch with the appropriate health care provider. This would allow the child the opportunity to receive the necessary treatment that is warranted in their situation. Though teachers have many things to accomplish in the classroom on a day to day basis, they often remain enthusiastic in making sure that children are in the position to learn and are mentally and emotionally sound. Many teachers are taking mental wellness into their hands, along with the administrators within schools, and offering mindfulness training in their classes. Teachers are also actively developing a Mental Health Education Curriculum to enhance children's mental health literacy. It is apparent that schools are realizing the importance of having mental health education within their schools. Moreover, there has been mandates in many school districts to make mental health education a mandatory class. It is believed that by having this as a mandatory class, schools would be better positioned to provide prevention and intervention to combat the number of children who are suffering from mental illness(es) in silence.

One of the biggest challenges with mental illness is the stigma that is associated with the term. Many children know they need help but refuse to seek help because they do not want to be labeled as "crazy". Many minority children think that seeking help is not needed. They feel that if they go to church and pray about it, then things will get better. No one is suggesting not to attend church and pray about a situation, but it is imperative that children recognize that there are trained professionals who can assist with their overall mental and emotional wellness. Requiring children to take a mandatory class in mental health education, similar to health education, will be extremely beneficial when it comes to helping children understand the importance of their mental and emotional wellness. Additionally, this would aide them in recognizing when their friends need to seek professional help. The goal is to have the knowledge and understanding that intervention and prevention could alleviate situations such as Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Park Landing. Of course, not all school shootings are the result of someone experiencing mental illness but the trauma that the communities face as a result of these tragedies can have a devastating impact on the minds of children, which can often last well into their adult life.

Taken together, children deserve to have a safe and healthy environment where they can learn but also feel mentally and emotionally well. Our children are having to grow up during a time where they are having to face much unrest in our world. Currently, the country is wrestling with a great deal of social injustices and racial strife, compounded with COVID-19, that has changed how we all once knew life. The way children once were educated has halted, and they are having to do everything online, not allowed to interact with their friends because of social/physical distancing, unable to participate in sports, have prom, or a traditional graduation ceremony. These are monumental benchmarks in children's lives they often look forward to. However, in the twinkle of their eye, their lives have been transformed. Children often look to adults to help them during difficult times, but they are coming to understand that adults do not *always* have the answer. Thus, it is important that even in these stressful times, we are making sure our school age children are mentally and emotionally well so they can perform at their very best academically.

### Recommended Materials:

- National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI).
- The National Suicide Prevention Line at (1-800-Talk (8255).
- TRAILS: Transforming Research Action to Improve the Lives of Students.
- 13 Reasons Why (Movies series Netflix).
- Little Miss Linda Goes to Counseling (2020) by Linda J. M. Holloway.
- <https://www.amazon.com/Little-Miss-Linda-Goes-Counseling-ebook/dp/B07YRVFZ98>.

### Disclosure

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### Bibliography

1. <https://www.nami.org/Home>

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