



May 2020 Enhance Webinar: Exploring Kids and Mental Health Presented by Monica Kramer McConkey

On Friday, May 15, 2020, DGN kicked off the first webinar in their #StrongerTogetHER mini-series for Mental Health Awareness Month. This year's series started off with a webinar called "Exploring Kids and Mental Health" focused on mental health in children and presented by Monica Kramer McConkey from Eyes on the Horizon Consulting.

Monica began the presentation by explaining what a large, broad topic kid's mental health is to cover. She explained she would touch on the basics, provide a broad overview and some helpful tips for parents on how to handle their child's mental health.

To begin, Monica broke down the difference between mental health and mental illness. Mental health is the overall wellness of how one thinks, regulates feelings and behaves. Mental illness is more defined as patterns or changes in thinking, feeling or behaving that cause distress or disrupt a person's ability to function. Monica pointed out someone can be experiencing both of these and one is not mutually exclusive to the other. 1 in 6 children from the ages of 2 to 8 have a mental, behavioral or developmental disorder. Oftentimes, this has to do with the brain development of the child.

The most common question parents ask about their child's mental health is, "Is this normal or is this a problem?" Monica explained as a parent it is their job to be alert to how their child is acting and if something is not normal to talk with the child. Signs parents should be aware of include if there are issues interfering with daily functions at home, school, with family or with friends. It is important to recognize the child's baseline function behavior. If they are not at their baseline function, check-in on the child.

Monica went on to discuss the warning signs for a mental illness in children. She started with signs in children under the age of 12. These included frequent tantrums, often talking about how fearful or worried they are, stomach and/or headaches, sleep disturbances, not interested in playing, struggle or decline academically and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. When dealing with mental illness in children under 12, it may be like peeling back the layers of an onion to figure out exactly what the cause is.

Next, Monica covered the warning signs for mental illness in adolescents. These signs may be

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harder to detect because they can be common teen activities. These symptoms include a loss of interest in participating in things that bring them joy, low energy or periods of high energy, isolating or avoiding family and friends, sleep disturbances, fear of gaining weight, self-harm, thoughts of suicide, risky, destructive behaviors and hallucinations/delusions.

Monica then went on to discuss the various mental illness diagnoses a child could receive. Common diagnoses include anxiety disorders, Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), eating disorders, depression and other mood disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and schizophrenia. Monica emphasized how many farm kids may experience PTSD due to traumatic events on the farm such as severe weather or farm accidents. Be sure to check in with kids after big traumatic events happen on the farm.

When receiving a diagnosis, Monica encouraged parents to start with their child's primary care physician. However, she said if you receive a diagnosis a little too fast, consider getting a second opinion. Once a diagnosis is received, there will typically be a two-pronged approach for the child with psychotherapy and medication. The best thing a parent can do to support the child is learn more about the diagnosis. Parents can also seek out family counseling, attend parent support groups, go to training and work closely with school caretakers.

To set the stage for good mental health, kids need to have unconditional love, high self-esteem, encouraging teachers, supportive caretakers, safety, security, guidance and discipline in their life. These are all important factors for a child to have a healthy mindset.

To conclude, Monica encouraged attendees to build solid relationships with their children and not friendships.

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