



nami

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Mental Health Issues among Asian American and Pacific Islander Children and Youth

Childhood mental illness occurs in one out of five children in the United States during a given year, and two-thirds of them get little or no help according to the U.S. Surgeon General. Furthermore, nearly 5 million American children live with some type of serious mental illness that significantly interferes with daily life. While the exact number of Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth living with mental illness is not known, but research suggests that they are at a high risk:

- AAPI females have the highest rates of suicidal ideation of any ethnic group between the ages of 15-24.^{1,2}
- 30 percent of Asian American females in 5th through 12th grade reported symptoms of depression, as compared to Non-Hispanic whites (22.5 percent), African American (17 percent) or Hispanic females (27 percent).³
- Native Hawaiian youth have higher rates of suicide attempts than other adolescents in Hawaii.⁴
- Asian American adolescent boys are twice as likely as Non-Hispanic whites to be physically abused.⁵

Health care providers often find it difficult to identify mental disorders in children because they exhibit many physical, mental and emotional changes as they progress through their natural growth and development. Many children tend to show mental illness as behavioral problems such as temper tantrums, hyperactivity or crying spells.

Because each child matures at his or her own pace, providers are often careful about diagnosing and labeling children at an early age. However, symptoms of mental illness do show up even at an early age, so paying close attention to a child's physical, emotional and mental changes is very important since this can significantly affect the type of support and intervention the child receives.

Many AAPI families tend not to report and share emotional challenges their children may be experiencing with their health care providers unless they are severely problematic. In fact, it can be challenging to convince AAPI parents to have their children examined and evaluated for potential mental health problems when there are no apparent physical symptoms. The notion of mental illness as being "all in the mind" and not a serious problem still persists among many AAPIs. Only when the symptoms interfere with school do parents get concerned and seek help.

Paying attention to your child's behaviors in multiple settings can provide a more accurate picture of what is going on. It is important to note that symptoms in children vary depending on the type of mental illness. Some general symptoms are listed on the next page.

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- Changes in school performance, such as poor grades despite good efforts
- Loss of interest in friends and activities the child usually enjoys
- Defying authority, skipping school, stealing or damaging property
- Significant increase in time spent alone
- Frequent outbursts of anger
- Persistent disobedience or aggressive behavior
- Hyperactivity
- Inability to cope with daily problems and activities
- Frequent temper tantrums
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Excessive complaints of physical ailments
- Intense fear of gaining weight
- Long-lasting negative moods, often accompanied by poor appetite and thoughts of death
- Excessive worrying or anxiety
- Persistent nightmares or night terrors
- Use of drugs and/or alcohol
- Hearing voices or seeing things that are not there (hallucinations)

Careful consideration of a number of factors such as how well a child functions at home, within the family, at school, with peers, as well as the child's age and symptoms, are important when making a diagnosis. Make sure to pay attention to how your child behaves in these different settings. Do you notice a difference in your child's behavior at home versus in school? Does your child's teacher notice something different in your child? Making connections and building relationships with your child teachers, and getting to know your child's peers, can be helpful in getting a clearer picture of how your child functions. This information will help as you begin seeking the appropriate support for your child.

Keeping a record of your observations can be a useful tool when you decide to seek help or support for your child. Records can help in accurately diagnosing and evaluating your child as well as in determining proper treatment options. School records such as report cards, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and medical records can also help in providing a clearer picture of your child's development.

Your role as a parent is vital in your child's life. Talk to your child frequently and build a trusting and loving relationship with your son or daughter. Spend time together. Many AAPI parents sacrifice their relationship with their children by working numerous jobs and long hours to provide economically for their children or enroll their children in numerous extracurricular activities, which reduces the amount of time they have with their children. These issues can result in insufficient time for developing emotional bonds and relationships, which are critical in the children's personal development and well-being.

The drive to succeed is common among many AAPI families and communities. Many AAPI parents not only push their children to excel in school but often involve their

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children in music, arts or sports at a very early age. While these activities are often very enriching, participation can also cause intense pressure and stress to the child. Careful consideration should be made to create a balance between the demands of home, school community and personal life. Your child should be encouraged to enjoy other activities such as playing or interacting with his/her peer group as part of normal development. Giving your child a break from schoolwork, violin or soccer practice during weekends can not only energize him/her but also give him/her a much-needed reprieve from his/her daily routine.

When you notice a problem, seeking mental health services is one of the best things you can do to help support your child and your family. You can play an active role in getting the help and support your child needs to be a successful individual. As a parent, you have the right to demand culturally appropriate services for your child and your family. Be ready to advocate and request for a provider who is familiar with your cultural beliefs and values, and if needed, speaks your language. Ask for a staff member who speaks your language and has worked with your community. If there are no bilingual or bicultural providers, demand a medical interpreter and a cultural broker. By federal law, you have the right to interpreter and translation services at no cost to you.

Above all, remember, you are not alone and help is available. The first step to getting help for your child is to know where to look. Organizations like NAMI (www.nami.org/aapi) provide information, resources and support that can help you navigate the process of seeking help and achieving recovery.

Resources

- NAMI's Child Adolescent Action Center works to improve the lives of children and adolescents living with mental illness and their families through advocacy, support and education. www.nami.org/caac
- NAMI Basics is a free, six-week education program for parents and other caregivers of children and adolescents living with mental illness. The NAMI Basics course is taught by trained teachers who are the parent or other caregivers of individuals who developed the symptoms of mental illness prior to the age of 13 years. www.nami.org/basics
- NAMI's website offers a wealth of information on illnesses, treatment and support. www.nami.org

References

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- 2 Lester D. Difference in the epidemiology of suicide in Asian Americans by nation of origin. *OMEGA* 1994; 29-89-93
- 3 Schoen, C., et al. *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls*. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. New York, N.Y., 1997.
- 4 U.S. Dept of Justice of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Fact Sheet February 2000 #1.
- 5 Schoen, C., et al. *The Health of Adolescent Boys: Commonwealth Fund Survey Findings*. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. New York, N.Y., 1998.