FOCUSING ON CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH

Childhood Development Matters

While mental and behavioral health conditions occur at any age, children and youth are especially vulnerable. Mental health disorders diagnosed during adolescence and adulthood are rooted in the experiences of early childhood. Stigma, lack of awareness and inadequate access to resources can delay diagnosis and treatment by weeks, months or even years.

By making sure children get the help they need, we can ensure they grow into resilient, healthy, productive adults. This means making care accessible and affordable. Preventive services and early intervention enables timely diagnosis and treatment, avoiding more intensive care and costs.

The Pandemic and Mental Health

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health have magnified the importance of access to early intervention and preventive services.

Compared to 2019, from April to October 2020, hospitals across the U.S. saw a:

- 24% increase in the proportion of mental health emergency department visits for kids ages 5 to 11
- 31% increase for kids and teens ages 12 to 17

When children are mentally, emotionally and behaviorally stable, they do better in school and are more likely to avoid risky behaviors. By investing in prevention, surveillance and treatment, children will grow up healthier and go on to more successful careers, higher lifetime wages and fulfilling lives.
On the Front Lines

Children’s hospitals, pediatricians and other mental health providers see firsthand the effect mental, emotional and behavioral conditions have on children and families. For children’s hospitals, this means seeing children who are in crisis in their emergency rooms, specialty clinics and inpatient units. Pediatric health care systems are simultaneously feeling the financial effect of the pandemic.

Children’s hospitals are witnessing an alarming number of kids and teens in behavioral health crisis, with emergency departments seeing increases in suicidal ideation and self-harm. A recent JAMA study found that children presenting in children’s hospital emergency departments for mental health conditions since the onset of the pandemic have been more likely to require admission and have had longer patient stays. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to place strains on the provision of pediatric mental health care.

Seeking Solutions: Investment Must Start Early

Children’s hospitals—in partnership with their communities—are providing care in settings where kids are comfortable. Children’s hospitals are:

- **Screening** to promote early intervention and educating health care professionals to recognize and rapidly care for patients with mental health needs.

- **Integrating mental health care** with primary care services by equipping pediatricians and families at checkups to care for kids early, strengthening care coordination services, and decreasing the likelihood kids will need emergency mental health services.

- **Promoting access** through telemedicine and leveraging telehealth to facilitate virtual consultations between mental health providers and families distant from sites of care.

- **Coordinating care** to support effective transitions and family supports by working with families to outline treatment plans and help them identify and navigate needed resources outside the hospital.

From 2016-2019, visits by 6 to 12-year-olds for mental health care needs doubled in children’s hospitals.

Currently there are 10 child psychiatrists per 100,000 kids and teens. It is estimated the country needs 47 per 100,000.

Hospital stays increase for kids with more than one health issue by:

- 9% for medical care
- 17% for surgical care