

Mental Health

Mental Health in Pediatrics

- A child is said to have good mental health when they are progressing towards **reaching emotional and developmental milestones**, when they are able to **learn healthy social skills**, when they are able to **build relationships** with others, and when they are able to **cope** with unpredictable challenges.
- Mental health is something not often talked about in childhood, but is so important for functioning in the home, school, and play environment.
- Both **biology** and the **environment** can have an impact on childhood mental health
 - A nurturing and responsive relationship with parents or caregivers is critical in the early development years



Common Diagnoses:

Since mental health is an emerging area of concern in childhood, it can be difficult to make a formal diagnosis. However, it is so important to note that mental health is a part of everyone's well-being. It **always** needs to be addressed even if there is no formal diagnosis present. With that being said, *attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)*, *anxiety*, and *oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)* are among the most common in childhood.

ODD:

- Often becoming angry or losing temper
- Arguing with adults
- Tends to not follow rules
- Spiteful towards others

Anxiety:

- Being very afraid when separated from parents
- Extreme fear
- Constant worry
- Fatigue, headaches, stomach aches

ADHD:

- Hyperactive/impulsive
 - restless
 - trouble taking turns
- Inattentive/withdrawn
 - often daydreams
 - forgetful

Potential Challenges

Since mental health is an emerging area of concern in childhood, it can be difficult to make a formal diagnosis. Depending on where children are in their language and emotional development, these challenges present rather differently as they would, for example, in adolescents or adults. This is why it is so important to look at our children **holistically** and observe them for changes in actions or behaviors.

While not all-encompassing, below are a few examples of ways mental health challenges can present in childhood:

- Difficulty with sleeping or feeding
- Intense irritability
- Hard to console when in distress
- Inability to adapt to a changing environment or demands
- Easily startled
- Excessive adverse behaviors towards others (pushing, biting, hitting, etc.)
- Impulsivity
- Tantrums
- Loss or delayed achievement of milestones

What can Occupational Therapists Do?

Occupational therapists, in collaboration with the therapy team, can address mental health concerns as they directly impact a child's ability to function in a healthy way in the home, school, and play environment. Below are a few examples of ways OTs can help:

- Assist with early identification of mental health challenges
- Equip children with emotional regulation skills in response to worry or stress
- Teach appropriate social interaction skills
- Collaborate with family members/caregivers on appropriate strategies to incorporate in daily routines.
- Incorporate activity and occupation-based intervention to address behaviors, social interaction, and self-expression
- Connect individuals with other professions that can help (psychologist, dietician, etc.)

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