FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

CHILD MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES
What is Mental Health?

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Mental wellness is generally viewed as a positive attribute, such that a person can reach enhanced levels of mental health, even if the person does not have any diagnosed mental health condition. This definition of mental health highlights emotional well-being, the capacity to live a full and creative life, and the flexibility to deal with life's inevitable challenges.

What is childhood mental health?

Childhood Mental health refers to the capacity of children to experience emotions, develop relationships with others around them. This can also be referred to as Social emotional development in children.

Why is mental health important for children?

Mental health is an essential part of children's overall health. It has a complex interactive relationship with their physical health and their ability to succeed in school, at work and in society. Both physical and mental health affect how we think, feel and act. Good mental health allows children and young people to develop the resilience to cope with problems and grow into well-rounded, healthy adults. A positive mental health ensures that the child can effectively express emotions, make friends and explore the world around them.

Do children also suffer from mental health problems?

Yes, Children also suffer from mental health problems. Mental health problems affect about one in ten children and young people. They include depression, anxiety and conduct disorder etc and are often a direct response to what is happening in their lives.

What kind of mental health problems do children suffer from?

Mental health concerns can include both emotional problems and behavioural problems. Emotional problems may include concerns about mood (usually sadness) or concerns about
anxiety. Behavioural problems can include concerns with anger and violence, as well as difficulties paying attention. Common problems during childhood include stress related to school, exams, anxieties related to going to school, changes in routine, location, performance in school and peer group, feeling sad about an event, hyperactivity, temper tantrums etc. However, when anxieties, stress, mood changes, conduct related issues continue for a prolonged period and are affecting the child’s performance and well being then it may be a Psychological disorder.

What are Childhood Psychological Disorders?

Some of the common Psychological disorders affecting children are as follows:

Mental Retardation: Functioning that is significantly below average in the areas of social, academic skills communication, taking care of one’s self, with an IQ of 70 or below

Learning Disorders: Demonstrating abilities below the level expected given their age and grade in school and significant learning problems in academics.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder

1. Autistic Disorder: It is the qualitative impairment in Social interactions including non verbal behaviours like eye contact, gestures etc and in communication as in delay or total lack of development of spoken language, stereotyped and repetitive use of words etc and repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests etc.

2. Aspergers: A condition in which the usual impairments of autism are seen but there is usually no language or cognitive delay

Attention Deficit and Disruptive Behaviour Disorders

1. ADHD: characterised by inattention and hyperactivity that is significantly inconsistent with the child’s developmental level which leads to impairment in other areas.

2. Conduct Disorder: Conduct Disorder is characterized by a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated, which may include being physically cruel to people and animals, bullies or initiates physical fights.

Anxiety Disorders

1. Separation Anxiety
Disorder: Excessive anxiety concerning separation by a child from the home or from those to whom the person is attached. This anxiety is beyond that which is expected for the individual’s developmental level.

2. Post traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) in children and adolescents occurs as a result of a child's exposure to one or more traumatic events that were life-threatening or perceived to be likely to cause serious injury to self or others. It is characterised by having frequent memories of the event, having upsetting and frightening dreams, acting or feeling like the experience is happening again and developing repeated physical or emotional symptoms when the child is reminded of the event.

Mood Disorders: Characterised by extreme changes in mood, irritability, feelings of extreme sadness or excitement. Common in Children is depression.

Substance use/abuse: When children resort to use of addictive substances and become dependent on them hampering their normal functioning in school, family and other social situations.

Schizophrenia: Characterised by a state of confusion, hallucinations, irrational thinking and behaviour.

Eating Disorders: Taking dieting and a distorted body perception to extremes. Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia are the common forms of this disorder.

Some of these illnesses, such as anxiety disorders, eating disorders, mood disorders, and schizophrenia, can occur in adults as well as children. Others, such as behavior and development disorders, elimination disorders, and learning and communication disorders, begin in childhood only, although they can continue into adulthood. In rare cases, tic disorders can develop in adults. It is not unusual for a child to have more than one disorder.

What causes psychological problems in children?

The exact cause of most mental illnesses is not known, but research suggests that a combination of factors, including heredity, biology, psychological trauma, and environmental stress, may be involved.

- Heredity (genetics): Mental illness tends to run in families, which means the likelihood to develop a mental disorder may be passed on from parents to their children.
• **Biology:** Some mental disorders have been linked to special chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters help nerve cells in the brain communicate with each other. If these chemicals are out of balance or not working properly, messages may not make it through the brain correctly, leading to symptoms. In addition, defects in or injury to certain areas of the brain also have been linked to some mental illnesses.

• **Psychological trauma:** Some mental illnesses may be triggered by psychological trauma, such as:
  - Severe emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or maltreatment
  - An important early loss, such as the loss of a parent
  - Neglect

• **Major Physical Illness:** Suffering from major physical illness is a very stressful situation for children and can affect the emotional and mental health of the child.

• **Environmental Factors:** Stressful or traumatic events can trigger a mental illness in a person with a vulnerability to a mental disorder.

What are the signs to identify psychological problems in my child?

Not every problem is serious. In fact, many everyday stresses can cause changes in your child’s behaviour. For example, the birth of a sibling may cause a child to temporarily act much younger than he or she is. It is important to be able to tell the difference between typical behaviour changes and those associated with more serious problems. Pay special attention to behaviours that include:

• Problems across a variety of settings, such as at school, at home, or with peers
• Changes in appetite or sleep
• Social withdrawal, or fearful behaviour toward things your child normally is not afraid of
• Returning to behaviours more common in younger children, such as bed-wetting, for a long time
• Signs of being upset, such as sadness or tearfulness
• Signs of self-destructive behaviour, such as head-banging, or a tendency to get hurt often
• Repeated thoughts of death
• Changes in school performance, such as poor grades despite good efforts
• Depression shown by sustained, prolonged negative mood and attitude, often accompanied by poor appetite, difficulty sleeping or thoughts of death
• Severe mood swings
• Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol
• Defying authority, skipping school, stealing, or damaging property
• Hearing voices or seeing things that are not there (hallucinations)

Whom do I consult if I feel my child has a psychological problem?

You can consult a child psychiatrist or a clinical Psychologist. A child psychiatrist has a medical degree and their work is mainly to treat more severe disorders like Schizophrenia, depression which involves prescription of medications. On the other hand, Child psychologists use therapy, counselling etc for treatment and management of the disorders.

How are psychological problems diagnosed in children?

Mental illnesses in children are diagnosed based on signs and symptoms that suggest a particular disorder. However, this process can be especially challenging with children. Many behaviours that are seen as symptoms of mental disorders, such as shyness, anxiety (nervousness), strange eating habits, and temper tantrums, can occur as a normal part of a child's development. Behaviours become symptoms when they occur very often, last a long time, occur at an unusual age or cause significant disruption to the child's and/or family's ability to function.

If symptoms are present, the physician will begin an evaluation by performing a complete medical history and physical exam to rule out physical illness or medication side effects as the cause of the symptoms.

If no physical illness is found, the child may be referred to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist, mental health professionals who are specially trained to diagnose and treat mental illness in children and teens. Psychiatrists and psychologists use specially designed interview and assessment tools to evaluate a child for a mental disorder. The Psychiatrist/Psychologist bases his or her diagnosis on reports of the child's symptoms and his or her observation of the child's attitude and behaviour. They often must rely on reports from the child's parents, teachers, and other adults because children often have trouble explaining their problems or understanding their symptoms.
Can mental health problems be treated?

Yes. Once a diagnosis is made, your child’s specialist will recommend a specific treatment. It is important to understand the various treatment choices, which often include psychotherapy or medication. Some psychological problems may not be cured like in the case of Learning Disability, Autism. Mental Retardation but a proper support/rehabilitation programme will successfully control the symptoms and help the child cope with the disabilities. The most common treatment options used include:

- **Medication**: Many mental illnesses can be effectively treated with medications. The drugs often used to treat mental disorders in children include antipsychotics, antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, stimulants, and mood stabilizing drugs.

- **Psychotherapy**: Psychotherapy (a type of counseling) addresses the emotional response to mental illness. It is a process in which trained mental health professionals help people deal with their illness, often by talking through strategies for understanding and dealing with their symptoms, thoughts, and behaviors. Types of psychotherapy often used with children are supportive, cognitive behavioural, interpersonal, group, and family therapy.

- **Creative therapies**: Certain therapies, such as art therapy or play therapy, may be helpful, especially with young children who may have trouble communicating their thoughts and feelings.

- **Special education**: for children who are slow learners, have ADHD/autism special educators can help in developing a program that is suitable to the requirements/speed of the child.

Will my child have to take medicines?

Medication can be an effective part of treatment for psychological problems of childhood. The psychiatrist who recommends medication should be experienced in treating psychiatric disorders of children. Medication is generally prescribed after a thorough diagnostic evaluation of the child and depending on the severity of the disorder. Medication may be prescribed for Psychological symptoms/disorders, including but not limited to:

- Anxiety
- ADHD
- Depression
What are psychotropic medications?

Psychotropic medications are substances that affect brain chemicals related to mood and behavior. In recent years, research has been conducted to understand the benefits and risks of using psychotropics in children. Still, more needs to be learned about the effects of psychotropics, especially in children under six years of age. While researchers are trying to clarify how early treatment affects a growing body, families and doctors should weigh the benefits and risks of medication. Each child has individual needs, and each child needs to be monitored closely while taking medications.

Are there treatments apart from medications?

Yes. Psychosocial therapies can be very effective alone and in combination with medications. Therapies that teach parents and children coping strategies can also be effective. Cognitive Behaviour therapy (CBT) is a type of psychotherapy that can be used with children. It has been widely studied and is an effective treatment for a number of conditions, such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and social anxiety. A person in CBT learns to change distorted thinking patterns and unhealthy behaviour. Children can receive CBT with or without their parents, as well as in a group setting. Additionally, therapies for ADHD are numerous and include behavioural parent training and behavioural classroom management.

What role do parents/family play in the treatment?

Parents and family play a very important role in the treatment of the child in the following ways:

- Monitoring the progress
- Family as a support system
- Role in preventing further degradation in the condition of the child
- By learning techniques of parenting which are child specific and centric
- By reinforcing the treatment at home
In Family therapy the family forms a major part of the treatment process.

Can mental illness be prevented in children?

Most mental illnesses are caused by a combination of factors and hence cannot really be prevented completely. One of the ways is to provide a secure and loving environment and look out for possible signs of mental distress among your children.

However, if symptoms are recognized and treatment is started early, many of the distressing and disabling effects of a mental illness may be prevented or at least minimized.

When treated appropriately and early, many children can fully recover from their mental illness or successfully control their symptoms. While some children become disabled adults because of a chronic or severe disorder, many people who have a mental illness are able to live full and productive lives.

It is very important to seek treatment for your child if they are displaying any symptoms of mental illness. Without treatment, many mental disorders can continue into adulthood and lead to problems in all areas of the person’s adult life. People with untreated mental disorders are at high risk for many problems, including alcohol or drug abuse, and violent or self-destructive behaviour, even suicide.

Are there any risk factors?

There are certain ‘risk factors’ that make some children and young people more likely to experience problems than other children, but they don’t necessarily mean difficulties are bound to come up or are even probable.

Some of these factors include:

- having a long-term physical illness
- having a parent who has had mental health problems, problems with alcohol or has been in trouble with the law
- experiencing the death of someone close to them
- having parents who separate or divorce
- having been severely bullied or physically or sexually abused
• living in poverty or being homeless
• experiencing discrimination, perhaps because of their race, sexuality or religion
• acting as a carer for a relative, taking on adult responsibilities
• having long-standing educational difficulties.

What can I do as a parent?

Since one of the mitigating factors in Psychological problems is childhood trauma, negative experiences at a very young age etc, as a parent you need to be nurturing, supportive, positively reinforce your child’s behaviours, be open to listening to them, do not make judgments, do not compare your child with other children. Maintaining harmony between both parents, preventing childhood traumatic experiences are some of the ways to protect the child from psychological problems.

How long will it take for the child to recover from the problem?

Some children get better with time. But other children need ongoing professional help. Talk to your child’s doctor or specialist about problems that are severe, continuous, and affect daily activities. Also, don’t delay seeking help. Treatment may produce better results if started early.

Can I ask the child Psychiatrist/Psychologist to maintain confidentiality?

Yes. The professionals supporting your child will keep information about them and your family confidential.
It shouldn't hurt to be a child.