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News

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235 (214) 688-3404

CONTACT: Ann Harrell
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/369-2695

**When does a child need psychiatric help?

NOTE TO THE EDITOR: Tuesday, April 5 The University of Texas Health Science Center will present a free public forum on depression at 8 p.m. in Gooch Auditorium. Presentors will be Dr. John Rush, associate professor of Psychiatry, on "The Big D: Is It Depression or Just the Blues?"; Dr. Rege Stewart, assistant professor of Clinical Psychiatry, "Why Are Women More Vulnerable?"; and Dr. Graham Emslie, assistant professor of Clinical Psychiatry, on "Depression in Children: The Newly Diagnosed Disease."

DALLAS--How can a parent--or other concerned adult close to a child--tell when the child's behavior is appropriate for his or her age or when it is a signal that something is wrong?

There is no magic answer to the question of whether a child or young person needs a psychiatric evaluation, says Dr. Kenneth Wiggins, professor of Psychiatry and chief of the Child and Adolescent Division, The University of Texas Health Science Center of Dallas. However, there are guidelines that can be used in deciding whether a professional opinion may be helpful, says Wiggins in an article in the spring, 1983 issue of BioLogue, UTHSCD research magazine.

First, the adult needs to be familiar with the different stages of physical and emotional development. A good book that might provide helpful insights is How to Parent by Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson, published by New American Library. The paperback is \$2.95. For other books on child and adolescent growth and development aimed at a lay audience, parents might consult their pediatrician, adolescent specialist or family physician.

After checking out the behavior or behaviors in question, parents might consider:

How frequently does the questionable behavior occur? Was the troublesome incident an isolated example, or is there the beginning of a pattern of behavior? It's not unusual, Wiggins said, for a young child, especially a boy, to set a fire. But if the behavior continues, there is cause for concern. In the same way, little boys may dress up in clothing belonging to a mother or sister, but if the game is repeated over and over, it may signal a desire for dressing in girls' clothing rather than innocent play.

How many other causes are there? If making poor grades at school is the only problem, there may well be no concern psychologically. But if he or she is making poor grades, having trouble getting along with others and rebelling against the parents, that is a different matter.

How generally happy and satisfied is the child? Some children may be doing poorly in school, but it doesn't bother them and the rest of their lives are going well. Also, some children essentially enjoy being alone and spending lots of time on their hobbies. Having a lot of social contacts doesn't seem important to them. However, when a child seems to feel guilty, anxious, aggressive or angry about anything in his or her life, that is a reason for parental concern.

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What price (or consequence) is the child paying for the behavior? If the child is skipping school, is he or she slipping behind? If a student misses a lot of classes, then it's hard to catch up, and when one is behind, it makes "skipping" even more attractive. Also, while some children can fight with their friends and forget it the next day, others seem to invite rejection or ostracism by their behavior.

The best rule, Wiggins stressed, is that if the parent feels uncomfortable about something that is happening with the child, a psychiatric evaluation should be sought.

"When a child tells us over and over his arm hurts, we care how the child feels. So we have a physician take a look at the arm. It's no different when we're talking about a psychiatric problem."

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