

General Circular Letter No: 02 - 99/2003

My No:-DMH/ A / 2003 / 13,  
Ministry of Health, Nutrition & Welfare,  
'Suwasiripaya',  
385,  
Rev. Baddegama Wimalawansa Thero MW  
Colombo 10.  
17.09.2003



To:-  
All Provincial Directors of Health Services,  
All Dy Provincial Directors of Health Services,  
All Directors of Specialized Campaigns,  
All Heads of Institutions / MOOH  
Principals of Schools of Nursing,

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY - 2003

October 10<sup>th</sup> 2003 marks the World Mental Health Day.

**The Theme:-** " Identification, treatment and prevention of emotional and behavioral disorders in children and adolescents "

**Objective:-**

To focus attention on the devastating effects of serious emotional and behavioural disorders on children and adolescents and the pressing need to promote enlightened public policy. To increase availability of treatment, services, and develop and implement effective prevention strategies in order to reduce the suffering of children and their families.

**Activities to be undertaken:-**

- (1). Assess the current situation through available data.
- (2). To identify the resources available.  
e.g:- Specialists, clinics, trained MOMH, Teachers, counseling services in schools and in universities etc.
- (3). Identify major gaps and priorities for improvement.
- (4). Draw up a plan to address the issues by 5<sup>th</sup> October to be considered and implemented through appropriate channels.  
e.g:- establishment of links with the school health programme and mental health promotion units - Psychiatrists, MOMH, Training of PHM, Volunteers, Parenting programmes etc.

**"The future of our society depends on the health and wellbeing of our children."**

However, these lofty words are seldom backed up by public policy or the allocation of adequate resources to ensure that families and communities can nurture and support healthy mental, physical and social development of their young people. Certainly, we have much work to do in the mental health field if we are to assure the promotion, prevention, and treatment services and programs are to be available for every child who needs them. World Health Organization has stated that the absence of good mental health early in life may lead to mental disorders with long-term consequences, undermines compliance with good general health practices, and reduces the capacity of societies to be safe and productive.

It is estimated that 20 percent of children and adolescents worldwide suffer from an impairing mental illness. It is critical that we all work together- mental health professionals, families, policy makers - to improve care and treatment of our children and adolescents, to increase the knowledge base through research, and to establish enlightened public policies that can lead to a substantial reduction in the burden of disease caused by these disorders.

### **The Science of Early Childhood Development:**

1. Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience.
2. Culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in child-rearing beliefs and practices designed to promote healthy adaptation.
3. The growth of self-regulation is the cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behaviour.
4. Children are active participants in their own development, reflecting the intrinsic human drive to explore and master one's environment.
5. Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.
6. The broad range of individual differences among young children often makes it difficult to distinguish normal variations and maturational delays from transient disorders and persistent impairments.
7. The development of children unfolds along individual pathways whose trajectories are characterized by continuities and discontinuities, as well as by a series of significant transitions.
8. Human development is shaped by the ongoing interplay among sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience.
9. The timing of early experiences can matter, but, more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life and into adulthood.
10. The course of development can be altered in early childhood by effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection, thereby shifting the odds in favor of more adaptive outcomes.

### **Identification**

The recognition that mental disorders can affect children and adolescents is a relatively new phenomenon. Identifying mental health problems in children and adolescents is tricky because of the rapid rate at which they grow and develop during the first 20 years of their life. It may therefore be difficult to tell whether something is part of normal development, or abnormal.

## Prevention

Many child and adolescent mental health problems are preventable. Mental health problems, as defined by Australia's New South Wales Health Department, are a "disruption in the interactions between the individual, group, and the environment, producing a diminished state of positive mental health". There is now scientific evidence demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of timely preventive and treatment interventions.

## Treatment and Service Systems

Untreated mental health problems during childhood and adolescence can have life-long impact. New treatments, both behavioural and medication, or a combination of both, are effective for a variety of mental illnesses.

## General Principles Underlying the Need for Prevention and Promotion Programs in Child and Adolescent Mental Health

- There is no health without mental health; mental health is an integral part of overall health and quality of life.
- Mental and behavioural disorders have grown to epidemic proportions and create a large social and economic burden to society.
- To address the epidemic of mental and behavioural disorders, prevention and promotion must be recognized as essential components of a public health approach alongside treatment and maintenance.
- Because of their positive effects in multiple sectors - education, economic, and legal, the promotion of mental health and prevention of mental and behavioural disorders are in the shared interest of diverse groups of stakeholders. An opportunity exists to develop powerful inter sectoral coalitions for promotion and prevention at global, regional, national, and local levels.
- Discrimination and stigma regarding mental and behavioural disorders continue to impede the development and delivery of prevention, treatment, maintenance, and rehabilitation services.
- Effective evidence-based programs and policies are available to promote mental health, enhance resilience, reduce risk factors, increase protective factors, and prevent mental and behavioural disorders.
- Growing evidence demonstrates that these practices can be cost-effective.
- Strengthening mental health and resilience not only reduces the risk of mental and behavioural disorders, but also contributes to better physical health, well-being, productive life, social capital, safer environments, and economic benefits.

Millions of children across the globe attend school each day. Each child is different and unique. But each of their lives is shaped and guided by their parents, cultures, and societies in which they live – and also by the teachers they encounter during their years of schooling. Some children arrive at school healthy, happy, and ready for school; but others, up to 20% worldwide, have serious emotional and behavioural disorders. Teachers, as one of the central adults in many

children's lives — and for some the only adult with whom they may have a trusting relationship— are in a key position to identify these mental health problems. These disorders must be identified and treated early in order to allow children to learn effectively. Teachers should be on the lookout for key symptoms of mental health problems, which include:

- Changes in habits
- Withdrawal
- Decreased social and academic functioning
- Erratic or changed behaviour
- Increased physical complaints

### **Promoting Good Mental Health**

Beyond the identification of mental illness and subsequent referral for services, school is also an excellent place to promote good mental health. In the school setting, mental health should not only be thought of as the absence of mental illness, but the possession of skills and abilities that allow students to cope with everyday challenges. It is recommended that schools develop policies that promote protective factors, including:

- A Sense of Belonging
- Adapting to Change
- Recognition
- Making a Difference

Mental health is how we think, feel, and act. It's common for children to feel sad or to behave badly from time to time. If you see troubling behaviours that seem persistent and severe, it's time to take an action. These questions can help you:

- Does the child seem angry most of the time? Cry a lot? Overreact to things?
- Does the child avoid friends or family? Want to be alone all the time? Seem to have lost interest in things usually enjoyed?
- Does the child destroy property, break the law, or do things that are life threatening? Often hurt animals or other people? Seem not to care when explain that this behaviour is harmful? Use alcohol or other drugs?
- Is the child extremely fearful? Having unexplained fears or worrying more than other young people?
- Is the child limited by poor concentration? Suddenly having trouble making decisions? Grades are showing a marked decline?
- Is your child obsessed about how he/she looks? Experiencing unexplained changes in sleeping or eating habits? Often complaining about headaches, stomachaches, or other physical problems?
- Does your child feel that life is too hard to handle or talk about suicide?

## Caring for a Child

There is no one right way to raise a child. Parenting styles vary. But it is important that all caregivers communicate clear and consistent expectations for each child. In today's world, some parents are so busy and under stress that nurturing the child may sometimes take a back seat considering the other problems as more important. However, here are a few suggestions that can help parents provide for children's physical safety and emotional well being.

Do your best to provide a safe home and community for your child, as well as nutritious meals, regular health check-ups, immunizations, and exercise.

Be aware of stages in child development so you don't expect too much or too little from your child.

Encourage your child to express his or her feelings; respect those feelings. Let your child know that everyone experiences pain, fear, anger, and anxiety. Try to learn the source of these feelings. Help your child express anger positively, without resorting to violence.

Promote mutual respect and trust. Keep your voice level down even when you don't agree. Keep communication channels open.

Listen to your child. Use words and examples your child can understand. Encourage questions. Express your willingness to talk about any subject.

Provide comfort and assurance. Be honest. Focus on the positives.

Look at your own problem-solving and coping skills. Are you setting a good example? Seek help if your child's feelings or behaviors overwhelm you or if you are unable to control your own frustration or anger.

Encourage your child's talents and accept limitations. Set goals based on the child's abilities and interests, not someone else's expectations. Celebrate accomplishments.

Don't compare your child's abilities to those of other children; appreciate the uniqueness of your child.

Spend time regularly with your child.

Foster your child's independence and self-worth. Help your child deal with life's ups and downs. Show confidence in your child's ability to handle problems and tackle new experiences.

Discipline constructively, fairly, and consistently. (Discipline is a form of teaching, not physical punishment.) All children and families are different; learn what is effective for your child. Show approval for positive behaviours. Help your child learn from his or her mistakes.

Love unconditionally. Teach the value of apologies, cooperation, patience, forgiveness, and consideration for others.

Do not expect to be perfect; parenting is a difficult job.

Any further information on this may be obtained by visiting the following web site.  
www.wfmh.org. or www.wmhd.org.net

Please bring the contents of this circular to the notice of all officers concerned in your province / division / Institution who should take a special interest in the above activities. The above suggestions are intended to serve as guidelines only. Details could be worked out to suit local situations.

All PDHSS, DPDHSS should ensure the full participation of preventive and curative health staff in these activities.

The Health Education Officers attached to your division should provide the necessary assistance and guidance in organizing the World Mental Health Day.

All PDDHS and DPDDHS are requested to bring a tentative plan for the HDC meeting on 26/09/2003.

Please send a summary of the World Mental Health Day activities carried out in your province / division / Institution with your observations to reach the office of Director Mental Health Services by 20<sup>th</sup> October 2003.



**Dr. Hiranthi de Silva**  
Director / Mental Health Services.

**Sgd. Dr. H.A.P. Kahandaliyanage.**  
Director General of Health Services

**Cc:-**

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|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Hon. Minister of Health, Nutrition & Welfare              | - for your information please.        |
| 2. Hon. Dy. Minister of Health, Nutrition & Welfare.         | - for your information please.        |
| 3. Hon. Provincial Ministers of Health.                      | - for your information please         |
| 4. Secretary, Ministry of Health, Nutrition & Welfare.       | - for your information please.        |
| 5. Addl. Secretary, Ministry of Health, Nutrition & Welfare. | - for your information please.        |
| 6. All provincial Secretaries of Health Services.            | - for your information please.        |
| 7. All Dy. Director Generals of Health Services              | - for your information please.        |
| 8. Epidemiologist.   | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 9. All Regional Epidemiologists                              | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 10. All DDHS/MOH   | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 11. All HEOO   | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 12. WHO Representative for Sri Lanka.                        | - for your information please.        |
| 13. UNICEF Representative for Sri Lanka.                     | - for your information please.        |
| 14. Director, Health Education Bureau.                       | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 15. Director, Family Health Bureau                           | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 16. Director, YEDD   | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 17. Director, NCD  | - for your information please. & n.a. |
| 18. Deans, Faculties of Medicine                             | - for your information please. & n.a. |