Definition

Prevention and early intervention is any activity which is aimed at identifying and/or treating risk factors for, or early symptoms of, emotional and behavioural disturbance that may lead to mental illness in childhood or adolescence.

Background

A significant number of infants, children and adolescents experience some form of mental illness. Mental illness in infancy, childhood or adolescence can have enduring consequences if left unresolved. Those affected bear a major burden in suffering, lost opportunities and reduced social and economic outcomes in adulthood, including reduced workforce participation. Among the many adverse outcomes are reduced self-esteem or confidence, reduced educational and occupational opportunity, increased risk of substance abuse and other mental disorders, as well as increased family conflict, breakdown and homelessness.

The RANZCP Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists (FCAP) believes that development and implementation of early intervention and prevention strategies for mental illness in infants, children and adolescents is imperative to addressing these adverse outcomes and to prevent or reduce mental disorders in adulthood. To this end, FCAP developed a report (ref) outlining strategies to promote and develop cohesive and evidence-based prevention and early intervention strategies, with the aim of decreasing the prevalence and harmful impact of mental illness in infants, childhood and adolescents. This position statement aims to set out key recommendations necessary to further promote and develop early intervention strategies to prevent mental illness in infants, children and adolescents. FCAP will continue to develop strategy and policy in this area.

Evidence

Early experiences determine whether a child’s developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health [1]. Mental health problems during early years can have enduring consequences if left unresolved [2] not only by placing individuals at increased risk of difficulties in adult life, but also by placing increased pressure on limited community service resources [3]. Suffering and negative outcomes can also cause intergenerational cycles which become larger problems to address [4]. There is robust evidence that the onset of many adult psychological problems have their origins in childhood and adolescence [5]. Families affected by parental mental illness are at particularly high risk [6].

There is a critical need for strategies to be developed in Australia and New Zealand to improve children and young people’s mental health. Research demonstrates that first symptoms of behavioural problems typically precede a mental, emotional or behavioural disorder by two to four years [7] and that early therapeutic intervention can be highly effective at limiting the severity and/or progression of problems [8]. Prevention and early intervention strategies have been accepted as legitimate actions to address physical health issues for many years, however, they are a relatively recent area of interest in the field of mental health [9]. Despite this, evidence-based research continues to expand and strengthen the argument in favour of these strategies as having the potential to be both beneficial and cost-effective.

In recognition of this need, the governments of Australia (both Commonwealth and State) and New Zealand have begun, to various degrees, to incorporate the concepts of promotion, prevention and early intervention strategies into their national mental health strategies.
intervention into their policy frameworks [10]. In Australian the National Health and Hospital Reform Committee report [11] and the Fourth National Mental Health Plan [12] brings a necessary emphasis back on prevention and, in New Zealand, the Second National Mental Health and Addiction Plan published in 2005 Te Tahu – Improving Mental Health 2005-2015 has recognised promotion and prevention as the first of ten challenges to be addressed [13].

Critical to the success of the prevention and early intervention of mental illness in childhood, is broadening the roles and priorities of child and adolescent psychiatrists and general psychiatrists to include the provision of leadership to multidisciplinary teams, training of other professionals, and advocating for improvements in service delivery.

**Recommendations**

Effective development and implementation of prevention and early intervention strategies requires:

- Adequate funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to provide early intervention services relative to the proportion of the population experiencing disorders
- Increased capacity and competence of the workforce to engage in prevention and early intervention work
- Coordinated and integrated care between health and other sectors to identify high-risk children and deliver prevention and early intervention programmes
- Continued strategies to reduce stigma associated with mental illness in children and adolescents
- Introduction and maintenance of rigorously evaluated prevention and early intervention programmes across all age-groups from 0 – 18 years
- Focus on specific prevention and early intervention programmes to address these key target groups: children with conduct disorders, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, children who self harm or who are at risk of suicide, children of parents with a mental illness, and Indigenous children.
- Further research into acceptability and effectiveness of prevention and early intervention programmes for infants, childhood and adolescents.

To assist in achieving progress in relation to these principles, RANZCP, through its bi-national and regional structures, will work to engage collaboratively with State and Territory Health Departments in Australia and District Health Boards in New Zealand in their efforts to establish or enhance strategies that focus on the prevention and early intervention of mental illness in infants, children, and adolescence and further develop policy in this area.

Further specific recommendations can be found in the full report: *Prevention and early intervention of mental illness in infants, childhood and adolescents: Planning strategies for Australia and New Zealand.*

**Further reading**


Position statement 56 - Children of parents with a mental illness

Position statement 64 – The role of psychiatrists in the prevention and early intervention of mental illness in infants, children, and adolescents
References


Adopted: February 2010 (GC2010/1)
Currency: Reviewed every 3 years (next review February 2013)
Owned by: Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry