

Local Pediatrician Talks Children's Mental Health, Warning Signs, Ways to Help

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - Mental health concerns in young people are “significantly ramping up,” according to a local pediatrician.

Dr. Kathie Wuellner, a doctor with Pediatric Healthcare Unlimited, has a lot of experience when it comes to pediatric mental health. From a lack of family time to cell phones, Wuellner has insights on what causes mental health concerns in young people, and she offers advice for parents and guardians who want to help their children.

“People are wanting to blame the COVID crises on a lot of it, and it did have some impact, but we were seeing a ramp up of mental health issues prior to COVID,” Wuellner explained. “Things were already significantly ramping up prior to 2020.”

According to Wuellner, around 10% of kids ages 3 to 17 — six million kids in the U.S. — have diagnosable symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety. Other behavioral disorders, like depression, are increasing in children, sometimes as young as ages 3 or 4. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents.

Wuellner credits these increases to a number of factors. She noted that a lack of family time and nurturing can contribute to mental health concerns later in life, and more support is one way to combat this. She also pointed out that many children with behavioral health concerns have at least one parent with a similar history.

“As families become more busy, have less time to contribute quality family time, that has an impact,” she said. “We also know that the amount of nurturing that an infant gets in the first several months of life from their moms or from their surrogate mother has a very important role in the development of their mental health going forward. That’s something that many people don’t even think about or take into consideration. Single-parent families, just lack of support, socioeconomic status amongst a lot of people dropping — that seems to have a negative role to play as well.”

For older kids, Wuellner said she has also witnessed an increase in bullying, especially among girls. She is concerned about the role social media plays in adolescent mental health, and she advises parents to hold off on smartphones until kids are in high school. As a pediatrician, Wuellner said she has seen many young patients who have had “pretty horrific experiences” online, including sexual abuse and exposure to methods of suicide.

“Parents need to really know what their kids are looking at,” she said. “Parents think they might have controls on, but there's ways that kids finagle around them and there’s some very disturbing apps that are out there.”

She also pointed out issues with the algorithms of popular social media apps like Facebook and Instagram. If a child looks at posts about depression or suicide, the algorithms will continue to show similar posts, which can normalize unhealthy behaviors or thinking patterns.

Fortunately, there are several warning signs that parents can catch. Low self-esteem, a drop in school performance, loss of friends, poor sleeping habits, an increase in tantrums and a lack of interest in family activities all might indicate that a child is experiencing a mental health concern.

Wuellner especially urges parents to pay attention if their child suddenly doesn't want to go to school. Instead of attributing this to laziness or normal teenage behavior, she encourages parents to ask questions and try to understand why their child is resistant.

“I think if it's a sudden change, it's really something that needs to be paid attention to and looked into,” she added.

When a mental health issue comes to light, counseling is Wuellner's first recommendation. She noted that there are often long waitlists and the professional turnover of therapists is “fairly high,” which can present barriers to counseling. But pediatricians can also help connect parents with books, websites and apps that can provide support and information. Additionally, medication can help if a child's life is significantly impacted by mental illness.

Ultimately, Wuellner encourages parents and guardians to communicate their love for their children and be there as much as possible. Especially when a child is struggling with their mental health, this can go a long way in supporting them. She encourages parents to talk to their child's pediatrician if there are any concerns.

“Just being there for all of their activities. Go to their sports events, go to their theater events, try to take them out, do special things with them,” she said. “Just be a good parent.”

If you or someone you know is struggling with depression or suicidal ideation, call or text 988. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7 to offer free and confidential support whenever it is needed. For those seeking resources related to mental health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Remember, you are not alone, and there are people ready to help you.